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**The Human to Come: Representations of Human in Literary Modernity's  
Testimonial "I"**

A Dissertation Presented

by

**Kerry Suzanne Spooner**

to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy**

in

**English**

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**Stony Brook University**

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Abstract of the Dissertation

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With the concern for human rights always present to this project, I explore in the initial chapters the precariousness of the first-person singular subjective "I" in both testimonial and fictional texts and its bearing on human rights. In practice, first-person narratives, whether as life-writing or fictional, are textual spaces in which writers' concerns that deal with human conditions are frequently articulated. By examining the first-person narrative function in selected texts of Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf, James Baldwin, and Samuel Beckett, this dissertation shows how conceptual imaginings of the concept of the human and human embodiment are unsettled. These exemplar modernist writers magnify the existing problems of representation and referentiality, to varying degrees, and challenge the assumption that words and their referents are inherently linked, thus destabilizing the concept of the human and the "I" that represents it. Through stylized hyperboles of the "self" and the "I" that represents it, as well as their deliberate misuse of genres, which ultimately break the genre rules, Stein, Woolf, Baldwin and Beckett, help illuminate the figure I call, the human to come. This project, then, asks the following questions: How does the Testimonial "I," a metonymic representation for the human, point to the impossibility of arresting and stabilizing a universal definition of human? And without a fixed definition of human, how, then, are human rights even possible? What conditions must be satisfied to be included as bearer of human rights? After having explored the chasm opened by representations of the human through the first-person narrative "I," the final chapter of this monograph and its conclusion proposes that the discourse, procedures and laws that shape current human rights projects are based on certain Western notions of the human that ultimately (at best) discourage and (at worst) prevent new and unfamiliar forms of bearing witness. Human rights for the human to

come opens a space for radically unfamiliar calls from potentially new kinds of subjects also affected by injuries, crimes and catastrophes.

## Dedication Page

For Anne and Emerson

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remains a vital part of my intellectual work and I look forward to discovering where it will take me in the future.

## Introduction

### Inventing the Human

[T]he plaintiff becomes a victim when no presentation is possible of the wrong he or she says he or she has suffered.

—Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*

We were still capable of sadness upon leaving comrades, still fresh, human.

—Robert Antelme, *L'Espèce Humaine*

### Just Human, Right?

Robert Antelme's *L'espèce humaine* (translated by Jeffrey Haight and Annie Mahler in the English edition as *The Human Race*) is a testimony that describes the author's time as a prisoner in three different concentration camps and his ordeal in the death march to Dachau during World War II. Central to his text is the affirmative response, "[W]e are still here," to the nullifying wish of the German denizens, "I don't want you to exist" (51). The brutal force of that desire is destabilized by Antelme's persistent reminder that the tormentors and tormented are always "locked in the same species," as Sarah Kofman notes in *Smothered Words*. Antelme reminds readers that despite the Nazi attack, "they are not people like us," a slogan which accompanied the racial discourse and policies of the Nazi program, there is something inextricable about the human (219). Moreover, such an ideology that propagates oppression and mass murder will inevitably reveal the "most forceful truth," as Maurice Blanchot says of Antelme's account in *The Infinite Conversation*, that "man is the indestructible. And this means there is no limit to the destruction of man" (135). In the state of extreme destitution, the self is no longer recognizable to itself and, thus, becomes a vague

presence essentially devoid of a self. Once the self has been annihilated, Blanchot continues, “my relation with myself is altered and lost—making of me this foreigner, this unknown from whom I am separated by an infinite distance, and making of me this infinite separation itself” (133). The “foreignness of the other” is the self—“man is absolutely other” (132). Nazism’s goal is (as is the case with other fascist totalitarian organizations), in part, to extinguish the sense of self. And smothered along with the self is the ability to recognize the plurality and empathetic potential in the first person “I.” By “bringing all speech down to the level of force,” totalitarianism denies the self the required social connection to others, thereby, actually preventing the particularity of the self and the “I” from which it finds expression (ibid).

But Antelme, Blanchot teaches, found something unexpected in that extreme powerlessness. He found a “presence of *autrui* (others) in himself” that “no power, even the most formidable” can reach (132). Blanchot quotes Antelme in calling this, “the ultimate feeling of belonging to mankind” (ibid). That place beyond the grasp of the totalitarian force is the “reserve speech of *autrui*” (135). While under the boot of the SS, the “deported persons who are Other [the impersonal] and [...] the force of a Self that kills [...] no language [was] possible” (134). But this silence was a speech of the “silent presence of *autrui* [of the personal others]” (135). Once victims returned to the world, Antelme remembers the incessant need to speak: “We wanted at last to speak, to be heard” (3). The reserved but affirming speech that eluded the control of the SS could begin to bear witness.

Turning briefly to Blanchot’s analysis offers me a kind of bridge: first, Blanchot’s focus on the other (and *autrui*) as that which disrupts the totalitarian tendency to control

the Self, highlights the potentially liberating force in pluralities of speech and of speakers. Second, Blanchot's engagement with Antelme's account is only one among many responses that connects to *L'espèce humaine* and constitutes a network of discourses in, for example, philosophical, literary, and historical fields of study. Consider the following critiques. Colin Davis offers in "Duras, Antelme and the Ethics of Writing" (1997) a strongly worded critique against Blanchot's reading of Antelme and Marguerite Duras's reading in her semi-fictional account, *La Douleur*, about a loved one waiting for her spouse, Robert L. to return from the camps (I, like Davis, believe this name to represent Robert Antelme, Duras's "real life" spouse). Davis, in a celebratory manner, concludes that *L'espèce humaine* is about "the unbreached wholeness of humanity and the survival of the self despite the threats of its annihilation" (175). Bruno Chaouat in "La mort ne recèle pas tant de mystère': Robert Antelme's Defaced Humanism," denounce Davis's apparent simplistic reading of Blanchot's reading of Antelme. For Chaouat, Antelme's testimony is not about the "triumph of good over evil" where ethics are reduced to "vague 'human and moral values' whose ideological and historical, i.e., metaphysical determinations are never questioned," but about "a political resistance against annihilation [that] rests upon the *reste* inscribed in the human face" (90, 98). Davis follows up in a later article entitled, "Antelme, Renoir, Levinas, and the Shock of the Other," in which he repeats the general idea of his earlier claim that Antelme's text is about the survival of "solitary subjects without [...] the support of others" (44).

Ostensibly, the stakes in their discussion that I tersely outlined above regard the status of the self after Nazism and its relation to the world. Perhaps more subtly, Antelme's account and the adjoining discussion are really about the status of the human

and of the self that is called *human* after the death camps. I call attention to this discussion in order to point out a few possible ways, among many, that Antelme's account is open to contesting phrases within a network of genres. After all, his text, Lyotard might have described, is a concatenation of phrases linked to other heterogeneous phrase regimens governed by the ethical exigency to present the unrepresentable. In staying faithful to the openness to the other, Antelme offers no explicit totalizing definition of the human, but rather an inviting reflection on the peculiar aura called humanity.<sup>1</sup>

For the prisoners the camps were a continual ordeal where torture and killing became an astonishingly banal act: "your friend's death [...] causes no stir at all, nothing stops. He dies, it's roll call; he dies, it's soup; he dies, we receive a beating" (95). Building on the banality of genocide, Antelme recalls his arrival at Buchenwald where he noticed the incommensurable distance between the new arrivals and those who have endured the torture as captives in the horrors of that "nightmarish hellhole" (11). According to Antelme, he was still "capable of sadness upon leaving comrades, still fresh, human"—still, perhaps, empathetic (95). Not yet exposed to the full brutality of camp violence, he still *felt* a connection to others. In fact, throughout the text, Antelme suggests that the connection determined by affection for others as well as affection received from them as a sensation indispensable to the human. In many ways, *L'espèce humaine* is a testament, then, to the persistent struggle to preserve empathetic connections with others, especially so in the face of extreme denigration and constant physical and psychological violence. Antelme's text is a kind of invitation to

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<sup>1</sup> Similar to Antelme, Primo Levi is not concerned with the question, "What is it to be human?" Rather, as Davide Sparti proposes in "Let Us Be Human: Primo Levi and Ludwig Wittgenstein," Levi's concern was with "whether or not something admits being seen as human" (*Philosophy and Literature*, 444).

other accounts and ways of bearing witness to the Shoah. His narrative keeps open its own discourse so that other phrase regimens, genres of discourse, or even affect-phrases may always potentially present something that adds to the ever-expanding network of heterogeneous phrases concerning the human and begin engaging in the ethical exigency, Lyotard prescribes, to bear witness to a differend. In this way his narrative refuses to enact the same kind of totalitarian violence that was so effective in annihilating millions.

Unsurprisingly, techniques employed by abusive, tyrannical, and fascist personalities hell-bent on consolidating and maintaining authority are meant to sever empathetic connections between people and produce hatred and fear of others who are often also disempowered. Antelme's narrative is a stark reminder of the very familiar mechanisms used to enforce abusive power: control, isolation, deprivation, and physical and psychological violence. And crushing that connection between prisoners was the preliminary goal of the Nazi regime. Such a mechanism was, in effect, crucial to the eventual goal of annihilating everything that Nazism perceived as marginal and inferior in the human species. On the one hand, while Antelme recognizes the shimmer of affection and suggests that there is something human about it, on the other hand, his hermeneutics does not function to foreclose other discourses on the human. Whether Antelme's account intentionally or unintentionally avoided such a foreclosure matters little, considering that regardless of intention the question of what or how we are inevitably escapes discursive lockup.

Immediately upon arrival at Buchenwald Antelme "saw [his] first prisoners," "attached by rope and carrying rocks or pulling carts;" there was an unrecognizable

“laughter” (95). Antelme insisted that it be “equated [...] with human laughter,” but there was “a distance [they] were unable to bridge” (ibid). And yet, the very pronouncement that the distance is unbridgeable is itself a kind of bridge, in Lyotard’s terminology, a linkage. Lyotard observes that phrasing is inevitable: “For there to be no phrase is impossible” (§102). Phrases include everything from verbal utterances to winks, shoulder shrugging, foot taping, “fleeting blushes,” and silence (§110). Upon arrival to the concentration camp, Antelme witnessed an unrecognizable laughter, a sound made by those deprived of their dignity and sense of self denied. Antelme not only bears witness to the incommensurability between that laughter and the disdain on the faces of their jailers, but he bore witness to the differend itself. Geoffrey Bennington translates the “differend itself” from Lyotard’s first published title of “l’inarticulé, ou le différend même” as “The Inarticulate, or the Differend Itself” later published under the title, “The Affect-Phrase.” Lyotard first introduces his concept of affect in *Discours, Figure* and again in *The Differend* before expounding on it in his follow-up text “The Affect-Phrase.” In “Political Animals,” Bennington points out that for Lyotard affect is the differend itself (inarticulate) that radically disrupts logos (24). Although affect is itself a phrase, Bennington continues, it “*does not even present a universe* [...] it merely ‘signals’ some apparently indeterminate sense or meaning without that sense or meaning being referred to any referent, and without it being addressed by any addressor or to any addressee” (25). Ron Katwan, in “The Affect in the Work of Jean-François Lyotard,” outlines a number of antinomies central to Lyotard’s thinking on affect and the differend. “The affect,” Katwan says, “is the experience of the irreconcilable conflict between an inevitable silence and an equally inevitable need to speak. [...] Suffering a radical wrong



becomes a conceptual impossibility” (21). Katwan pointed to the “impossible” task of bearing witness to the affect as the differend itself:

Responsiveness to the affect is itself necessarily paradoxical. It demands that we open ourselves to an experience that is defined by its intolerability. It requires that we speak of what cannot be spoken of. Far from being a logical error, however, this irrationality of responsiveness is inseparable from what it means to be human. The human is lived in the paradoxical and intolerable tension between “inhumans”: affect and discourse. The temptation of each “inhuman” is to “resolve” the paradox and to “heal” the painful disorder caused through this conflict, by eliminating its other. Lyotard’s philosophy calls upon us to resist this temptation. (22)

Turning our attention to affect is crucial. Affect both subverts the tendency for discursive practices to claim exclusive legitimacy and has inventive potential. For example, in a discussion rebuking Kripke’s claim that referents must be fixed and that proper names are “rigid designators,” Lyotard takes as his example the proper name *Auschwitz* and highlights the fact that Auschwitz is no longer simply a town in Poland, but “is a sign that something remains to be phrased which is not” (*The Differend*, §93). This means that the referent of the name, Auschwitz, a place where millions were exterminated, belongs to “a network of names and relations [...] and of the heterogeneity of phrase universes” as well as “the silence” (Lyotard’s emphasis; §81, 93). Lyotard continues, “[t]he silence indicates that phrases are in abeyance of their becoming event, *that the feeling is the suffering of this abeyance*” (my italics; §93). The suffering is caused by the suspension of something that needs to be put into phrases but cannot be phrased.

In “Cultural Criticism and Society,” readers find Theodor Adorno’s oft quoted statement: “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (35).<sup>2</sup> Written in the aftermath of the Shoah, Adorno recognized that the basic premise of the Enlightenment—namely,

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<sup>2</sup> “Cultural Criticism and Society” was written in 1951, however, it was published as a compilation of essays written by the author in, *Prisms: Essays on Veblen, Huxley, Benjamin, Bach, Proust, Schoenberg, Spengler, Jazz, Kafka* in 1955.

reason and the blind allegiance to Western notion of progress—faltered disastrously. The Shoah exposed the dialectical foundation of the Enlightenment as a myth. It turns out that reason can be too easily hijacked by false consciousness which is created, maintained and manipulated by multiple “technologies” of power—i.e. media, education, etcetera. In his essay, Adorno critiques a practice of criticism where the practitioners see themselves as outside and independent from the object under analysis—a position that claims superior status which is indicative of the Enlightenment thought. Adopting this transcendental position, Adorno warns, operates under the false belief that s/he is objective and can judge without prejudice or without effect. Adorno declares that “the traditional transcendent critique of ideology is obsolete [...] there are no more ideologies in the authentic sense of false consciousness, only advertisements for the world through its duplication and the provocative lie which does not seek belief but commands silence” (33-34).

When Adorno claimed that there is no poetry after Auschwitz he was describing an experience of what Lyotard will later term, the differend. Later in the subsection called, “After Auschwitz” in the *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno incorrectly postulates, I believe, that he “may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz poetry could no longer be written” (362). To create text where the aesthetic qualities are the primary transmitters for emotion and meaning after Auschwitz, is to write within the differend—poetry and Auschwitz are irreconcilable. Another turn of the screw also shows that Auschwitz itself, after Auschwitz, is an experience of the differend. Adorno, does not make the argument this way; however, I would. Adorno states: “Auschwitz confirmed the philosopheme of pure identity, as death” (ibid). But if “pure” identity means applying

a wholly abstract condition of absolute unadulterated, inherent, all-encompassing, and undifferentiated to *the* identified, then such a “being” is impossible in the so called real world. The grand narrative required for any “pure” identity—or identity generally—produces differends. In following Lyotard’s prescription, I would argue that identity necessitates linkage and bearing witness, this point will be articulated later in this project.

Antelme’s text articulates the deadly consequences of a power structure—philosophical, state, and ideological—that works to define the human and proceed to allocate each particular *human* into racialized taxonomic categories. Antelme’s claim did not stem from some naïve position. He witnessed an apocalyptic catastrophe that was premised on the manufacturing of race and the categorizing of the human species into classes. Linda Schiebinger noted that eighteenth century botanist Carolus Linnaeus “introduced the term Mammalia into zoological taxonomy” as well as the name *Homo sapiens* into the tenth edition of his *System Naturae* (1758). In it, Linnaeus devised a new category of animal that he named mammal, “meaning literally ‘of the breast’” (382). Schiebinger convincingly argues in “Why Mammals are Called Mammals” that Linnaeus’s decision to term this class of animal after the mammae is a combination of his “vision of nature” and the “pressing political trends” of his day. Linnaeus took the stance that healthy women ought to breastfeed their *own* children. In fact, the region that was once called Prussia eventually enacted a law in 1794 that required it. In what appeared to be a strictly “objective” and scientific endeavor of Linnaeus’s classification, was actually socially, economically, politically, and racially motivated. In his *Historia Animalium*, Aristotle classified the human as animal and part of the natural world. In the

Middle Ages, Schiebinger footnotes, “scholastics removed human from nature, emphasizing instead their proximity to angels” (385). The idea of the human in the sixteenth century was beginning to return to the world of nature. In the throes of the Enlightenment period the classification of nature was in full gear. According to Schiebinger, Linnaeus preferred the ear pleasing sound of mammalia to anamalia (meaning “the breath of life”)—evidently personal aesthetic preferences were also behind the term “mammal.” “Early categories, later called races,” according to Stephen Molnar, “were largely determined by comparisons of skin color, face form, and skull shape. Measuring the form and size of the skull,” Molnar continues, “was an especially popular method for racial studies” (6). But the “arbitrary selection of traits” used to fix “race” “led some early workers to suggest that racial classification was unimportant” (ibid). Because these traits did not prevent interbreeding (a hallmark for determining species) then, some claimed, the differences were not significant. Molnar offers an example of early racial classifications in which only Linnaeus—not Buffon, Blumenbach, and Cuvier—made skin color a determining factor: “American (Reddish), European (White), Asiatic (Yellow), and Negro (Black)” (ibid).

On the one hand, definitional development of the term human, as in any definitional process, attempts to construct a fixed meaning through a deceptively simplistic binary of similarities and differences. An inextricable element in this process is that the “other” already operates within the signifying chain as an “outside” that the “inside” is defined against. But for those familiar with poststructuralist thought, this binary does not hold. The effort to create meaning by excluding that which it is not, the definitional process always produces—and paradoxically so—an open border. In the

same way, then, it can be argued, that the definition of the *human* is figured by the exclusion of the discourse of the non-human. On the other hand, Linnaeus ultimately produced the groundwork that would eventually lead to racialization, which would be governed by a discourse seen as legitimate and that defined the human accordingly. People later learn that this racial program has dire consequences. All the more puzzling is why *L'espèce humaine* was translated into *The Human Race* rather than the more direct translation, *The Human Species*.

For Antelme, the line that separates life and death is as much about what we today might call biopolitics as it is about each irreducible life that eventually crosses the boundary from life into death.<sup>3</sup> He reasons that for prisoners in concentration camps, the only possibility of resistance against the Nazi regime may be to do the unthinkable: to force one's own death.<sup>4</sup> Antelme's formulation, "death is stronger than the SS. The SS cannot pursue the guy over the line into death. The dead body that turned its back on them [...] doesn't give a shit about their laws," is a pointed rebuke against the sovereignty of the Nazi government to determine a prisoner's death (93, 94). Foucault, in *The History of Sexuality*, stated: "The sovereign exercised his right of life only by exercising his right to kill, or by refraining from killing" (136). Indeed, the camps were one of the places where the absolute power over life and death was exercised. But

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<sup>3</sup> See Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*, specifically "Part Five: Right of Death and Power over Life." And also see *The Birth of Biopolitics, Lectures at Collège de France 1978-1979*. For a thorough review of the biopolitics/biopower field, see Thomas Lemke's delineation of several historical and current arguments in *Bio-Politics An Advanced Introduction*. Antelme does not use the term biopolitics; however, his text describes in detail the real effects of the Nazi regime's program that regulated and controlled certain bodies in order to avoid "the imaginary dangers of 'racial mixing'" (Lemke, 12).

<sup>4</sup> See Jared Stark's "Suicide After Auschwitz" for a compelling discussion on claims that suicide was rare in the camps. In it, Stark dispenses with the concern over the question of suicide in camps and rephrases it: "[the question is] not whether or not, how and to what degree, prisoners committed suicide, but rather what it means to speak of suicide in relation to the camps, what it means to speak of suicide after Auschwitz" (95).

Foucault also recognized the difference between sovereign rights to seize things and bodies and the acts of genocide. Genocide did not only involve what Foucault called the “deduction” form of power, but also a new form of power over life that was “bent on generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them” (ibid) through regulatory controls termed bio-politics. Such a change from the rights of the sovereign to the “right of the social body” (136) allowed a new multiplying power where wars were “no longer waged in the name of the sovereign [...] but on the existence of everyone” (137). Antelme’s formulation mentioned above takes into account the condition that exercised power requires other bodies to be exercised against—both as sovereign power and biopolitics. Therefore, prisoner suicides in the camps deprived Nazi regime of the very objects they required for power.

Modernity, Foucault recognized, required the transformational shift from primarily deductive forms of power to productive forms of power and with it moving from sovereign politics to biopolitics. Giorgio Agamben argues, however, in *Homo Sacer* that “the first foundation of political life is a life that may be killed, which is politicized through its very capacity to be killed” (89). Agamben concludes that, “*the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power*” (Agamben’s emphasis, 6). He makes the case through a reading of the Roman law in which the father has unconditional authority, including of death, in the “sphere of the *domus*” (88). These rights of power for “free male citizens” were not confined nor originated as a separate power from the social; it was instead “the very model of political life in general. *Not simple natural life, but life exposed to death (bare life or sacred life) is the originary political elements*” (G.A. emphasis, ibid). In the context of a national program that

polices bodies for power—in a space that forcibly determines the activities in which bodies may engage and how they may be engaged, as well as the timing of their deaths—the only available rebuke to the Nazi regime’s life-denying-machine is for prisoners to take back control over the timing of their own deaths. Crossing the boundary between life and death ends their torment and, Antelme suggests, may also produce an opening that affirms life for those remaining behind in the camps. In other words, the dead bodies become a kind of symbol for resistance and allow those left behind to imagine saying: “I don’t give a shit about your laws.” At any time, they might follow their fellow prison mates over the line to death.

In addition to the limit between life and death, Antelme introduces other boundaries: “the variety of relationships between men, their color, their customs, the classes they are formed into mask a truth that here, at the boundary of nature, at the point where we approach our limits [...] there are not several human races, there is only one human race” (219). At this point in his text, Antelme offers readers two boundaries: 1) culture and nature and 2) the universal and particular. Antelme’s use of the term “nature” implies that there is something about the human that is beyond all cultural significations (beyond politics, language, and man-made law, etc.). Simply put, the human occupies the other side of the boundary in nature. The relation of nature to the human is that nature established one human species. The singularity, the assumed uniqueness of that one, comprises the universal; it includes all. Setting aside the assumption that culture and nature are in opposition, the metaphor of the boundary appears to function as a scripter, writing the human into a concept of nature and, as such, into a social signifying network of tropes. To put it another way, the boundary

demarcates the limit where bodies are claimed to exist outside language, but only to illuminate the social operation inherent in meaning-making. Foucault says it differently in *The Order of Things*. Through an archaeological investigation, Foucault found that “[i]n any given culture and at any given moment, there is always only one *episteme* that defines the conditions of possibility of all knowledge, whether expressed in a theory or silently invested in a practice” (168). The ordering of biology is influenced by the epistemic system of the time period. Within each period a different knowledge of the human is established through an inner law:

[which is] the hidden network that determines the way they confront one another, and also that which has no existence except in the grid created by a glance, an examination, a language; and it is only in the blank spaces of this grid that order manifests itself in depth as though already there, waiting in silence for the moment of its expression. (xx)

Therefore, if nature is understood by Antelme as something outside of language and the human also dwells in the space of nature, then according to Foucault’s logic, the epistemic system has gripped Antelme. For Foucault, “man composed his own figure in the interstices of fragmented language” (386).

Although Arendt was not concerned explicitly about the function of language, in *The Human Condition*, she describes act of defining human nature as an action that “is like jumping over our own shadows” (10). This analogy is not as simple as it may first appear. One could jump over her own shadow only by extracting her body, the very object that creates the shadow, from between the light source and the space on which the shadow lands, effectively effacing the silhouette. Imagine the silhouette as the concept of the human that reflects only an outline of our image with no clear particularities and drawn in by obscure generalities. That shadowy outline before her,



that requires her body but never captures it entirely, is the predicament of the universal definition of human. In other words, the question of what is human nature has no attainable answer. Nevertheless, people throughout the ages have attempted (and will continue) to find an answer to the question: “what are we?” Interestingly, Arendt points out that in the absence of certitude many re-present the unknown into “the construction of a deity” (11)—a deity that ultimately represents the unknowable human animal.

Tempting as it is to perceive the human species as naked of all representations—as if we could stand before truth without the mediation of language, reason, or politics—to claim something is literally without signification is to do just the opposite and place it in the realm of signification. For example, Antelme allegorizes death and the human race, symbolizing not a clear boundary, but a blurring of the distinctions between the representation of the human and actual humans that render the singular as universal and, conversely, the universal as singular. The singular must “preserve” the universal and “also destroy and suspend” the universal, as Derrida writes in a different context of justice and the law in “Force of Law:” “[Justice] always addresses itself to singularity, to the singularity of the other, despite or even because it pretends to universality” (248). Each person lays claim to being human and, in so doing, prevents the universality of the human.

Antelme’s account questions the limits of law and violence, representation and referentiality, and singularity and universality as they relate to the notion of the human and human species and history, up through the last sentence of his text: He concludes his testimony with an unnamed survivor who cannot be seen and remains unrecognizable: “[H]is life story” was summed up in one name, that of his hometown,

“Sebastopol.” They struggle to see each other’s visage, even when they were face-to-face shaking hands. And yet, Antelme declares: “We are free.”<sup>5</sup> The unnamed, barely seen but touchable survivor, responds affirmatively and familiarly in the German affirmation “ja” (meaning “yes”). In the cataclysmic space of the camps where negation was constant, German was the official language. Antelme, in an interesting recuperative moment, reaffirms life in the very language that tried to nullify it. The singularity of each actual body—of Antelme and the unnamed survivor—and of the particular moment in the context of a singular event called the Shoah, haunts the annals of human history. To view the affirmative, the “yes” of the unnamed survivor, together with the boundary of Antelme’s limits, is to view it as a space that keeps history open—not for some revisionist strategy that seeks to escape accountability, but in order to keep the question of the human open to new and other accounts, new and other experiences, and new and other knowledges. In this project, the term human is not simply a word that designates a subject, but is instead a name for an event—the human event. As with any event, it does not have a totalizable narrative or history; though grand narratives attempt to establish a universal story, they consist of the incalculable number of local narratives of real and imagined stories from each person who has once lived and each who lives today. Although grand narratives attempt to offer comprehensive accounts, they simply do not, yet they are, nevertheless, still part of the human event. As in any event, for example, American slavery and the Shoah, it would be a violent act inspired by the tyrannical assumption that we can close the book on the stories that are still to come that have occurred in the past in order to prevent their inclusion. The human to come includes the local stories, but it is also about experiences and/or knowledge (new forms

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<sup>5</sup> Sebastopol is the name of a town located in the Crimean Peninsula.

of knowledge too) that have yet to be presented. Moreover, the human to come is also open to the stories, experiences, and knowledge that we will never know.

While the concern for human rights is always present to this project, the intention of the *The Human to Come* is to explore the discursive limits, irresolvable impasses, and openings of the singular subject “I” as it is configured in the conceptual imaginings of the human and human body in literature. The project will closely examine the autobiography, testimony, memoir, diary, and self-reflective fiction through the autobiographical novels, short stories, and memoirs of Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf, Samuel Beckett, and James Baldwin. In practice, these literary genres, collectively called life-writing, are spaces in which writers deal with human conditions. Problems of representation and referentiality occupy literature generally, but Stein, Woolf, Beckett, and Baldwin magnify these problems and challenge readers’ beliefs that an inherent link must exist between words and their referents. How does the autobiographical “I,” a metonymic representation of the human, point to the impossibility of arresting an absolute stable definition of human? Without a fixed definition of human, how are human rights possible? What conditions must be satisfied to be included as bearer of human rights? Who or what should be included in human rights laws—a natural person (human being) and/or legal person (companies and corporations)?<sup>6</sup> On the one hand, these questions reflect a broad concern with current domestic and international human rights laws. On the other hand, these questions point to a fundamental problem in

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<sup>6</sup> For an informative discussion on corporations exploiting human rights laws, see Anat Scolnicov’s “Lifelike and Lifeless in Law: Do Corporations Have Human Rights?” The author asks: “Do legal persons (i.e., non-natural persons) have human rights?” For a thorough discussion of anti-abortion/anti-choice groups and human rights, including Personhood USA and American Life League, see Alastair Hunt’s “Rightless: Perplexities of Human Rights in CR.” Hunt explores the national and international discourses that allow such groups to employ the language of human rights in their campaigns and legal protection under human rights law.

existing human rights laws. That is, the presumed conclusion that the human, outlined by The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is an autonomous individual that reasons and possess inalienable rights bestowed by nature, lies at the core of human rights.

Human rights discourses generally describe a human as that which is born with the faculty to reason and use language (logos). Attributing reason as the defining characteristic of the human is unsurprising given the long philosophical history. But for many classical thinkers, as well as those who come later, reason is the faculty that makes the human good. For example, in the *Republic*, Plato states: “a just person is clever and good” (350c). Although for Plato reason is achieved through education, he nevertheless attributes a moral authority to those who obtain an education and thus the ability to reason. Plato’s student Aristotle later said in his *Nicomachean Ethics* that what sets the human being apart from all other creatures and plants is the “special function” that is “some sort of life of action of the [part of the soul] that has reason” (1098a). He continues: “We have found, then, that the human function is the soul’s activity that expresses reason [as itself having reason]” (1098a5). And like Plato, Aristotle attributes moral worth to reason. In his ground-breaking work in zoology, *Historia Animalium*, Aristotle says that “no other creature except man can recall the past at will” and “of all the animals man alone is capable of deliberation” (book I). Plato and Aristotle were not alone; Marcus Aurelius too claimed that “the universal nature has made rational animals for the sake of one another, to help one another according to their worth, but in no way to injure one another” (91). The notion that humans are essentially different from other animals did not end in the classical Greek and Roman philosophical periods. Western

thought carried the notion that reason is the characteristic that defines human.<sup>7</sup> Sagan and Druyan quote René Descartes's 1649 letter describing the difference between brute and human:

It has never been observed that any animal has arrived at such a degree of perfection as to make use of a true language; that is to say, as to be able to indicate to us by the voice, or by other signs, anything which could be referred to thought alone [...] for the word is the sole sign and the only certain mark of the presence of though hidden and wrapped up in a body.  
(381)

Sagan and Druyan survey a number of modern and contemporary philosophical thinkers who also ascribe to the supremacy of reason. The thinkers I cite above all attribute reason as the defining characteristic, but with nuanced differences that nevertheless are connected to each other. For Plato and Aristotle reason is associated with the morally good and just. Aristotle wrote that reason was in the soul; therefore one cannot ignore the transcendental connection between reason, passion, feeling, and personality. Not entirely different from Plato's notion of act, Aurelius associates reason with responsibility toward others. And, for Descartes, reason becomes attached explicitly to language, writing, speaking, and signs. Justice, responsibility, and communication are thoroughly embedded in the concept of reason and reason is embedded as the core characteristic of the human. This explains, but does not justify, why current human rights programs and practices adopt certain criteria for submitting complaints of human rights violations—this will be expounded on in the final chapter.

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<sup>7</sup> For an excellent history of the human, see Carl Sagan and Ann Druyan's *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestor*. In it, the chapters entitled "What Is Human?" and "The Animal Within" are particularly helpful in situating the human as another animal in the ecology of all.

But this undoubtedly becomes complicated when figurations of the human and the first person pronoun “I” (as well as “we”) are formed by the metaphoricity of language and its economical structure. This is a system of exchange that constantly circulates and substitutes tropes, producing irresolvable abysses and aporia that ultimately prevent any fixed notion of the human. If human rights projects must assume some tacit, shared meaning of the human, then what does this human look like? Therefore, it is important to follow the discursive circuitry powering the metonymic representation of “human.” This may be accomplished through a close examination of the autobiographical “I” in the texts of Stein, Woolf, Beckett, and Baldwin.

### **The Human in (Con)Text**

Concerns regarding the meaning of human, the human condition, human behavior, and human fate are ubiquitous. The compulsion to ponder or explore human existence is extraordinary in and of itself. Attempts to grapple with the question can be found in numerous forms of storytelling throughout history, including early human chants, dance, funerary scripts, myths, poems, and fictional, autobiographical, and confessional narratives. For example, the *Tell Abū Şalābīkh*, ancient Sumerian tablets created in the mid-third millennium BCE, were composed of hymns that described the “bonds between heaven and earth” and catalogued gods, governors and other administrative officials, weaponry, and animals and plants (45).<sup>8</sup> In bearing witness to the world around them including the activities, responsibilities, and objects produced by

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<sup>8</sup> The ancient Egyptian manuscript called *The Book of the Dead* is also a fascinating example of chants and spells believed to help loved ones after death. Naming the dead was an essential part of the funereal process, as naming maintained the uniqueness of the dead. However it is important to note that there are multiple versions of this book in print and online as well as similar books in other cultures.

people, as well as to nature and the stars, the ancient Sumerians—as we still do today—explored their relation to each other, to the world and, thus, to the self and the human with whom we have come to terms and attempt to define. Hannah Arendt notes that, in his attempt to define human nature, Augustine “is usually credited with having been the first to raise the so-called anthropological question in philosophy...‘What am I?’”<sup>9</sup> The quest to define or bear witness to human life is not limited to written language alone, but we can only access oral tradition through transcriptions that are generated in retrospect. In this case, if we accept Arendt’s supposition that those efforts to define human or human nature eventually spill into discussions of deities as noted in the previous section of this introduction, then we may assume that the *Tell Abū Ṣalābīkh* tablets bear witness to the impossibility of pinning down the meaning of human.

Despite the futility of determining a singular meaning of human, most people are nevertheless compelled to engage in the definitional process or augment an already perceived definition. For example, classical Greek philosophy’s influence on the fields of philosophy, literature, economics, psychology, and politics (as it was briefly outlined above), as well as on general perceptions among a Western public, informs a particular figuration of the human as that which is essentially social and political, as well as that which possesses reason and speech.<sup>10</sup> Such figurations shape juridical processes, legal discourse, and political systems, and they constitute and justify economic policies and influence medical and psychiatric approaches.

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<sup>9</sup> See also a complete reference to Augustine’s question in a footnote in *The Human Condition* (10).

<sup>10</sup> Aristotle attributes additional characteristics to the human in the text of the *Politics* as such: “[M]an is by nature a political animal...man is the only animal whom is endowed with speech...[a] social instinct is implanted in all men by nature” (251-252). In *Metaphysics*, Aristotle claims, “All men by nature have a desire to know” (5).

In the West, laws and juridical processes are based upon the notion that the human is essentially rational and possesses the exceptional ability to employ reason and speech. Given the extraordinarily wide range in humans' abilities and skills to reason and the fact that they are also profoundly shaped by their circumstances and discursive practices of a number of cultural and social institutions, the claim that reason is what sets humans apart from nonhuman animals establishes a criteria that ultimately sabotages humans' existence from the start. In his critique of humanism, Nietzsche in "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense" mocks human arrogance: "the clever animal invented cognition" (874). For Nietzsche it is not a question of whether the human has intellect, but that reason is assumed to be some truth in and of itself. Nietzsche continues: "The arrogance inherent in cognition and feeling casts a blinding fog over the eyes and senses of human beings, and because it contains within itself the most flattering evaluation of cognition it deceives them about the value of existence. Its most general effect is deception" (875). The human, according to Nietzsche's logic, lies to itself. Not intentionally, however, lies are essentially part of the structure of concepts, logic, and stories. For Nietzsche, we could not distinguish between truth and lies. But the human nevertheless declares that what is true uses trumped-up reason as a way to "rule over life" (883). Those who have the authority to determine which stories or grievances are legitimate and who can tell or petition and under what conditions and with which terms it can be told, sabotages the stories, experiences, and knowledge still to come.

The damages caused by the notion that humans possess "reason" are most evident where the law is concerned. In *The Juridical Unconscious*, Shoshana Felman



writes, “The law requires that the witness should be able to narrate a story in the past, to recount an event in the past tense...[it] requires and provides distance...and brings closure and totalization of the evidence and of its meaning” (151). Felman also argues that juridical proceedings can, however, include “moments of disruption...of intrusion...of unpredictability...” (131). The specific narrative requirements, together with the unpredictable sudden silences and shocks, “contribute to the formulation of a legal meaning” (147). The case study Felman analyzes concerns the witness, K-Zetnik, who is called on to testify and becomes overwhelmed by the “epistemological abyss [and] cognitive rupture” that Auschwitz produced, subsequently fainting during the Eichmann trial. Thus, chasms are opened (150). If law requires objectivity, distance, and reason, then K-Zetnik, through his experience, proved that the law has partially failed. As a consequence of the law’s functionality, it generalizes all who are subject to its force. Therefore the law does not so easily accommodate testimonies that diverge from the norm and unsettle its function. At the same time, K-Zetnik’s fainting forces an opening into a juridical space in which emotion, speechlessness, and presence reside and a space that the law cannot quickly close. For Felman, this scene describes how the possibility of justice might enter the courtroom.

A brief detour through Felman’s analysis of the “tension between law and trauma” exemplifies not only the limits of definitional exigency on the human as they apply to law and real bodies, but also to real life procedural undertakings in routine events that remain susceptible to the unpredictable drama that “we” bring. Felman’s work also points to a particular subject represented by the reluctant “I.” Felman details Walter Benjamin’s aversion to his use of “I” in his autobiography on the First World War,

*A Berlin Chronicle*, as I explain below. Benjamin concludes, however, that the use of “I” is an unavoidable and significant decision. Much in the way that earlier definitional claims influenced law, so too have definitions of human influenced the genres of testimony and life writing. In other words, just as the law is suspended (as it was when the judge called for a recess in response to a faint) under the pressures of courtroom trauma/drama, the rules that also govern autobiographical genres—including novels—and essays are persistently broken by the pressure of the actual lives represented by the “I.”

On the one hand, Benjamin’s initial impulse to deny the singular subject “I” is a desire to erase his presence from his own life story. His is a story, Felman argues, that is filled with “deep and harrowing experiences” (37); but he also bears witness to the harrowing experiences of many others. On the other hand, Benjamin’s decision to employ “I” suggests that the “I” speaks for all who are no longer alive to tell their stories. The singular subject “I” is no longer singular: it carries with it subjects of the past and, potentially, those of the present and future. There is, however, a risk of aligning Benjamin’s “I” with other individuals who are unknown and even yet to be named. The risk is that the “I” could become a parody and, as a consequence, undermine the seriousness of the content. Yet it could be argued that the subject singular “I” is already generalized and includes others: “that it goes beyond the personal” (37). Does this mean that there is a fictional component to Benjamin’s “I?” Indeed, the “I” references the particular witness, Benjamin who, as it turns out, already has difficulty articulating his story. Therefore, Benjamin’s imperative to “tell” was made possible by the use of a fictional “I” and the plural “I.”

The shifting and uncertainty of the subject representing “I” in Benjamin’s autobiography can also be found in Samuel Beckett’s *The Unnamable*. The narrator has no name and, as such, leaves the reader wondering about the referent, or who belongs to the unnamable subject “I.” On the one hand, it is a fictional text narrated in the first person. On the other hand, it is a text conscious of itself as a textual object, testifying within its own space to its own incomprehensibility and mute powerlessness. The text bears the mark of a traumatic account with the impulse to tell its story, but the narrative is persistently undermined by the narrator’s voided “I”: “I can’t go on. I’ll go on” (414).

Gertrude Stein’s *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* further shifts the subject of the “I” represented in the text. Stein borrows the name Alice and, therefore, the “I” discloses her own autobiography through that name. In the context of an examination of the representative “I,” Stein’s decision to substitute Alice for herself—an overdetermined decision, no doubt—suggests that her story would be easier to convey in the voice of another. Interestingly, Stein did not directly write about the effects trauma had on her—even in her texts that referenced war. She often wrote about traumas in a seemingly unaffected style, removed from any engagement with traumatic moments and offering readers rather detailed accounts of the banal everydayness of life, perhaps as an unconscious act to dismiss the violent policies of France’s pro-Nazi Vichy government in which she collaborated by translating Maréchal Pétain’s anti-Semitic texts into English. For these reasons, the hidden traumas in Stein’s text and her unconscious decisions suggest a life nevertheless affected by the (denial) of violence. Much of the debate surrounding Stein’s contribution to Pétain’s speeches stems from the article, “Portrait of a National Fetish: Gertrude Stein’s unpublished ‘Introduction to the Speeches of

Maréchal Pétain' (1942)," written by Wanda Van Dusen and published posthumously in 1996. However, Barbara Will in "Lost in Translation: Stein's Vichy Collaboration" and Brenda Wineapple's "The Politics of Politics; or, How the Atomic Bomb Didn't Interest Gertrude Stein and Emily Dickenson," point out that scholarship referencing the translation project had already existed.<sup>11</sup> Renate Stendhal in "Why the Witch-Hunt Against Gertrude Stein," recounts the phony outrage of Gustav Hendrikssen who, Stendhal says, in 1995 ginned up false accusation that "Stein lobbied the Nobel Peace Prize Committee for Hitler [...] the office of the Nobel Peace Prize Committee debunked that story." Whether or not one was aware before Van Dusen's article, it was surely difficult, nevertheless, to understand why a Jewish American lesbian living in occupied France with her lover would opt to remain in warring Europe and why she might have contributed to the dissemination of a Vichy government ranking member. In the wake of Van Dusen's article, detractors and immediate outrage surfaced. Phoebe Stein Davis points to the immediate aftermath that the article "heralded [...] in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*" (568). Stein's vocal detractors included Alan Dershowitz, New York state assemblyman Dov Hikind and historian Fred Rosenbaum, among others. It is beyond the scope of this project to engage in a thorough critique of the criticism. Yet in a project that takes as its main concern human rights, how does Stein's political history speak to the stakes of this dissertation? Does her history encourage new kinds of readings of her texts? It is true that even before the Second World War, Stein was considered a conservative republican, a point not lost on those who have studied her work and the criticism of it.

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<sup>11</sup> In a footnote, Will cites biographies and articles that point to Stein's contributions: Richard Bridgman, *Gertrude Stein in Pieces* (1970); Linda Wagner-Martin, "Favored Strangers": *Gertrude Stein and Her Family* (1995); and ed. Edward Burns and Ulla Dydo, *The Letters of Gertrude Stein and Thornton Wilder*.

While Virginia Woolf's "The Mark on the Wall" is said to be a fictional account, it was narrated—as in Beckett's text—in the first person by an unnamed narrator. Written during the First World War, the story touches on a number of subjects. It is clear, however, that the meditation is occupied primarily with the ongoing war.<sup>12</sup> In *Virginia Woolf and the Great War*, Karen Levenback supports this argument: "Woolf demonstrates a progressive awareness of the ways in which the situations of soldiers and civilians are linked by the very realities of war that are ignored both by history and theory" (7). As Stein often does, Woolf bypasses the direct account of war and, instead, offers a deliberate approach designed to challenge normative expectations of the testimonial "I" through a kind of testimonial fiction. In so doing, Woolf exploits the fictional space open in non-fiction whereby she could maintain a relative distance from the waging threats just outside her house.

Like Woolf, Baldwin uses a fictional "I" in the story *Giovanni's Room* to explicitly explore representations of the self and identity, the experience of loss and responsibility. The narrator in Baldwin's text, like Woolf's in *A Sketch*, was unsettled by his reflection. Though the self that reflects back compels readers to consider the role of the self and its relation to others, Baldwin and Woolf created their very own circumstances for the self. Indeed, Baldwin created an overtly fictional text to stage a self and Woolf's was an autobiographical essay. For Baldwin, the reflection appeared precisely when the narrator pondered the level of responsibility he held in relation to a friend who is imprisoned for murder. For Woolf, the reflection itself became "a horrible face—the face of an animal" (69), disassociated from Woolf herself. Baldwin's task,

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<sup>12</sup> Woolf's short story was written in 1917, two years before the end of the war was reached with the Treaty of Versailles.

however, differs in that his text explores representations of the self and marginalized bodies as figured by representations of social and political power. It is this examination that informs a new imagining of human rights for the human to come.

Beckett, Stein, Woolf, and Baldwin disrupt sequential narrative structure by displacing the function of a fixed “I.” They produce a space in which fiction and non-fiction become entangled, exposing aporias at the borders between representation and referent, self and other. They enable access to previously inaccessible and unintelligible forms of witnessing. With Lyotard’s *The Differend*, this project will probe the question: How do victims seek redress if they lack all means to articulate the crime? It is also the contention of this dissertation that the question concerning the meaning of “human” arises precisely from moments and events that threaten existence and draws attention to the limit separating life and death. These events destroy the comfortable fantasy of a universal human subject and allow for the contestation of multiple phrases.

Human rights discourse and its laws adopt the Western definition of the human as an animal that reasons and, along with it, a particular Western vision of the human. Furthermore, as I will argue below, human rights discourse and law assumes and operates under the pretense that the West’s perception of the human is universal. Instead, this project considers and is motivated by the question: What might human rights mean and how would human rights be different without a definition of the human? In order to answer this question, I seek out potential hotspots where a totalizing discourse attempts to foreclose other discourses or stories and find the silences produced by the imposition of any one particular discourse. I examine the genre of life

writing, specifically autobiography, testimony, and fiction, and their bearing on human rights.

Literary modernist writers Stein, Woolf, Beckett, and Baldwin notably complicate the position of the human self and the first person “I” position that is said to hold it. The “I” functions as a placeholder, which is governed by grammatical rules that situate the speaker who borrows the space. Although each writer unsettles readers’ expectations differently, they nevertheless subvert the non-fiction/fiction dichotomy. Once subverted, each writer challenges the testimonial position of the “I” to differing degrees and exposes the fragile connection between the “I” and the particular self it is meant to represent. In respect to the writers chosen, I will make the obvious observation that they are representative of a feature in literary modernity that contributed to creating new narrative expressions, which challenged the traditional narrative structure. Moreover, each represents a different strain of modernity, but none exhausts the numerous contentions made about modernity—there are as many modernities as there are those who have written on them. And this fact, I would argue, is an inevitable product of the term. This is why Friedman asks the perennial question: “What, after all, *is* modernity?” (432).<sup>13</sup> Lyotard’s *The Differend* offers a significant rejoinder to the long-held Aristotelian notion of origin and referentiality. Like Lyotard, Foucault was consumed by the effects of power and its relation to discourse on consciousness and, in Foucault’s terms, the subject as it is constructed within language and by discursive practices. I argue that the diffusion of “phrasing” and discourse and the relation different forms of phrasing has on both the idea of the human and human bodies, marks the site for the human to come.

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Susan Stanford Friedman’s “Periodizing Modernism: Postcolonial Modernities and Space/Time Borders of Modernist Studies” in *Modernism/Modernity* (2006).

To this end, I will resituate Lyotard's notion of phrasing and affect and place it at the forefront of the human to come and explicate the political and ethical exigencies that call for a new thinking on human rights. Paradoxically, it is through diffused discursive practices and phrasing that prevents an easy definitional takeover and allows for the justice of the human to come.



## Chapter One

### Rewriting Human at the Limits of Genre

Curse this war; God damn this war!

—Virginia Woolf, “The Mark on the Wall”

I

#### Introduction: Disfiguring Life

The declaration against war quoted above is not about just any war. The determining pronoun “this” is supposed to refer to a specific war. Presumably because the story, “The Mark on the Wall,” was written in 1917 Britain, “this war” would be referencing the First World War. However, there is nothing, besides the date it was written, that would limit readers to *that* specific war. The demonstrative spatial deictic word “this” is part of a larger context and multiple phrases: “Curse *this war*, God damn *this war*.” But, Lyotard discerns, the “universe presented by the ‘current’ phrase” and the origin are fluid: “[f]ar from constituting a permanence in itself, however, this ‘origin’ is presented or co-presented with the universe of the phrase in which they are marked (§50, 51). First, the context of the deictic and the phrases with which it presents is further destabilized in “The Mark on the Wall” by blurring the border between fiction and nonfiction. This is in part why first time readers can become disoriented. The identity of the addressor “I” and the addressee “you” (and/or “I”?), is that which the referent *war* denotes—First World War? War in general? These three terminals of the universe, at best clogs or at worst shuts down, the fourth terminal. In light of the internal disruption in Woolf’s reverie, the heterogeneity of phrase regimens are continually in play through the

tension produced by the rhetorical tropes that ultimately resist the text's transformation into normative discourse. This does not come without some dismay. After reading "The Mark on the Wall," my students initially and predictably reproached the text with an interrogative inquiry of its purpose. I would argue that at the outset, the students might have felt betrayed by the reverie's lack of normative discourse; therefore, the text appeared untrustworthy.

My students are not alone. Consider, for example, the once Oprah Winfrey endorsed memoirist, James Frey. After learning that James Frey had fictionalized facts in his memoir, *A Million Little Pieces*, nonreaders, casual readers, and literati alike were outraged.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the contempt was easily detectable in English departments across academe. Many found Frey's deliberate obfuscation of literary boundaries and his disregard for genre law unacceptable. For some, he did not violate just any boundary. He trifled with the wrong genre and in so doing, upended referentiality, and with it, the absoluteness of a particular history of Frey's life story.

Evidently Paul de Man's message formulated in "Autobiography as De-facement" has not found its way into popular consciousness. In all this outrage, what was utterly imperceptible was any sense of the "embarrassment" that de Man presumed would overcome those who place autobiography into its own literary genre (67). And those who were thrown by and into Frey's unintelligible milieu of uncoupled references had improperly "assume[d] that life *produces* the autobiography" (69). The collective outrage

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<sup>1</sup> In September 2006 Laura Barton offered an informative description in *The Guardian* of the strong public reaction to Frey's textual deceptions. Stephen King also took the opportunity in February of 2007 to pen an article entitled, "Stephen King on James Frey's 'A Million Little Pieces'" for *Entertainment Weekly*. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* published a number of articles either directly addressing the controversy or alluding to it. See Elise Blackwell's November 16, 2010 article, "A Fray Over Frey's Play to Prey on M.F.A.'s" or Kenneth Goldsmith's article of September 11, 2011, "It's Not Plagiarism. In the Digital Age, It's Repurposing."

over Frey's autobiography was symptomatic of an ingrained belief that the life story should be a truthful retelling. Consequently Frey's deliberate misrepresentation that severed the link between reference and referent left many readers apparently confounded and betrayed.

Indeed, it is not unreasonable to expect to find some consistency between a text that claims to be representative of one's life and the life it claims to represent. Even de Man admits that readers of life-writings are (perhaps should be) offered some thematic remnant of a particular life selected consciously—and unconsciously—by its author. But at the same time, the testimonial “I” is usually structured by a sequential chain of moments—selected, again consciously and unconsciously, by the writer. To say it another way, the autobiographical framework is already generated *a priori* to its writers. There are already genres of discourse in play before any particular text—whether autobiographical, nonfiction, fiction, etc. The genre conventions, ideological frameworks, and discursive practices that inform ways of understanding the world, and even objects produced by others, come before us. Therefore, the genre that represents the testimonial “I” is shaped by the normative formula reproduced and presented again and again.

Just to show how subjective and sometimes arbitrary the definitional process inevitably is, a brief recounting of Phillippe Lejeune's formulation of normalizing and institutionalizing the genre of autobiography will be helpful. In Lejeune's “The Autobiographical Pact,” he takes readers to his definitional laboratory to show the required steps in pinning down a definition. First, he situates the autobiography historically with a timeframe beginning in 1770 and up through 1989, when TAP was

published. Then, according to Lejeune, a process of determining which texts to include in the definition begins. The challenge, he claimed, was in having to position himself as the reader, not the writer, because as the reader he has “the chance to understand more clearly how the text functions” (4). This was just the beginning. Lejeune, needed to create a definition, which included at least four categories: “Forms of language,” “Subject treated,” “Situation of the author,” and “Position of the narrator.” When certain requirements are not met, they are regulated to the *other* no-name list.

Neither is it so simple to claim that autobiography represents the life. On the one hand, it can be argued that readers recognize a life otherwise unknown only through the selected events, first-person narrative, and from the style (tone and voice) through which the autobiography is narrated. Indeed, while the traditional framework of autobiography determines to some extent the life found in its pages, it is also true that the life of any writer is not only found in the genre(s) of biography. A life can be found within all her written texts, regardless of genre.

At the same time, one would not want to conflate all writing into a selfsame, fixed identity. In the case of autobiography as well as testimony, trust in the “I” as a historical referent is a central concern.<sup>2</sup> Trust in the historical “accuracy” of life-writing is contingent on a conviction that there exists a direct and fixed link between reference and the historical referent. Unfortunately, like many convictions, this too leads to inevitable disappointment. If such an unquestionable connection were possible, then the coupling would ultimately condemn testimonial writing to the impossible labor of translating the absolute whole of an event and its singularity—a Sisyphean ordeal, to

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<sup>2</sup> Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

say the least. Barthes and Benjamin point out the complex network of meaning making, as it involves weaving signifiers (Barthes, 159) and the “reciprocal relationship between languages,” as it involves the persistent act of translating (Benjamin, 72) while remaining faithful to the singularity of each text at once.<sup>3</sup> Lejeune agrees in “The Autobiographical Pact” that “biographies and autobiographies are referential texts: exactly like scientific or historical discourse, they claim to provide information about a ‘reality’ exterior to the text, and so submit to a test of verification” (22). But to bear witness to or to write one’s autobiography is already in the realm of re-presentation of translation. This is why Lejeune quickly points out to readers that it is a “resemblance to the truth” (ibid).

The Frey scandal, then, was in part the result of a readership that believed that life-writing is a composed of an internal economy where a discourse carried with it a stable or even a representational referent. Aside from the impossibility of an autonomous eternal economy, such a discursive structure would paradoxically promise much more than it could deliver while simultaneously delivering very little. This would assume that the writer and the text could fulfill some kind of totalitarian control over meaning, thus leaving very little for the reader. In fact, the belief that normative discursive practices are requirements and must be adhered to, in fact, wrongs the readers. Readers, by interpretive means, build on textual events—by linking phrases—which is an important potential for political engagement, a detail that did not escape Lyotard’s notice in *The Differend*. Foreclosing additional phrasing, as if that were possible, would radically limit meaning, thereby prohibiting any emergence of meaning.

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<sup>3</sup> See Roland Barthes’s “From Work to Text” in *Image Music Text* and Walter Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator” in *Illuminations*.

But more importantly, such a view of narrative function closes off all potential for the testimonial “I” to come. Contrarily, all writing is influenced in unknown and unintended ways by external forces and psychological appropriation. Economic, familial, social conditions, and the discursive and ideological practices that infuse meaning into them, in which certain fictions taken to be truths, get reinscribed into the narrative. But at the same time, (un)conscious resistances to metanarratives open up new possibilities of understanding.

For example, the neo-liberal notion of personhood and the individual gave the false perception that we are each a master of our destiny and any failure is seen as a failure of moral character.<sup>4</sup> Although the current conception of the individual has its roots in classical Greece and Italy, it, however, has survived primarily in a likeness. In *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, Jacob Burckhardt argues that the political circumstances in Italy during the Middle Ages occurred when the veil that draped over the peoples’ consciousness began to melt. The individual “was conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family, or corporation—only through some general category” (para 129). Even the failure to substantiate an injury is also seen as a failure of character for the victim. As new attempts to pressure conventional narrative making is put into action, new attention is given to those who are often not part of the grand narrative of neo-liberalism. Thus, new possibilities emerge generally for the evolving concepts of the human.

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<sup>4</sup> For a discussion on the EuroAmerican notion of personhood and its relation to commodification and capitalist society, see Pierre Bourdieu’s *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* and LiPuma, E. (1998), “Modernity and forms of personhood in Melanesia,” In M. Lambek & A. Strathern (Eds.), *Bodies and persons* (pp. 53-80).

The Frey scandal exposed a readership that overwhelmingly prefers classificatory systems of genre which impacts the interpretive outcome. Although I have focused primarily on readership, Frey is not off the hook either. Frey knowingly distorted, perjured, and bore false witness and, in doing so, broke a promise both implied and explicit in originally categorizing his text as a memoir. Readers and writers are caught in a bind. On the one hand, a tyrannical approach to narrative structure and function oppresses marginalized voices and reinforces the prison house of silence. But on the other hand, a wholly unstructured, anarchic, and unaccountable approach to the public space of writing has the consequence of also suppressing voices where only the stories of the lucky emerge.

### **Autobiography and Hysteria: Life-writing as Literature's Feminized Other**

Although many may disagree with de Man's objection to autobiography's ascension, it is difficult to disagree with de Man's observation that in all writing and within all genres there is a trace of a testimonial "I," whether or not it is slightly touched by autobiography, memoir, or testimony (which collectively can be called "life-writing"). At the same time, his claim that autobiography "always *looks* slightly *disreputable* and *self-indulgent* in a way that may be symptomatic of its incompatibility with the monumental dignity of aesthetic values" (my emphasis) is puzzling in many respects, not the least of which is that autobiography for de Man does not merit a place among the "canonical hierarchies of the major literary genres" (68). His authoritarian swipe interestingly anthropomorphizes autobiography, a move he would surely oppose, while at the same time relegating it to a place as literature's "other." In de Man's view,

autobiography has the agency for self-awareness and self-care, but it remains “silly” and unworthy of its own intellectual muscle.

Man’s claim that autobiography is silly may aid in a kind of cover-up to conceal his own history. In 1987, Ortwin de Graef, a graduate student conducting dissertation research, discovered articles written by de Man and published in pro-Nazi newspapers, including *Le Soir*, in which he contributed the most articles, counting among them at least one explicitly anti-Semitic. In *The Double Life of Paul de Man*, Evelyn Barish’s extensive research reveals the extent to which de Man collaborated. Barish notes that “[t]he documents from the Military Court that I unearthed [...] provide a rare picture of how literary and commercial collaboration proceeded inside the media. In fact, [during Nazi-controlled Belgium] de Man was employed simultaneously by the three major media companies” (xv). Henri de Man, his uncle and close family member, was an influential and politically connected member of the pro-Nazi government. Barish unearthed the criminal circumstances that led to his arrival into the United States. De Man, she discovered, was accused of embezzlement and forgery, among other crimes, and Bob de Man, Paul’s father, helped him to escape prosecution by financing his trip to New York. Barish’s research reveals, among the many revelations, a personality that was vulnerable to fascist ideologies. Perhaps, too, readers of Gertrude Stein and Martin Heidegger might find similar traits. The question for readers is whether their ideological predispositions make it into their thought and writing and, if so, to what extent? With regards to the first question, the answer is an unequivocal yes. As for the second question, the extent to which a writer’s politics (or political biases) weave into the



thought and determine the language of a text is something that requires continual consideration.

Barish suggests that because Madeleine de Man, Paul's mother, suffered from debilitating depressive episodes "she had little of herself to spare for her younger son [Paul]" (13). De Man's widow stated that he had an obsession with staring into the mirror. Barish observes that De Man "obsessively needed to seek himself, Narcissus-like, in a mirror [and] all his adult life was certainly preceded by the infant and boy who had lacked the close and loving attention of his first caregiver. [Paul] struggled to gain an identity through experiencing the presence [...] of the Other [...] And one may venture to guess that what was unstable in himself, which he called the abyss [...] would become the instability of language" (ibid). Barish continues with her analysis: "The unfulfilled hunger of narcissism [...] would mark him, both with the effortless and indifferent charm typical of this sort of personality and with self-centeredness and a private sense of lack, a damaging emptiness that he would try disastrously to fill by money and acquisitions" (14). It is not difficult to see some of Barish's observations play out in de Man's particular notion of deconstruction. And it would not be an unfair leap to suggest that de Man's critique on the autobiographical genre is fueled by his own history including his mother's psychological isolation and subsequent suicide, his collaboration on Nazi propaganda, and his many additional criminal activities.

For those attentive to all subtleties of gendering, it is easy to find lurking in de Man's description of autobiography a complex network of gendered metaphors and oppressive doctrines. For example, the term "self-indulgent" suggests vanity, the lack of restraint and self-control, and the unreasonable/irrational desire to tend to whims.

Western patriarchy, its constitutional origin found in Western Metaphysics, has always had the propensity to define the feminized other. The “feminine” is imagined as vain, irrational, and unrestrained—essentially self-indulgent—and, as such, untrustworthy (or in de Man’s word, “disreputable”). De Man’s description summons to mind an image of autobiography slapping on some lipstick, flirting with her reader, then dashing off to mess with referentiality and her “I.”

Imagine the personification of autobiography, and imagine it was given the *proper* name, Dora. For a moment, consider Freud’s Dora as a metonymic displacement of autobiography, with all the utterances and symptoms generated and sustained under the dictatorial rule of the father. Dora attempted to defy father Freud when she “broke off” his analysis of her story. The break was assuredly overdetermined. But among the multiple causes, one likely and perhaps unconscious reason was Dora’s effort to secure control of her life story and with it her life. Dora was only partly successful. Indeed, she did effectively foreclose most of her narrative(s). But at the same time, Freud still possessed fragments of Dora’s testimony.

With those fragments, Dora’s frequent bouts with hysterical aphonia and the narrative fragments she left behind were subjected to Freud’s editorial, and therefore interpretive, authority. Freud admits that “[t]he case history itself was only committed to writing from memory” (24). Of course, Dora herself testified from memory. Readers are thereby presented with a memory of a memory—an interpretation of an interpretation. When readers’ interpretations are factored into the interpretive chain, then it is an interpretation ad infinitum. In other words, readers are only ever receiving an

interpretation: Freud's translation of Dora's translation and the readers' translation of Freud's translation. Bound translations, however, are sites of mistranslations.

One such translational move—imposed on and to the narrative structure—is Freud's attempt, as he confesses, to “fill the gaps” so as to produce a more linear narrative. Furthermore, Freud tells readers that his amendments to Dora's fragments are “trustworthy;” presumably readers are expected to assume this because he simply claimed them to be so. The risk here is that all mistranslations of Dora's text are upheld and believed accurate under both the law of psychoanalysis and Freud's authority. Therefore, misrepresentations are seen as truths. Dora consequently becomes Freud's Dora, as such access to discourse was foreclosed to Dora. Dora experienced a wrong, in Lyotardian terms, when Freud imposed a genre of discourse on Dora's phrases (both articulate and inarticulate), in effect claiming that discourse to be the legitimate interpretation. In Dora's case, the only escape route was through the analyst's office door.

By claiming narrative authority over Dora's story, Freud effectively colonized and smothered Dora's voice, thus producing an altogether different narrative. Freud himself becomes, figuratively speaking, the framework and the law that generates her story. Dora is, figuratively speaking, the text that is already predetermined in and through the framework. The text that Dora is for Freud is riddled with the same narrative concerns that governed life-narratives. That is to say, because a preexisting framework with specific genre rules and expectations governs autobiographies, testimonies, and memoirs, such narratives are not accurate reflections of the lives they are told to represent. It is also true that regardless of whether Dora had continued or broken off

analysis as she did, narrative fragmentation is an inevitable outcome and consequence of language and narrative making. In any case, Freud would have framed and structured the narratives. For the most part, Dora's narrative condition is an exemplar. The genre rules that generate autobiography and testimony determine, to some extent, the narrative content, presentation, the subject, and even the reader.

To be sure, readers do not have access to Dora's Dora, but to Freud's Dora. Like Dora, all texts are generated and structured by laws, multiple fathers who stand both outside and in the law. In general, the occupied territory of narrative making can be oppressive space for both writers and readers—even under the occupied regime of life-stories. Life-writing—more specifically, autobiography and testimony (each governed by slightly different rules with different stakes, see below)—is a textual space that, if we take de Man's criticism seriously (I think his view on autobiography is representative of a pervasive view), is both denigrated and yet excessively monitored and regulated. When experience becomes articulated through phrase regimens overseen by rules of discourse, and the stakes involve the abolition of racial dehumanization practices and the demand for justice and human rights, whether in written text or social movements, the policing forces rush in to impose specific rules to how and when a grievance can be articulated, which phrases are appropriate, etc. For example, through the Freedom of Information Act, the online publication, *The Intercept*, obtained documentation confirming that "The Department of Homeland Security has been monitoring the Black Lives Matter movement" since 2014 (Joseph, 2015). According to these documents, the policing of the Black Lives Matter organization is much wider than what was originally thought; it includes, but is not limited to, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the

Federal Emergency Management Agency. One can already see the replay: the law rushes in to deny those wronged a means to articulate the damages, through arrests, misinformation, and intimidation.

To be clear, I agree that genres of life-writing and fiction, especially given their potential bearing on human rights, are discursive practices that make it possible to address wrongs. My critique is not then of genre, but instead of the expectation that narrative making and, for that matter, all forms of bearing witness is governed by rules both implied and explicit must not be transgressed. Genre law provides some confidence in the probability of specific forms of affective engagement, which secures exclusionary hold and center of power. Lyotard rhetorically asks: “In the absence of a phrase regimen or of a genre of discourse that enjoys a universal authority to decide, does not the linkage (whichever one it is) necessarily wrong the regimens or genres whose possible phrases remain unactualized” (xii)? In my project, I attempt to link genres of discourse with competing stakes as a way to delegitimize the assumed authority some discourses claim over others and to draw attention, as Lyotard demands, to the differend.

For example, as we found in Freud’s transcription of Dora, readers can also detect in de Man’s description of autobiography an unconscious activation of the latent nineteenth-century moralistic notion of hysteria and a male “colonization” of autobiography. Consider, for example, Hélène Cixous’ and Catherine Clément’s reminder in *The Newly Born Woman* of Jules Falret’s phallogocentric rendering of hysteria: “These patients are real actresses; they have no greater pleasure than deceiving [...] In a word, the hysteric’s life is nothing but [a] perpetual lie” (49). Falret is

not alone, in *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, Friedrich Nietzsche claims that “a few truths about ‘woman as such’” but these truths, after all are only, according to Nietzsche, “my truths” (162). One of the several truths mentioned is that women’s “great art is the lie” (163). Cixous’s abbreviated version of the long held Western view of women: “Girls are liars” (49). In short, autobiographies, for de Man, cannot be trusted, especially if they are by women.

Indeed, the story of the “feminine” liar can be traced throughout the history of Western philosophy and epistemology. This philosophical system, Cixous reminds us, is “[e]verywhere (where) ordering intervenes, where a law organizes what is thinkable by [hierarchical] oppositions [...] It subjects thought—all concepts, codes and values—to a binary system, related to ‘the’ couple, man/woman and [active/passive] ” (64). With some thirty years of Derridean thinking, responsive readers, who follow the phantoms and aporias that haunt philosophical and literary critique, will inevitably be torn by the bar that slashes and tears its way between two seemingly opposed terms such as literature/autobiography, regarding the second term as subordinate.

“Woman” and all “others” barred in Western traditional thinking—for example, brown and black, gay, lesbian, trans and bisexual, non-citizen, lawless, condemned, and economically deprived people—share the same position in the traditional philosophical discursive network, that is, with the secondary terms. These include, but are not limited to, the secondary terms in the following binaries: good/evil, self/other, whole/part, day/night, father/mother, inside/outside, logos/pathos, heterosexual/homosexual, and presence/absence. Traditional Western philosophy and the hierarchal oppositional structure that constitutes it generates a sense of innate

*puissance*, which allows a relatively practiced thinker like de Man to be unconsciously absorbed in this mythic network of terms and ideas. This is why for him, his description of the autobiography genre is almost personified and, as such, it becomes a decadent liar with father issues and canon envy.

Before settling too quickly into the argument that life-writing is literature's feminized other, consider a congenital outcome of hierarchical oppositions: the metaphysically gendered delegation of narrative making and meaning making results in a divestment of presence that ultimately bars the sovereignty required to announce, "Here-I-am."<sup>5</sup> Most forms of writing, court testimony, or even to serve on a jury were (and still in some countries are) denied to women. To write, to testify, and to critique others is to announce "Here-I-Am." And as such, life-writing work is either denied outright or delegitimized by and through a phallogocentric apparatus that separates the writer from her text, closes her potential for world-shaping, suppresses and censors her testimony, and encourages the frequent theft of her work.<sup>6</sup>

Sidonie Smith in *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation* reminds her reader that:

Autobiography is itself one of the forms of selfhood constituting the idea of man and in turn promoting the idea [...]. Since the ideology of gender

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<sup>5</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, for a philosophical exploration into the autobiographical animal.

<sup>6</sup> See "The Laugh of the Medusa," in which Hélène Cixous reclaims the classical figure of Medusa who now laughs and in so doing interrupts phallogocentricism. And only when women begin to write themselves, about themselves, will we possess our work, bodies and identities. Also see, *What is An Apparatus?* by Giorgio Agamben, and Louis Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (ISA). "Apparatus" specifically is a term Foucault uses when he turns his attention to studies on governmentality. In *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* Foucault succinctly defines apparatus as "a thoroughly heterogeneous set consisting of discourse, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions [...] The apparatus is itself the network that can be established between these elements [...] it is always inscribed into a play of power" (119). Among many other sites that power functions, sexuality and the prison are the most widely read—see his *The History of Sexuality* and *Discipline and Punishment*.

makes of woman's life script a nonstory, a silent space, a gap in patriarchal culture, the ideal woman is self-effacing rather than self-promoting, and her story shapes itself not around the public, heroic life but around the fluid, circumstantial, contingent responsiveness to other that, according to patriarchal ideology, characterizes the life of woman but not autobiography (50).

Without her role in the social and public sphere recognized, women were denied the legitimizing literary space for life stories. Whether the "law" of autobiography delegitimizes or outright denies women access to a subject—and therefore deprives her of the life-affirming potential that her text provides—is an act not against one who is feared to be less human. Within the traditional bipartite hierarchy that structures the framework for global living entities, preventing another from writing (and reading) is generated by the fear of which she can and will learn. After all, laws against reading and writing were never enacted on other animals (i.e. dogs, cats, etc.). In fact, the force of any law, whether claimed by authorities in a discipline, a state, or claimed to be "natural," is imposed precisely because it is feared that those upon whom the law acts are already the presence that that law seeks to degrade. This is an act more against the one who is feared to be as human as those who deny them their rights. It is an act against those who already possess all the living possibilities open to what is normally called "human." Why, then, deprive women, as well as those enslaved during American slavery, an education of reading and writing? Perhaps the concern all along was that they were always more human, perhaps too human.

Within this bipartite hierarchy of global entities, a kind of logical inconsistency inevitably opens. The human is imagined as a supreme entity (only one notch down from a god) and traditionally rooted in the idealized and abstract notion of universal belonging, while at the same time corrupted by its earthly origins and limitations.



Consider the expression “only human.” It means to be flawed, inferior, weak, wounded, unfound, unsound, and lacking responsibility. To be only human is to be too embodied on the laws of nature. The axiom “only human” is an outcome of the dichotomous opposition between god and human and mind and body, of which the opposition between male and female is a constituent. But “man” too is predicated on the same god/human dichotomy and yet he is often imagined as superior to the *other* human. Therefore, if women are considered “somehow *more* biological, *more* corporeal, and *more* natural than men,” and are among the many marginalized bodies that are deemed too human, then perhaps it is because the function of a scale is also within the dichotomy (Grosz 1994, 14). Spivak may have been on to something in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” when she parenthetically stated that the margin is really the “silent center” (283).<sup>7</sup> This principle is established only on a continuum that functions within a dichotomous oppositional hierarchical network of meanings beginning with the god/human invention and descending next to human/animal.

For example, this network resembles a complex web where human can be subdivided into superior and inferior (all too) humans (e.g. man/woman, white/black, citizen/immigrant, etc.). Those flawed, inferior, weak, wounded, unfound, and unsound, risk it all to bear witness—to affirm a life is especially dangerous. Such affirmation can be personally dangerous to the writer (she is vulnerable to social, economic, and institutional isolation, physical and psychological attacks, and indeed, death), but she is also dangerous to the very social structures that benefit order and reinforce the myth that claims an essential opposition between mind and body. As a result, the patrolmen

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<sup>7</sup> See also Spivak’s revised version in the “History” chapter of *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003.

and guards rush in and command obedience to the regulatory system, laying claim and determining who gets to write, which genres, subject, and styles are permissible, and whether work is publishable.

Of course, subverting regulatory systems and hiding from policing powers requires a room of one's own. But as anyone with construction experience will testify, this work is always dangerous and, too frequently, deadly. And, as Virginia Woolf knew, it also does not come cheap.<sup>8</sup> The Hogarth Press offered the Woolfs—especially Virginia—a means to print her texts as well as publishing others' works. Woolf offered marginalized narratives and the too humans like herself an escape route from the law. Our grandmothers, mothers, and sisters, especially those who occupy the more complex networks of oppressed positions, know all too well the blisters, cuts, bruises, breaks, sore backs and shoulders, and physical and mental exhaustion that come with constructing this room. Illness, mental breakdowns, and death are too common among those exhausted bodies struggling for the authorial determination of their own work.

Distressing as it is to be forced to build one's own space, what is more disturbing is the certain gender-specific assaults against both the work and the writer herself. Just as detestable is that the worthlessness is too often internalized. To be sure, Woolf did not escape self-reproach. Hermione Lee reminds the reader that Woolf indeed claimed life-writing to be “a bastard, an impure act,” simply put, “poppycock.”<sup>9</sup> Yet it is often difficult to distinguish fiction and life-writing in Woolf's oeuvre. If autobiography is, for Woolf, poppycock, then this called into question what value Woolf put on her own work.

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<sup>8</sup> Leonard Woolf and Virginia Woolf founded Hogarth Press, a British publishing house.

<sup>9</sup> In *Virginia Woolf*, Hermione Lee offers a thorough examination into Woolf's claims on life-writing.

Woolf was no stranger to harsh reviews and neither was Gertrude Stein. In fact, Stein's work provoked some to engage in personal condemnation. For example, Michael Gold's 1936 diatribe entitled "Gertrude Stein: A Literary Idiot" was a misogynistic, overstimulated spasm in which he called Stein erratic, insane, childish, and an imbecile. And more recently some criticism has called into question Stein's integrity. But of course, as is so often true, there is the unconscious fallback; it is easy to hear the sentiment, "women are liars" and especially so, gay women. In these critiques, the thinking and ideas within Woolf and Stein's texts are not the subject of analysis. Instead, the message emanating from the critiques is that Stein and Woolf cannot be trusted, and because they cannot be trusted then neither can their work. They are, according to patriarchal authority, too embodied and subject to irrational whims; they simply lack the faculty of reason that is thought to separate the human animal from other animals. In short, women are too animalistic to be fully human.

Although Stein and Woolf were socially gendered, each was read differently. For example, how Stein and Woolf each occupied her expected gender role influenced the rhetoric of the criticism against each. Within Virginia's marriage to Leonard she, at least presumably so, followed the heteronormative role. The hierarchical oppositional structure generated and sustained by patriarchy was still partly upheld. Woolf nevertheless had the audacity to participate in the public intellectual space normally reserved for privileged men. Naturally, according to the assumptions that motivate the patriarchal imagination, Woolf's mental illness was both an effect of participating in the intellectual sphere and the cause that allowed her to assume she had the intellectual might to participate in the first place. Therefore, like any "good woman" who in her "cute"

way tried to “play with the boys,” she, as is so often assumed, suffered emotionally and physically as well.

Stein, on the other hand, occupied her gendered space slightly differently from Woolf. Like Woolf, Stein influenced the rhetoric of the criticism and participated in the public intellectual sphere, but did not adhere to the expectations of heteronormativity. Rejecting the predatory gaze of male desire, Stein’s nonconformity incidentally unsettles the patriarchal system that relegates women as subordinate. Even as Stein undermines an abstract structure, at the concrete level her non-heteronormativity was not obviously known; therefore, she remains within the ideological circuitry of heteronormativity. This had the potential of being dangerous for Stein. Because she never sought male desire and likely rejected men when approached, she risked social alienation, economic stagnation, and psychological and physical harm. As was (and still is today) the risk for all lesbians, when she did not conform according to gendered expectations she is considered suspect. The lesbian is deemed socially guilty of unsettling heteronormativity and, at best misleading others, if not telling outright lies. In popular imagination, the lesbian deceives. Above all else, as we hear the charge still in 2016, she cannot be trusted.

This project assumes of course that “women are not liars.” But if the word “genius” can only be attributed to the gender that is not a gender, then so be it. It would be a greater honor if this project could stand among the mad and deceiving gendered, the unfound, unsound, and childish, and shine in the hot brilliance of its grandmothers, mothers, and sisters.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Women are gendered through networks of power—shown earlier in this chapter. The question: Who is gendered? is also a question: who gets to do the defining? The patriarchal structure is benefactor

In this and the following chapter, I follow the shifting “I” and the trans-genre characteristics which with Woolf’s “The Mark on the Wall” and Stein’s *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, engage as a way to resist the totalizing and silencing discourses that prevent the limits of autobiography and testimony. This chapter examines precisely how the “human” is figured at the limits of the testimonial “I,” with a close reading of the structure and content of each text. Stein’s *Autobiography* and Woolf’s “The Mark on the Wall” are both read as fellow wanderers in the search for the human and as denizens laying claim against each other. In each text’s own unique way, the structure of the testimonial “I” is unsettled. While examining these texts, I explore the genre differences between each and illuminate the discursive structure of each and explore the possible ways the idea of the human is addressed or imagined against the standard Western patriarchal definition.

### **Woolf and Stein as Trans-Genre**

In the title “The Mark on the Wall,” Woolf introduces the concept of limit within the term “mark.”<sup>11</sup> Perhaps it is some kind of sign symbolizing a specific meaning, or indeed even a closing off of meanings. Readers are led on a stream-of-conscious reverie into the precise character of the mark through which Woolf deliberately obfuscates the writing on the wall so that readers, along with the unnamed narrator, cannot read it.

Woolf takes readers on a journey that traverses history and confronts present-day events through an allegory of writing. The question that occupies the narrator and

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socially, economically, politically, familial, legally, medically, and educationally. As for being a “genius,” historically this designation was assigned only to those non-gendered (men); thus, the patriarchal networks of power assume the authority to define others, the world, reason, and human.

<sup>11</sup> Completed in 1917, it was slightly revised in 1919 and was published in Woolf’s short prose collection called *Monday or Tuesday* in 1921.

readers is, what was the mark on the wall? The journey is cut short when “someone” interrupts, claims to want a newspaper, curses the war, and then informs the narrator and readers that a snail is on the wall. It is this living entity that is the impetus for the readers’ meditative voyage. It is also what concludes the text.

With this “ending,” as so many readily point out, Woolf parodies conventional narrative conclusions. According to literary conventions, narratives progress sequentially toward a conclusion, but the snail undermines this development. Readers typically anticipate a conclusion to stories. And indeed, Woolf offered just that, an end to her story. But the final “mark,” that is, the final word, as others have pointed out, was itself disturbingly unsatisfying.<sup>12</sup> Why was the final answer disappointing? Would it have been more satisfying if the mark was some kind of smudge, or a nail, or still more a hole?

Perhaps the problem is that Woolf offered up, or rather “sacrificed,” as Toni Morrison would more aptly state it in the “Nobel Lecture,” a living or what once was a living creature, in order to make a narrative point. Readers do not know whether the snail is dead or alive. And as such, the snail occupies an impossible space of being both alive and dead at once. The ambivalence frustrates readers’ expectations and disturbs our sense of decency.

Furthermore, the snail which is both alive and dead is also both the final word and that which begins the text and writes the story. If Morrison’s bird analogy is brought to bear on the function of the snail in Woolf’s text, then readers may understand the

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<sup>12</sup> Marc D. Cyr, in “A Conflict of Closure in Virginia Woolf’s ‘The Mark on the Wall,’” notes some of the scholarly disappointment in learning that the mark on the wall was a snail. For example, Jean Guiguet stated in *Virginia Woolf: and Her Works* that it was “cruelly disappointing” (217) and “absurd” (385), as well as Susan Rubinow Gorsky in *Virginia Woolf* who found it “insignificant” (51).

snail as that which represents language. In Woolf's case, similar to the bird in Morrison's "Nobel Lecture,," invoking a living and substantively finite object—when throughout the text primarily only inorganic objects were entertained—produced a pause. The snail, in a very real way, came out of nowhere. Stunned, readers are compelled to reflect differently on "The Mark on the Wall" and generally on narrative expectations, if only briefly.

Partly too because of the kind of creature Woolf presents—a slithering, slippery, virtually silent, nocturnal being that leaves behind slime—the snail breaks expectations and, in so doing, any attempt to finalize the text. When in the morning spectators observe a visible trail, they know that a snail slipped by during the night. Readers might ask: Why introduce a creature that uses the camouflage of night to make its move? Is there a secret? What is held from the reader? These are not simply rhetorical questions. Woolf's text was precisely crafted to produce indeterminacy and consequently provokes questioning. As such, Woolf's snail does more than resist textual closure. Throughout the reverie, the snail was primarily an unidentified and mysterious mark and adds to the already laden text of interruptions and omissions, queries and phantoms, dashes and ellipses. All contribute to a reading experience that manically rushes readers along while at once melancholically slowing them down with frequent pauses.

Together with Woolf, readers are also engaged in a narrative experiment where thinking acts against all tyrannical claims of summation and resolution. Woolf achieves this by disrupting the temporal sequence of narrative form, parodying the ending, providing constant in-text interruptions, and by the subject matter she contends in the reverie.

Just preceding the final figure is another mysterious body, a “someone” who breaks in and interrupts the narrator’s reverie and forces a recognition of “reality,” of war, and of “news.” Like the snail, the “someone” interrupts any attempt at linear narration, narrative closure, and precedent. The pronoun—someone—usually refers to a person mentioned earlier in a text. But in “The Mark on the Wall,” Woolf did not introduce the proper name linked to the pronoun. Perhaps this is to suggest that the “someone” who interrupts represents anyone and everyone, much like the unnamed narrator. In many ways, readers occupy both figures at once—the narrator who desires to keep the narrative open, who in other words explicitly challenges historical practices and resists precedence, patriarchal domination, and closure. Therefore, readers are unsettlingly suspended on the median between life and death. However, being suspended is not the only effect. Just preceding the last mark is a scene where the unnamed narrator confesses, “I can’t remember a thing. Everything’s moving, falling, slipping, vanishing...There is a vast upheaval of matter” (89). Of course, using the pronoun “I” does not ensure a straightforward autobiographical moment. But it does suggest an indirect opening to the writer’s self; in short, an autobiographical opening.

“The Mark on the Wall” is more than the short fiction it appears to be at first read. It is also an account that bears witness to the First World War. After all, the genre-bending of fiction and nonfiction is not new. Kafka, for example, referred to his short story “The Judgment” as his most autobiographical text, yet it is often referred to by most as a fictional text. Similarly, Woolf’s text, while occupying the genre of fiction, does not do so exclusively. Resistance to narrative rules is not only found in the last word of Woolf’s meditation. That resistance opens the text with a “perhaps” and moves in and



through it entirely by making it an experimental text that defies genre rules and narrative expectations with each turn of phrase.

Before Derrida, Stein and Woolf challenged and opened up the boundaries of genre. All three writers engage in a structural and linguistic written performance designed to act out the very concerns with “the law of the law of genre” (“The Law of Genre,” 227). The concern is nicely articulated by Dominick La Capra in his “Comment” to Ralph Cohen: “The status of genres as discursive institutions does create constraints that may make a text that combines or mixes genres appear to be a cultural monstrosity. Such a text may be attacked or even made a scapegoat by some” (220). Derrida’s assertion is not an attempt to deny genre, as many have tried to argue. It is instead meant to accentuate that the law, as in any law, is impure. There always remains an uncertainty in the language of the law, its interpretation, and its acceptance. The general law of life-writing, and each particular law governing its subgenres (i.e. autobiography, testimony, memoir, and biography), proves to be dubious. And the general law of fiction and each particular law governing its subgenres also always remain somewhat unenforceable.

“The Mark on the Wall” is one of those texts that cannot be relegated only to the shelves of fiction. The text references “real” life experiences. It was written and first published in 1917 during WWI and the unnamed “someone” exclaims: “Curse this war; God damn this war” (89)! And although readers assume an unnamed narrator, there is in fact very little that suggests that the text is fiction. At the same time, however, the text cannot be relegated exclusively to the shelves of testimony or autobiography.

Like Woolf, Gertrude Stein violates the arbitrary norms and rules thought to regulate types of genres. *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* is described as an autobiography, even though Stein, its author, adopts another's name, her lover Alice's. In doing so, Stein challenges narrative conventions that are assumed to regulate autobiography. Stein's *Autobiography* does not only challenge genre law through the appropriation of Alice's name, but Stein's text also puts the law on trial through playful repetition and contradictions that disrupt time and the concept of history.

Stein and Woolf question the structure that stabilizes Western epistemology by testing the binary systems that contain and regulate meaning. Textual control does not exist without the very philosophical history that governs concepts. That is itself the author of the network of ideological and non-ideological actors that reinforce adherence to a regulatory system. Total and fundamental control is impossible to demand and still more to imagine. Like in any network of symbolic exchange and meaning making, there are fragments, misreading, mistranslations, and forgetting.

Nietzsche, in "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense," describes the process of concept formation and outlines human truth. Nietzsche exposes human truth as nothing more than a "mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, [and] anthropomorphism," dependent on "forgetting those features which differentiate one thing from another." He further states that to forget means to forget "that original metaphors of perception were indeed metaphors" (877-879). Nietzsche says in *The Will to Power* that the "will to truth [is] a tool of the will to power [the will to truth] is really something else and only a disguise" (§ 375, 378). The will to truth or the methods in which people determine truth are "not invented from motives of truth, but from motives

of power, of wanting to be superior” (§ 455). Nietzsche is not claiming that there is no truth, but because some are blinded by the will to power, truths are invented in order to justify claims of superiority. But he asks: “What is ‘truth’” (§ 584)? The true world “cannot contradict itself, cannot change, cannot become, has no beginning and no end” (ibid). And this “truth,” Nietzsche calls out, is the “greatest error that has ever been committed [...] the world became false” (ibid). What is considered true is actually false, but we forgot that it was false. Perhaps Lyotard’s suggestion that we need to bear witness to the differend and create linkages and attach phrases to other phrases concludes that perhaps there is a chance that the veil of lies is removed and we can know the atrocity against those victims of the gas chambers. When experience can be linked to countless phrases that help articulate wrongs and damages, Lyotard’s differend is a blow to the error invented in favor of those wanting to be superior.

Unsettlingly taken for granted assumptions was Stein’s specialty as well. Stein’s *Autobiography*, like many of her texts, plays with language in order to interrupt literary expectations and generate thinking. If nothing else, Stein’s oeuvre reflects a persistent struggle against acts of forgetting. Stein’s repetitive return to her place of birth in the *Autobiography* is an obvious move that inscribes itself into the memory of readers. However, it is also the case that repetition alone does not secure a place in memory. As Stein suggests, repetition can be the cause of forgetting.

Stein’s text is also contradictorily structured. On the one hand, it possesses an exaggerated excess of human experience. The use of hyperbole, together with dissonant repetition, challenges the automatism embedded in narrative convention. In this way, Stein’s text subverts Western epistemological claims on narrative, thereby

allowing for new voices, previously unknown events, experiences, and truths to enter the collective consciousness. Keeping texts open allows for oppressed and marginalized voices to offer new critiques, suggestions, and worldviews.

On the other hand, Stein employs hyperbole and dissonant repetition in what commonly are considered banal moments and comments. Surely it is common for writers to offer their place and date of birth in an autobiography. However, it is not the “norm” to restate the fact repeatedly. Readers of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* are repeatedly confronted with the banality of this fact. Stein’s text forces readers to slow down. By slowing down, the reader is manipulated into following a progression of responses, beginning with simple acknowledgment and concluding with frazzled questioning.

In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein describes a scene at the American embassy in Paris when she was asked to take an oath, but the embassy worker, having administered them so often, had forgotten it. The everyday experience of administering the oath produced an experience of forgetting. The automatic or unconscious performance, what Austin would call a performative utterance, is situated in forgetting. However, Stein introduces something new. If the laws regulating narrative making are broken, then what was once considered predictable is now unique and enlivened. Stein’s narrative technique throws readers around, and once they are disoriented, the ordinary is re-contextualized and becomes unfamiliar and new.

Also in the oath scene, Stein describes a moment when an embassy worker claimed to have the authorization to determine whether those who claim American citizenry but lack identification papers (birth certificates, visas, or passports), by simply

“guessing.” Diana Fuss in *Identification Papers* reminds readers of Frantz Fanon’s work on identifications: “Fanon asks us to remember the violence of identification; the material practices of exclusion, alienation, appropriation, and domination that transform other subjects into subjected others. Identification is not only how we accede to power, is also how we learn submission” (14).<sup>13</sup> Identity and recognition is both empowering and disempowering. To be recognized allows one to respond, to have a say and articulate a concern, an idea, share experiences, etc. There is something about it that permits the possibility to actualize through discursive practices and say “here-I-am.” At the same time, it can mark us as inferior, subordinate, and subject to overt violence.

Stein so often puts subjects to the test. Perhaps the test is a way of rescuing the human from the totalitarian grips of a discursive regime that determined authority over the specific rules that define the human—in effect, putting the rules to the test or, to put it differently, put the test to the test. Or perhaps Stein simply enjoyed submitting her subjects to cruel practices just to see them struggle—like a sadistic child who takes a magnifying glass to ants. Generally, test-taking brings with it a variety of seemingly compulsory trite rules of etiquette. Testing, like any genre, is determined by a set of rules, given in formal settings (classrooms, offices), with expected vocabulary and an expected answer; most conditions are already known in advance. There are, however, other kinds of testing where no one knows it is underway and it is not even clear who the test takers are during it. On the other hand, the textual experimentations that Stein and Woolf perform are at a kind of open, indeterminate testing site where the rules are shaped at the present time among those participating. What haunts the question of who

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<sup>13</sup> See Althusser’s text “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” for a critical discussion on interpellation and the identificatory process.

and what “we” are is precisely located in the ever-present and mostly unbeknownst to us, countless tests we are engaged in. The limit to which Stein and Woolf take their readers is just a reminder of the perpetual trials we encounter—and indeed some trials are pleasurable and some not.

Not only is provoking thinking an unwelcome task for many people, but it is also often unpopular. When a monstrosity turns in our direction and demands that we recognize its existence and even demands our response, it can be dangerous for both the monster and for those who publicly take notice of its existence. In saying “here I am,” all preconceptions rush in to give a discernable shape. The concept or law of what human is, and thus what we ourselves are, is put to a spontaneous test without a proctor or a grader; and yet, we so often still experience the spectral presence of authority and its inevitable judgment or what Freud calls the superego.

How does a thinking of the human take place without a concept of human? Heidegger raises the question of thought in *What is Called Thinking?* In “Lecture V,” Heidegger begins with the question “what is called thinking, what does call for thinking?” (48). What does it mean to think about the human? What does it mean to think about the thinking of human? What does thinking about the human look like or feel like? What is this thing that we are that calls for thinking? Returning to Heidegger’s question, what is it that we call thinking and what calls it? These questions indirectly touch on the ontological and epistemological entanglement of the concept of human.

It is striking how Heidegger immediately follows the question with an imaginary scene of a mother shouting at her child: “You just wait—I’ll teach you what we call obedience” (48). Interestingly, the call comes from a mother. It is an accusatory demand

to an ambiguous “you” singular and plural pronoun that demands “just” (“only one,” “singular”) pause. Presumably some instruction will be offered during the pause. This is a trick. The mother becomes a substitute for the father and simply occupies his place. But it is a different kind of law, one that keeps the trial openly suspended in perpetual postponement, unless it is the “wait” that is the only law and the only trial. But then what does it mean to “wait?” Is it the absence of judgment or decision? One might hear now the “You just wait...” in “The Mark on the Wall.” In “The Mark on the Wall,” the law of genre and narrative were suspended. The essence of human may be located in that pause. Contrary to what Heidegger may have intended, this is triggered by the “wait” demanded by the mother’s voice, ultimately putting the brakes on any formal judgement.

Just as Woolf’s “The Mark on the Wall” consists of pauses, it is also structured by the pause. Time and place are met repeatedly with ellipses and the obstruction sign “perhaps.” Woolf’s text is not remarkable in that each reader has, even if only slightly, a different reading of it. But what Woolf’s writing does is stage a scene where readers are participants in the reverie. As the text unfolds in the stream-of-consciousness writing that it is, readers are unable to apply the traditional frameworks that dictate narrative beginning, middle, and ending. Woolf’s reverie is also structured by pauses.

Indeed, there are the existential pauses that effect the reading experience—i.e. fragmentary narratives and experiences that engage any text, including Woolf’s and Stein’s. At the moment when narrative frameworks and experiences collide, an inevitable brief suspension occurs. The fragmentary narratives reading each other also attempt to read the silences within the gaps that produce new readings and, with that,

new silences and gaps. In other words, when the reader who herself consists of fragmentation—much of which is unconscious—reads “The Mark on the Wall,” the ellipses, the question inherent in all of the uses of “perhaps,” the dashes and frequent changes in subjects under consideration, and the mysterious figures, produce for her unforeseen meanings.

So too does Stein’s *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* produce unforeseen meanings, though not in the same way. Stein normally engages text at the level of syntax—playfully disrupting, rearranging, removing, and replacing expected structures and words. However, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* appears considerably more traditionally structured than her previous experimental texts such as *Tender Buttons*, *The Making of Americans*, and *Patriarchal Poetry*. Although this may be true, *The Autobiography* remains as rigorously experimental as her other work. However, she composes it decidedly differently.

Anat Osher Ben-Shaul suggests in “Chatting about War: Gertrude Stein’s Subversive Autobiography” that Stein’s casual discussions about people, places, and things and not about the Great War “allows for a double subversion” (27). He continues to describe the *Autobiography* as that which “breaks the conventions of this patriarchal genre, the autobiography, and of this typical masculine kind of writing, war testimony. At the same time, it opposes any legitimate conception and representation of war” (ibid). Stein upends the autobiographical literary genre by violating the rules “one by one” (ibid). Ben-Shaul also suggests that “the violation of norms and conventions is thematic: through this peculiar writing and testimony on war, Stein seems at first sight to treat the subject in an inconceivable way” (27). Because readers expect a certain theme, style,



and reincarnation about war, Stein presents it in an altogether different way that disrupts the normalizing nature of the reading experience. Stein, Ben-Shaul concludes, found “a new form in order to create a female autobiography [...] where she invents her own rules” (28).

Furthermore, Ben-Shaul adds to the “peculiar” manner in which Stein talks about war by reading the poly-phonic structure of *The Autobiography* as her attempt to exaggerate to a level of absurdity “female speech,” thus parodying the assumptions about women and meaning-making (29). Stein’s doubled first-person “I” challenges in multiple ways the conventions regulating autobiography. Hardly perceivable, but actively nonetheless at work in Stein’s text, is a slippage between a fictive and non-fictive first-person. In “Autobiography in the Third Person,” Philippe Lejeune has readers entertain Émile Benveniste’s formula for the double displaced “I.” Benveniste’s movement, as Lejeune delineates, goes as follows:

So far as the enunciation is concerned, the deictic element (“the present instance of discourse”) slides from the enunciation to the enunciator. This movement is also found in the customary formula of prefaces written “in the third person”-“he who writes these lines.” The subject of the statement (“the individual”) is represented by the subject of the enunciation. It is to be understood that the person spoken about is “the same” as the speaker. This “identity” must only be taken literally in one case, that of performative utterances. [...] As one dissects the pronoun “I” (or “you”), one inevitably confronts the problem of identity. (28)

Lejeune agrees with Benveniste that the “I” cannot remain in the grammatical realm as it is formed in social relations. But Lejeune oversimplifies Stein’s strategy: Stein imagines, “how a close friend might tell the story of your life” (42). And in this character substitution, Stein gives herself wide latitude in composing *The Autobiography of Alice*

*B. Toklas.* There is much more to Stein's first-person doubled displacement of her "I" than a simple flight of fancy.

Stein's readers are familiar with the textual disruptions frequently at play on the level of syntax and grammar. On the one hand, Lejeune much later describes via Benveniste, the double move within the grammatical "I:" and Stein too displaces it. On the other hand, Lejeune also points out—and Stein did decades before—that the "I" is part of the social relation, as well as the social pressure and linguistic economic structure. When anyone of us employs the "I," we are in the realm of identity as it concerns the notion of the "individual," "personhood," and the "human." It is clear that the "I," as it represents particular subjects, is in fact a kind of placeholder that is conditioned by the confluence of social relations and discursive practices.

The first person subject "I" is discursively produced through a symbolic order that requires to a great extent an unconscious submission. It feels as "natural" as claiming we are "human." Althusser was onto something when he described the network of power that produces and sustains ideology. The subject is produced through a complex network of ideas that work passively and incessantly through narratives. In other words, those subjected are likely not cognizant of their own subjugation.

Stein, more so than Woolf, calls into question such subjugation when she occupies the space of another's identity, that being Alice's "I." It is difficult for most to resist the ideological apparatus. Assuredly, it requires much more to resist the non-ideological; they both function simultaneously. Consider briefly a scene in which someone (even the term "someone" is forbidden here) rejects all identity, all positions that locate and summon the possibilities of identity, especially that of the "I." Is this

scene even possible? Of course, for this scene to succeed it necessitates that the subject alone determines her/his identity. No subject can, after all, constitute herself.

Instead, let us imagine a moment in which one is stricken with a condition that prevents her from recognizing the world around, including other humans, animals, and objects. She would, assuredly, find the world absolutely unfamiliar because the self requires other selves to be identified before the self is identifiable to oneself. Gertrude Stein sets this scene up for readers. To begin answering Helga Lénárt-Cheng's question: "Why do Gertrude Stein's sentences get under our skin?" readers might point to the use of repetition in Stein's texts.<sup>14</sup> In part, Stein's incessant repetition can irritate readers' senses and manipulate their opinions of her, like a successful advertisement, Lénárt-Cheng might say. But if Stein "gets under the skin," it is also because she knocks us out of ourselves. In short, readers are never familiar with Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*.

Undoubtedly the literary market also got under Stein's and Woolf's skins. They knew too well the significance in entering the economics of publishing. They too felt the blows of both the ideological and non-ideological apparatuses. For instance, in market-based, mixed, or barter economies, the regulatory brigade is at once both a malevolent despot and pacifistic soothsayer. The duplicity is obvious in the publishing field, where controlling who publishes and in which subject means controlling the context, content, and the self-determination required for self-formation and meaning making.

Althusser, a binary enthusiast himself, offers a dichotomous interpretation of state power, which, at first, appears extrinsic to a discussion on the management of

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<sup>14</sup> Helga Lénárt-Cheng, "Autobiography As Advertisement: Why Do Gertrude Stein's Sentences Get Under Our Skin?" *New Literary History*, Volume 34, Number 1, Winter 2003. 117-131. Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press.

textual space. In "Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatus," Althusser is concerned with explicit and implicit forms of state power. He reminds his reader that language functions behind the scene of ideology. This fact is not a minor point. Language offers subjectivity and reality; it does not and cannot offer access to the entire truth of our condition. At the same time, while language only ever re-presents our world, it also gives us a means to bear witness to truth, even if that truth is never entirely accessible.

On the one hand, it is difficult to ignore Althusser's interpretive dependence on the public/private (despite his attempts at removing the dichotomy) and mind/body hierarchical oppositions as he develops his thought. Indeed, Althusser raises the case of gendering only to "leave this point, too, on the side" (176). After quickly pushing aside all attempts at serious examination of gendering, he at once turns his attention to "the Word of God." Althusser alerts his reader to a paradox: "the interpellation of individuals as subjects presupposes the 'existence of a Unique and central Other Subject...[a Subject that can declare] 'I am that I am'" (178,179). To name one's self and at the same time to call one's own subjectivity into existence is to occupy a position of radical sovereignty. This position would be paradoxically no position; it would have no place and it would be without time.

Althusser determined that a direct link between the subject and subjects needed a middle-man, or perhaps middle-management. Consider the oft-recycled fable: the "father" offers up a "son" who then is scanned through the patriarchal machinery and assumes the father's name. The process described by Althusser's Christian religious ideology case study is an example of how interpellation functions. It is not a mere coincidence that Althusser examines religious myth together with the ideology of the

family, specifically in terms of the paternal/maternal opposition. While Althusser suggests, even if by accident, that the ideological state apparatus is paternalistic, he nevertheless largely ignores the hierarchical opposition at the core of at least two ISAs (family and religion). This oversight speaks to the efficacy of ideology and presumes the “naturalness” of hierarchical oppositions.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, Althusser too, was interpellated.

On the other hand, because the symbolic order produces, structures, and operates ideology—the effects of which construct discursive sites that are called into being in and through language—a concept of the self, the subject, personhood, and identity are conditions already inscribed with interpretive frameworks for understanding the self, others, and the world and our relation to it. What is more, because the space of writing is itself in the symbolic order and is regulated by and emerged from the symbolic order and is destined perhaps to be read by countless other symbolic orders (in the case that it may be denied publication), it nevertheless operates with the symbolic order. The symbolic space that conditions the subject, the concept of the human, and how we come to understand what it means to be human is an unstable, fluid space. Nevertheless, questions remain: Is the human something that comes before, outside, or beyond language? Is the human even possible without language? Does the very relationality intrinsic to all symbolic orders, and therefore to language, allow for the possibility of the human?

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<sup>15</sup> See Paul de Man’s “The Rhetoric of Blindness” in *Blindness and Insight* where Derrida’s analysis in *Of Grammatology* on Rousseau is examined by de Man. In it, de Man argues that critics obtain insight through their blindness: “since interpretation is nothing but the possibility of error, by claiming that a certain degree of blindness is part of the specificity of all literature we also reaffirm the absolute dependence of the interpretation on the text and of the text on the interpretation” (141). See also Plato’s “Book VII” in the *Republic* where he describes the process of constructing knowledge. In it, Plato offers a scenario where, after having dwelled in a cave since birth, readers are asked to imagine walking out and into the daylight. Assuredly, Plato contends, the sudden light would shock the sense and pain the eyes—this is Plato’s description of learning. But too, the sun causes blindness and this is necessary for knowledge.

How does life stripped of all relation, beyond and outside of the outside ad infinitum, speak, write, and bear witness to itself and the world? The autobiographical “I” is not so much where the human can be located, arrested, fixed, or defined. Rather, it is a place—an abyss—where, in the paradoxes and aporias that haunt all life-writing, the human ephemeral presence might be spotted, even if the human presence is singularly fleeting and translucent. Simultaneously, it is a place where the human unyielding presence cannot be ignored even for a single brief pause to reflect, even if it is a place that is all too human.<sup>16</sup> No genre or subject other than that which is called “life-writing” has been said to respond more directly to the question concerning the human.

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<sup>16</sup> The term human, itself is sheer trope—created and sustained in language.

## Chapter Two

### Constructing the “I” in Gertrude Stein’s *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*

The norm is what turns a prescription into a law.

—Jean- François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*

[T]he normal is so much more simply complicated and interesting.

—Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*

### Breaking the Law

As a medical student at Johns Hopkins, Gertrude Stein confessed to a professor that medicine and the study of pathology bored her. She later wrote in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* that she generally “dislikes the abnormal, it is so obvious. [...] The normal is so much more simply complicated and interesting” (83). Stein’s textual stylistic experiments were designed to challenge the assumptions embedded in claims of normality. After all, what challenge is there in breaking the breakable, especially when defying expectations and possibly succeeding in exposing the holes, contradictions, and ambiguities in anything claimed to be the norm can be far more satisfying? Nevertheless, the dichotomous construction of normal and abnormal is not as simple as that which Stein lays out. As Michael Warner reminds readers, the history of the concept of normal is multilayered and contradictory. This is why he asks: “what exactly is normal” (53)? Is normal, for example, determined by statistical data showing a common activity, behavior, conditions and opinions? Or does “normal mean certified, approved, as meeting a set of normative standards” (56)? In other words, normal may refer to common practices among populations or practices that have been

judged as appropriate by authorities. Here we may be approaching a Lyotardian notion of the norm and his prescription against the metanarratives that aim to extinguish different and competing heterogeneity of phrases and discourses that make it possible to bear witness to the differend. Clearly, the structure of normal and its perceived source of legitimization remain convoluted. But just as uncertain, however, is how Stein interpreted the concept of normal. There is some indication that the norm was not something she wanted to be part of, but neither did being part of the so called abnormal. Perhaps she saw herself as an exception—not normal or abnormal—but as an elite with the authority to put on trial old rules of grammar and establish new rules of writing.

On the one hand, Stein conducted a literal experiment in the psychological laboratory at Radcliffe College before Stein's years at John Hopkins. This is where Stein co-conducted with Leon Solomons a research experiment on "automatism" titled, "Cultivated Motor Automatism: A Study of Character in Its Relation to Attention." In it, Solomons and Stein study and ultimately "blur the distinction between 'normality' and 'abnormality' by proving that the 'normal' subject shows tendencies toward automatic behavior similar to that of the 'abnormal' subject" (Will, 24). On the other hand, in this same lab, Stein began the practice of self-experimentation. Barbara Will points out again in *Gertrude Stein: Modernism, and the Problem with Genius* that both Solomons and Stein were test subjects of their own study; they claimed in the results that they were the perfect fit for the study (ibid).

In what is explicitly considered a science experiment, Stein and Solomons write themselves in, not simply as authors and examiners, but as subjects of the experiment. The implications of this experiment cannot be mistaken. Stein begins her "self-



examination” in a science lab—as if somehow the self can be subjected to the scientific method. Stein’s syntactical and narrative practices leave no doubt that philosophical concerns about the human will not bear the same outcome over and over again. And as she does, she introduces narrative structure, metaphor, and consequently, genre mixing, in this very lab. Is this lab experiment the beginning of Stein’s autobiographical writings?

Experiments sometimes require breaking rules. “Gertrude Stein has a weakness for breakable objects,” Stein writes in her *Autobiography*, “she has a horror of people who collect only the unbreakable” (13). Even over her “most cherished objects” Stein was easy-going when they broke (88). A necessary disposition, no doubt, when the object of testing turns out to be oneself. Given that her experimental approach to writing changed after the Second World War, is it possible that *this* war broke too much for Stein? In *Wars I Have Seen*, Stein observes a critical difference between the World Wars: both wars tried to break from the nineteenth century, but only WWII brought the century to an end, it “kills it dead, dead dead” (79). There was also a notable change in her style of writing, which no longer took on the radical experimental method.<sup>17</sup> Stein does not abandon experimentation altogether. The novella, *Brewsie and Willie*, continues to challenge literary expectation (albeit not as extreme). For example, chapter fifteen is just one paragraph long and that paragraph comprises two sentences. Compared to pre-1945 texts, the novella and the war account, *Wars I Have Seen*, are more logical. While the force of Stein’s experimentations lessened after WWII, she did

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<sup>17</sup> In “‘Even Cake Gets to Have Another Meaning’: History, Narrative, and ‘Daily Living’ in Gertrude Stein’s World War II Writings,” Phoebe Stein Davis cites a number of reviews observing that Stein’s works are “more ‘straightforward’ and lucid” than earlier work. See also Kristin Bergen’s chapter titled, “Modernist and Future Ex-Modernist,” in *Primary Stein: Returning to the Writing of Gertrude Stein* where she examines Stein’s post World War II texts especially, *Wars I Have Seen* and *Brewsie and Willie*.

not abandon the practice altogether, a notable fact given that a considerable portion of her oeuvre is autobiographical or testimonial, including *Wars I Have Seen*.

Any number of the genres of fiction would appear more suitable than autobiography or testimony for literary experimentation. Indeed, Stein did work with drama, poetry, and short story, for example, but she not only did not spare autobiography, she also fully subjected it to rigorous testing. If the answers to the questions involving author identity and author experience are readers' expectation, then Stein's autobiographical and testimonial texts may lead to reader disappointment. Charles Bernstein, in *My Way: Speeches and Poems*, says that for those "who would read her in terms of group-identity poetics" and I would add, group-identity politics, will find Stein a difficult subject (141). He points out that "Stein questions identity constructions; she does not affirm identity. Her syntactic and grammatical investigations show how language forms consciousness, how our words make as well as reflect experience" (ibid). The fact that Stein breaks genre rules is not a new observation, but when it comes to life-writing, the stakes involved in rule breaking and genre-bending are far greater. In life-writing it is the self and its relation to others and the world around that is called into question as she blurs the line between fiction and nonfiction. In Lyotard's terms, Stein questions the position of the "we" as well as the "I," which is so intimately connected to the "we."

In the previous chapter, I briefly discussed Lyotard's notion of the referent and the question of the name. Here I want to take it a step further and note that naming is essentially an act of identification. At least in part, the process involved in naming is also involved in establishing identity—specifically, the phrases that come to describe or form

a name (or idea) and the marshalling of rules that determine which stakes will be legitimized through a discursive practices ultimately requires the homogenous “we” to authorize the name as a kind of normative discourse. Although the first-person plural appears unified and universal, Lyotard tells his readers that it is not. The normative and prescriptive “we” inhabit a differend. Stein, readers can guess, understood this—or at least the function of a differend without the term. Relating to identity, I am obliged to link Lyotard’s description of the process of naming and referent to the function of identity. On the one hand, identity has a history of being determined before one’s birth: Lyotard quotes Hegel’s claim that a result of the dialectic is positive “because it has a determined content”; there is a result, in other words, “because there is a determination” (§154). Lyotard agrees, but with a caveat: “determination is only determinate, in turn, by the rules of that genre of discourse which is the speculative” (ibid). Speculation implies doubt, ambiguity, and fluidity. Stein exposes just this speculation in the identity of autobiography and in her persistent interrogation of the self.

In *The Limits of Autobiography*, Leigh Gilmore describes the generative force always at work in and at the site of limits, specifically in the limits of autobiography. The site where representation fails, where the limits of representation are recognized, is where something new may be articulated, but also it is a site where wrongs can dwell. This is no different for life-writings. The task then is to follow the structural gaps between signifier and referent and between the “I” and the identity to which it is supposed to link. Gilmore asks: “what is the self [auto] that it can be represented in writing?” When scenes of the testimonial “I,” which are neither reducible to nor entirely separate from one another are introduced, question involve the discursive sites of

personhood, identity, the self, and the subject become exponentially more unstable. Then, adding to this instability, the inquisitive and critical glare into the question of the human is like staring into an abyss that may, as Nietzsche once said, look back at us.

Even with the constant risk of being effaced by the stare if an abyss, no idea has been and continues to be reflected upon, discussed, addressed, reviewed, and even tested, more than the concept of the human. It would take great feats of intellectual contortion to imagine that a study, a text, or any art can be detached absolutely from all relation to the human. Although presumably someone could attempt to point to a remnant of some thought and proclaim that it is utterly devoid of any trace of interest in the concept of the human or address the question who, what, and how the human came to be. But such a negation would be at best premature and at worst the result of poor intellectual translation.

Singularly unyielding as the question of the human is to this project, a straightforward definition or a clear explanation of what we are or an answer to the question of who we are is far from certain, perhaps even unknowable. And yet the human is something all around us, in and through us, and yes, surely at once wholly separate. What writing does not tend toward life-writing? I pointed out in the previous chapter that writing and thinking is impossible without leaving some trace of a life—this is why the author must become part of a work's critique including de Man and Stein. This is in part because its writer embodies it, but mostly because it is explicitly probing the question of what we call "human."

In "Autobiography as De-Facement," de Man problematizes autobiography by claiming that anyone attempting to distinguish between autobiography and fiction will

inevitably occupy the realm of undecidability, where one, in other words, will be brought to the threshold of contradictory ideas. De Man goes further and proposes that autobiography is “a figure of reading or understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts” (70) The author is caught in a linguistic dilemma each time she becomes the subject of her own understanding. On the one hand, the author reads herself in the text, while on the other hand, only seeing in this self-reflexive moment the figure of her face—the author is already a substitution. Therefore, one will never find herself in the text because the moment she enters she is already a kind of representation. We write autobiographies, testimonies, and biographies, but they contain but only a remnant—some trait—of a life.

While de Man examines the question of autobiography in the realm of literature and the written word, it may be argued that there is nothing that does not leave some trace of the autobiography in or on it. What field of study or labor does not contend with the human—science, philosophy, art, theology, even creating and constructing buildings? Still, the answer to the question of what and who we are continuously eludes us. It is not enough to simply look into the mirror and know at what, in its entirety, one gazes. Neither would a vigorous genetic and psychological examination or a study of environmental, social, and economic conditions complete the picture—though it does add to the story.

Such unrelenting study has not brought us any closer to the human. Human, as with any story, concept, or metaphor will not and cannot escape the battering of examination. The term “human” has been defined and redefined, contentiously debated, denied, or worked over into a “post-human,” which was at first too often understood as

an “after” human—a predictable mistake, really, given that the term was so often used to critique that which came just before, namely modernity/modernism. For example, Robert Venturi replied to the modernist slogan, “less is more,” with “less is a bore” (Cahoone, 8). Even the title of Lawrence Cahoon’s anthology, *From Modernism To Postmodernism*, situates the modern before the post in the prepositional construction “from...to” posits the temporality. Moreover, he cites German philosopher Rudolf Pannwitz as being an early operator of the term postmodern: “[postmodern] as distinguishing the contemporary scene from the modern [was first used] in 1917” (3). The “post” as “after” was inscribed within Western epistemology’s sequential linear narrative framework. This mistake required correction. Only three years after Jean-François Lyotard’s use of the term “postmodern” in 1979, he labored to warn his readers against translating “post” as “after.” He made the necessary move in substituting the term “postmodern” for “rewriting modernity.” Lyotard’s own translation was crucial. It was crucial partly because the term “rewriting” forecloses the temptation to periodize; while keeping open future narrative, pasts still to come to us in the future. The critical concept of the term “rewriting” illuminates the obscured condition that first, it is now impossible to deny the dispersal of fissures in all definitions, philosophies, and ideologies even if we can never account for them all. Second, we must consider that the yet-unknown narratives, thoughts, and claims are always haunting all narration, even while there remains a great attempt to suppress, oppress, or ignore them.

Similarly, the question of what or who we are is haunted by the fact that the question of the human is already disseminated within an extensive tangled collection of theories, philosophies, studies, and stories—in and through a symbolic order that is

structured by gaps. Simply said, the human prevents categorization and summation. Perhaps it is the perpetual opening that constitutes us, which drives the incessant need to narrate. The drive is an attempt to find some answer, some closure in a similar way one might do if she suffered from abandonment fears, urgently seeking self-stability. Perhaps, too, the drive to narrate is a way to maintain openness. And that in fact, humans, to some extent, resist closure and totalization. Perhaps Nietzsche was on to something when he declared, tongue-in-cheek: “man is the as yet undetermined animal” (BGE, 264). But nevertheless, this is the inevitable condition the human in language finds itself.

It is also true that some forms of writing and fields of study are more explicitly concerned with the question of the human—biology, anthropology, psychology—while others allude to it—astronomy, zoology, oceanography. Of course, all human intellectual or artistic work is not benevolent work. There are philosophies, scientific, economic, legal, and political theories, art, theologies, and literary texts that directly and indirectly advocate for violent ideas or inhumane acts—totalitarianism, eugenics, economic privatization, and fervent and exclusionary nationalism, just to name a few.

Whether an autobiography represents a banal, benevolent, or malevolent gestalt, the interest in examining particular human lives is, in part, derived from the desire for certitude in the human existence. Perhaps this condition is what Ernest Hemingway was referring when he credited Gertrude Stein with coining the term “lost generation.” Stein embraced the description of “Lost Generation” because it did, even if unintentionally, speak to the collective spirit of the period. Technological advancement, together with the near-global involvement in a new, expansive, deadly war machine provoked a

rethinking of human relations in the years following the First World War. Disoriented, the Lost Generation could no longer clasp onto the idealized mythical belief in a “traditional” substructure and superstructure of meaning-making. In particular, the substructure of patriarchy and the Law assumed to precede the idea that all narratives lacked credence.<sup>18</sup> The Law, history (historiography), and the human were all at stake. In *The Writing of History*, Michel de Certeau’s argues:

[H]istory is entirely shaped by the system within which it is developed...To take seriously the site of historiography is still not tantamount to expounding history [and this is the] condition that allows something to be stated that is neither legendary (nor ‘edifying’) nor atypical (lacking relevance). Denial of the specificity of the place being the very principle of ideology, all theory is excluded. Even more, by moving discourse into a non-place, ideology forbids history from speaking of society and of death—in other words, from being history (69).

History and historiography are concerned with local stories, so the focus must be on the otherness and difference of everyday people. Furthermore, if the focus of history writing is on abstracting and universalizing experience, then it is a false history with the violent effects of marginalizing and silencing the local stories of each person. The job for the historian is to encounter the world, as Lyotard prescribes, by bearing witness to the differends that inevitably result in narrative making. In Paul de Man’s *Aesthetic Ideology*, in which he says, in a different semantic register with a different effect: “History is therefore not a temporal notion, it has nothing to do with temporality, but it is the emergence of a language of power out of a language of cognition” (133). Although on the surface both thinkers appear to be working within a similar program, namely critiquing history as an all-encompassing narrative, in fact, de Certeau’s and de Man’s

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<sup>18</sup> See Mitchell Greenberg’s *Corneille, Classicism and the Ruses of Symmetry* for a compelling study on the patriarchal state, absolute power, and the “new production of the Law’s origin” (66). This is in part what Gertrude Stein is challenging in her work.



thinking differs in crucial ways that result in each line of reasoning leading to a different goal. For de Man, unlike Certeau, language is always untrustworthy; therefore, even the local individual histories cannot be trusted. Again, it is essential to consider the confluence between de Man's intellectual project and his own personal history. Whereas Certeau's thinking encourages history practitioners to find the differend and tell stories, de Man's thinking itself sometimes appears to create potential differends by divesting language of its potential to articulate wrongs and damages as well as justice and injustice, etc.

Like the early-twentieth-century expatriate artists and writers, Stein, through the autobiographical and testimonial presentation of her oeuvre and the contents and style of those accounts, together with the persistent mediation on the question of the human, unsettled the presumed notion that the human is a fixed concept that mirrors a completely totalized reality of it. One way Stein achieves this unsettling is by positioning herself as both the subject and the non-subject simultaneously and by parodying the binary between non-fiction and fiction.

### **Subverting Phallogocentrism**

Here, Stein's work discussed above will be placed in a slightly different context. As I pointed out, Stein deliberately obfuscates the autobiographical and the testimonial "I." There are interpretive effects in adopting another's name. Doing so, functions to redirect readers away from the critical question of presence in general to Stein's human presence specifically. Taking on another's name is not altogether unprecedented. On the one hand, we frequently take on the name of someone other than ourselves. In fact,

it is unavoidable. And to be sure, we take on multiple names at once. This project, for example, has appropriated explicitly the name of many others and implicitly it has taken on the names of countless others. Referencing the works of others and reading their thinking shapes this project, this life-story. At the same time, so many others have shaped my thinking—family, friends, teachers, strangers, interpolative messages, events, etc.—whose names you will not find here nor will you find particular moments of who, when, and how, which I could never recall precisely. Nevertheless, they are all here. But because Stein hyperbolically adopts another’s name, she draws attention to the question of authorship. Readers assume that Stein’s adoption of the name Alice refers to Stein’s longtime love. However, what Stein does instead is construct an “Alice.” Indeed a proper name, one that her (non-legal) spouse shares, signifies plurality, not a stable recognizable referent. Many Stein scholars note the radical way that Stein multiplies and subverts subjectivity. For example, Sidonie Smith states in “Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance” that “autobiographical narration begins with amnesia, and once begun, the fragmentary nature of subjectivity intrudes” (18). Davis points out, however, that, “for Stein, the ‘fragmentary nature of subjectivity’ is less an ‘intrusion’ than a constant in [Stein’s] autobiography” (“Subjectivity,” 21). Something else is going on as well. Stein’s autobiography complicates the “I,” and arguably it exposes much more the fragile relation between the “I” and the “we.” On the one hand, Stein does disorient the “I”, but in *The Geographical History of America* the “I” is thrown even more radically. On the other hand, the autobiography seems to be just as much about the “we.” In fact, by Stein writing the *Autobiography* from the name of Alice, allows her refer to the “we” as a central identity. Stein’s displacement of her “I”

and the adoption of a proper name, Alice, speaks to Lyotard's "Results" in *The Differend*: "The we composed at least of / who write and you who read" (§158). Writing an autobiography is one means to leave remains.

What Stein's text in part bears witness to is the way the "I" is structured by the phallogocentric narrative apparatus that represses, oppresses, and marginalizes so many. The "I" alone is vulnerable, the "we" is extended "to the living" (Lyotard, §160). For certain bodies, it is often only through the appropriation of a name other than one's own that they will be read—a fact that cannot be lost. Of course at the same time, the question of the name and whether anyone really can have *his* own name is present in this discussion. But the function and the power ascribed to names does not have the same effect.

Interestingly, Stein adopts not a name that is commonly attributed to men, but the specific name of her beloved, Alice. With this appropriation there is no promise Stein will obtain any formal recognition, promise of readership, or of financial compensation—the book might have been a marketing flop. The *Autobiography* emasculates mastery and authorship. Stein also subverts the stability of her own name that works in and through the very narrative she signs. In so doing, Stein attempts to reexamine the question of presence.

Woolf experiments with narrative conventions differently. Although not considered a member of the Lost Generation, Woolf was one of the progenitors of the "stream-of-consciousness" method that sabotages and ambushes the act of summation. She subverts readers' expectations, knowing, as does Stein, that a liberated presence will require the destruction of the prescribed framework of a conclusion.

For both writers, human finitude is explored through the examination of the singularity of a particular human presence. But at the same time neither is successful in the absoluteness of re-presentation. Again, the utter wholeness of a life or even of an event is impossible. The solidity of the phallogocentric “I” and the narrative conventions that structure it have always been limp. If not Woolf, Stein, in taking on Alice’s name, exposes this fact.

And of course playing with narrative structure is a hallmark of literary postmodernity—Beckett, Apollinaire, and Kafka are prime examples. But what distinguishes the works of Stein and Woolf is that they challenge the presumed normality and structure of the phallogocentric subject. By shattering the conventional narrative framework with playful repetitions, disrupting sequential timeframes, and generally unsettling accepted norms of narrative expectations, they called into the question the phallogocentric apparatus. Often such a resistance requires the tactics of guerrilla warfare.

Consider for a moment the anti-phallogocentric guerrilla warrior tactics of Avital Ronell when she traces, for example, Kafka’s textual topography, and notices a pattern. On the one hand, the cleaning ladies found in “The Metamorphosis,” *The Castle*, and “The Judgment” might be a metonym for “wiping clean the real presence of women”—a requirement for traditional methods of discourse. On the other hand, the function of “the cleaning lady” and the depressed presence of Kafka’s ladies in general could be a demand for the symbolic mother, albeit unconsciously. But recognition of this demand necessitates a kind of guerrilla warrior approach to reading in the first place. The

function of the symbolic mother and the otherness of all Kafka's ladies occupy "the edge of writing" (BGE, 53) and a site where thinking begins.

Franz Kafka apprehensively confronts the power of the Father—particularly his father—who rejects, belittles, and threatens him. The tormented relationship was likely the laboratory from which much of his work comes. But unlike Stein and Woolf's, Kafka's oeuvre does not deliberately challenge the phallogocentric subject and his project was not an intentional experiment designed to overthrow Western epistemology. It was instead an attempt exclusively to bear witness to the cruelty of *his* father and to that end indeed an unintentional critique of phallogocentrism.

The works of Stein and Woolf deliberately trouble the generative, reproductive, and operative social construction of oppositional binaries expressed in the phallogocentric network of ideas and apparatus. In particular, Stein and Woolf subvert and dethrone the oppositional binary of fiction/nonfiction and the possibility of referentiality, historiography, and memory that constitute the binary. What is more, they construct a literary laboratory of their own, testing the phallogocentrism written in the conventions of narration and the social formation of the subject, and then subvert its centrality by putting it to the test. Stein's texts, such as "Patriarchal Poetry," which mocks the supremacy of meaning, and *The Making of Americans*, a text that opens with a direct swipe at the father's body, are at least two research sites where she tests the phallus. It is not difficult to find a work by Woolf where patriarchy is critiqued—*A Room of One's Own*, *Jacob's Room*, *To the Lighthouse*, are examples, among others. Subverting the phallogocentric subject was a shared strategy for the two writers, but what is uncertain was whether they shared the same goal. Stein's textual experiment in

the *Autobiography* shows that the phallus fails the test, so after changing the directions and inserting herself as the “normal” subject—like she had done in the experiment at Radcliff—the phallus might become all hers.<sup>19</sup>

On the other hand, Woolf mocks the coercive power that phallogocentrism exercises in meaning-making and narrative construction. Woolf creates a literary space, a room of her own, to test that power. Indeed, much of Woolf’s fiction carries the burden of the testimonial “I,” bearing witness to both the world and her own experiences. In testing the limits of *testimony* and its unsettled boundary between fact and fiction, Woolf refuses to submit to the tyrannical gesture of tradition and patriarchy, especially in the fictional short story “The Mark on the Wall” and the autobiographical text “A Sketch of the Past.” In the former, the function of the testimonial “I” and the stream of consciousness style of the story work to draw in the reader. When the symbolic scene Woolf creates engulfs the reader, the boundaries between writer and reader, fact and fiction, and self and other are blurred. Reading “The Mark on the Wall” together with the persistent concern for human relation and loss in “The Sketch of the Past” disrupts all attempts at constructing a linear notion of the human.

### **Autobiography, Memory, and Performativity**

It helps to turn briefly to James Olney and Dwight McBride’s work on Frederick Douglass’s *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* for a more complete delineation between autobiography and testimony. For Olney, “autobiography may be understood as a recollected/ narrative act in which the writer,

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<sup>19</sup> Again, see Barbara Will’s *Gertrude Stein, Modernism and the Problem with “Genius.”* In it, Will alerts her reader to Stein’s years working in the psychological laboratory at Harvard. During an experiment, Stein and her colleague chose themselves as the “normal” test subject.

from a certain point in his life—the present—looks back over the events of that life and recounts them in such a way as to show how that past history has led to this present state of being” (149). In reading the *Narrative*, McBride understands it primarily as testimonial literature: “the narrative is denied to us and is reduced to sheer personal memory of the witness, which we can witness only as that which is unspeakable” (94). While Olney and McBride approach a single text from different authorial positions, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* overtly troubles the positions and then asks the reader to consider the context of her words and phrases. For Stein, context determines meaning and therefore “meaning is established relationally” (*Tender Buttons*).

Through *The Autobiography of Alice B Toklas*, Stein teaches that the very human experience challenges the concept of a totalized narrative. Stein’s *Autobiography* provides testimonies that escape a unifying center, while at the same time offering a history of a particular human experience. But the *Autobiography* both attests to and subverts the imperial hand of History wherein all stories are believed to be told in a neat and tight package. It is here that Stein introduces us to how autobiography and testimony function and how they function at once within a text.

This chapter began by exploring the autobiographical “I” and the autobiographical genre generally, but now I want to contrast the autobiographical (and its “I”) against the testimonial “I” and the genre laws that shape it. Let us return briefly to autobiography with the intent to question its structure. Traditionally, autobiography has been defined as writing one’s own history, one’s own story.<sup>20</sup> The autobiographical narrative is primarily centered on the self who writes it. The narrative is a linear story, usually beginning with early life and progressing to the writer’s present. Life-writing presumably presents truth

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<sup>20</sup> Autobiography has been recognized since the eighteenth century.

about one's personhood.<sup>21</sup> What autobiographical discourse attempts to bear witness to and what it sees itself affirming, is a unified unique individuality that expresses itself in terms of universal human nature.

Philippe Lejeune defines autobiography as "a retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality" (193). However, he is concerned that this definition does not produce a distinct boundary between autobiography and other genres. He contends that there must be "identity between author, the narrator, and the protagonist" (ibid). In *Autobiography*, Linda Anderson quotes Karl Weintraub:

An autobiography can only be understood if the 'place' the author themselves occup[ies] in relation to their lives can be constructed by the reader. Reading an autobiography "properly" means reading with an already existing knowledge of the text's meaning: This moment, this point of view, needs to be recaptured for a proper understanding of the autobiographic effort; so must the motivation and intention of the author for writing autobiography at all. (3)

Anderson points out that for Lejeune and Weintraub, autobiography itself contends with the proof of authorship. In order to glean the author's motivation and intention, there must already be conventions governing the existence of autobiographical discourse. Autobiography must follow a certain convention and be written under certain conditions and with certain intentions already agreed upon.<sup>22</sup> Simply put, autobiographies are overwhelmingly similar.

At the same time Stein frequently broke the law of the autobiographical genre: "I am not sure that is not the end" (235). An uncertainty over the possibility of non-closure opens up space to consider new identities. This final line is also concerned with

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<sup>21</sup> Personhood may be interpreted as arriving at self-realization within the Romantic notion of selfhood.

<sup>22</sup> See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, in which he delineates between illocutionary and perlocutionary performative utterances.



memory, specifically with a rupture in the present when the autobiography is/was written, the past as something forgotten, and the future as that time in which something is still to come.

Memory is a subject essential to the discourse on autobiography. Memory, Olney suggests, is a certain kind of autobiographical performance. It is in the function of memory that we begin to witness the instability and slippage of the referent. Olney continues:

Exercising memory, in order to that he may recollect and narrate, the autobiographer is not a neutral and passive recorder but rather a creative and active shaper. Recollection, or memory, in this way a most creative faculty, goes backwards so that narrative, its twin counterpart, may go forward: memory and narration move along the same line only in reverse directions...memory creates the *significance* of the events in discovering patterns into which those events fall.[...]memory is not only the mode but becomes the very subject of the writing. (149)

he primary function is to authenticate the narrator, thus to affirm and offer the truth in the narrative. Stein's narratives gesture to aspects of reading that both bring us closer to the world and making us familiar, while at the same time sustaining the text and its distance and difference. On the one hand, we must familiarize ourselves, incorporate the text, let it bring us to our knees and make us sob. On the other hand, we must not devour, we must respect its distance and otherness, listen to the phrases and meanings while also letting it shock us with its radical, absolute otherness.

Exercising the muscle of memory is similar to weightlifting where the repetitive act of flexing and relaxing tears and produces gaps. Stein also bears witness to memory and within each tear, she grafts into it. Stein writes in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*: "*The Making of Americans* [...] changed from being a history of one family to being a history of everybody the family knew then it became the history of every kind

and of every individual human being” (113). This is a critical change for Stein. She recognizes a desired connection between being *of* an-other and at the same time being *for* an-other, or *of* writing, as in autobiography, and *for* writing, as in testimony. The tension produced in autobiography is structured aporetically where the discourse affirms and effaces itself at once. On the one hand, Stein’s act of writing her life story makes present that which would otherwise not present itself as *her* story—the act of writing her narration makes claims, or rather offers us her written presence. Barthes more succinctly states in “The Death of the Author:” “the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text” (145). Before Barthes, Stein’s work might have been read as an enactment that the author is no longer figured as the past of his own text, but as something becoming present with the text. It may not be incorrect to claim Stein as experimenting with a radical sense of presence. At the same time, however, readers of Stein know that history and memory are critical engagements in much of her work. In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, memory and history are focuses of rhetorical and literary performances.

The narrator, sponsor, audience, theme, content, and form are a performance for Stein. Stein must have known that a successful performance requires a collaborating audience/reader who would do much of the imaginative work. In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein frequently returns to her prior texts. Some could argue that she does this to clarify her work. But if clarification is the purpose of Stein’s return, then readers are no doubt let down. The return instead suggests that the texts which appear to be done, to be part of her literary canon—her history—are in fact unfinished and still in the present. Moreover, she restages them (re-cites them) with an additional twist.

Consider the moment in AATS where Stein returns again to *The Making of Americans* where she describes the narrative change “from being a history of a family to being a history of everybody the family knew and then it became the history of every kind and every individual human being” (113). Each reader must imagine herself and everybody she knows and knew. The incalculable numbers of readers (past, present and future) become new characters through Stein’s re-staging. In restaging and reciting *The Making of Americans* (among the other texts recited), Stein produces texts with multiple frames that intertwine among a web of narratives too vast to account for and, at the same time, are so radically finite. Stein so seemingly deadpan follows up with: “But in spite of this there was a hero and he was to die” (113). For Stein, a past never remains in the past and the present is already past — infinitely finitely so.

For her, writing is not the question of becoming, but of *being becoming*. Nevertheless, her narratives promise to fulfill themselves as a story of her life—fulfill the promise that it is a narrative. Whether contractual or declaratory, even Stein cannot avoid the performative, which without the narrator’s knowledge always promises to fulfill the act. With regard to “[a] person making an utterance of this sort,” Austin reminds his readers, “we should say he is doing something rather than merely saying something [...]. We should say rather that, in saying what I do, I actually perform that action” (235). An act, however, may actually reinforce or produce the utterance; in so doing it becomes impossible to distinguish cause and effect. We can ask: what is an utterance? A sigh? Imagine a scene of utter despair, where one cannot leave her bed, and refuses to eat or bathe, a scene where one defecates in her own bed, lying motionless and incapable of speaking where only the occasional sigh may be heard. How does this act,

or lack of act—a stupor act, if you will—perform this utterance? Is the uttered “sigh,” in fact, for texted self-unutterable anguish?

When Stein refuses to inscribe her autobiographies as a linear series of events and descriptions organized in a chronological episodic narrative, she enacts a new kind of coming-into-presence where the very utterance, precisely at the time of utterance, constitutes a possible author. Even if this is thought of as a “human presence,” it necessitates an openness—an opening—that offers the possibility of a continual presence making where an ultimate arrival, the end game, is not imagined. It is a suspension that offers a space for the possibility of thinking, of discussion, of reflection, of the possibility of peace. Indeed, this can also be dangerous. This space never guarantees peace or justice. But we know too well that the knee-jerk reaction to an event can and too often will result in injuries against the global lives of the disenfranchised.

On the other hand, the very performativity of Stein’s *Autobiography* functions while slipping, stuttering, and silencing; no unifying center may be claimed. History remains, in other words, open. There is something quite manic about performativity, wherein Stein’s utterance is not simply an uttered anguish but also points to a mode of telling that refuses to sleep, rushes around, devouring and obsessively cleaning up the clutter of authorial discourse. Stein, in other words, is not a passive recipient of autobiographical and testimonial discourse but actively moves within it and participates in defining the discourse’s parameters. Stein, readers know, took great pains in deciding what episodes she would reveal and conceal.

Still, while the author is understood in terms of being linguistically nothing more than the instance of writing the subject—the author—the author as an illusion, an ideological construct always displaced within a system of exchange, also takes part in the performative function of the text. In “What is an Author?,” Foucault attempts to read the author’s function as being involved in the production of meaning. The author is constituted by ideology. He describes the author’s name as operating within a certain discursive practice, which encourages a “mode of existence, circulation, and functioning of certain discourses within a society.” The “author” is primarily viewed as providing unity for serves to neutralize contradictions within a text. Foucault says it clearly, “[t]he author is not an indefinite source of significations...the author does not precede the work; he is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses” (119). For Barthes, the subject cannot recapture the past or aim at some ideal future. Barthes says the writer, “can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the one with the others” (146). This encounter produces multiplicity of meanings; the reader, thus, no longer finds the author in the innumerable centers of her text. Still more, the author is no longer the origin or source of meaning.

Returning to de Man’s point, all self-knowledge depends on the figurative language of trope. And with each turn a disfiguration or defacement occurs. The epiphany of the face, in autobiographies (or for de Man, all texts) is always already a disfigurement of the autobiographical subject. The very structure of the figure, the figurality of language itself, calls the reference into question. It is the figure that determines the reality of the events and the narrative; it also determines the very

subject in the text—the author’s memory. The reader is inevitably and necessarily implicated in the disfigured subject, and even the reader becomes disfigured. An impasse within autobiography is structured in the tension between the subject (author) produced (made present) who can now lay claims of truth in and through the very utterance of the text, and the slipping of the “author” as the very referent the text attempts to stabilize, but cannot.

### **Testimony and Memory: Reading the Aporia**

Testimony suggests a kind of telling of or telling about an-other(s) or event as evidence of truth. One is called on to attest to or bear witness to something without offering, Megan Boler nicely summarizes Felman and Dori’s argument in “The Risk of Empathy: Interrogating Multiculturalism’s Gaze,” “a completed statement or a totalizable account of those events. [In testimony], language is in process and in trial; it does not possess itself as a conclusion” (21). That “[t]o testify—to vow to tell, to promise and produce one’s own speech as material evidence for truth—is to accomplish a speech act. As a performative speech act, testimony in effect addresses what in history is action that exceeds any substantialized significance” (29). Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub argue in *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* that trauma is a result of being “overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or” memory; and therefore, “testimony is composed of” only “bits and pieces of” the occurrence (5).

Recently, testimony has been largely thought about and theorized in psychoanalytic terms in what we call today Trauma Theory. Psychoanalysis offers a discourse, a way of speaking about resistance and hesitation. The one who bears

witness is caught in an impossible bind: one is asked to tell the truth while having no intelligible way of accessing it. The performative function of testimony adheres to this contradiction. There inevitably exists a slippage between cognition and act, between thought and utterance, and between memory and testimony.

For the reader must, as Laub suggests, “[partake] of the struggles of the victim with the memories and residues of his or her traumatic past. The listener has to feel the victim’s victories, defeats and silences, know them from within, so that they can assume the form of testimony” (58). And for McBride, the narrative challenge is “to relate one’s story in terms that would ‘make sense’ for one’s readership” (7). The question of reading, listening, and audience is a necessary element of testimony. McBride contends that the witness constructs the reader while at the same time the reader is discursive for the witness. In other words, an already established discourse exists within and around the reader, yet the reader is still transformed by the very testimony uttered from within the discourse.

Perhaps unbeknownst to Stein, in order to have meaning, one must have a discursive terrain in order for it to produce “understanding” and be intelligible. For Stein to have a voice, she must speak the language of her other. But this is not entirely restrictive; Stein produces something different within her experimental discourse in her arrangement in the differential system of exchange—language. This too is a bind: on the one hand the discourse brings her story into being, while on the other hand, the story is subjected to the discourse.

Returning to Sidonie Smith’s suggestion that autobiography generally begins with forgetting (“Subjectivity), in Stein’s *Autobiography*, memory is parodied. James Olney

makes an excellent point, Stein “was not interested on failure” or, I add, forgetting (238). For Heidegger, memory is a gathering or the recalling of words, language. Derrida shares with Heidegger the idea that without language, thought would be impossible. Unlike Heidegger, Derrida writes in *Specters of Marx* that memory cannot be a gathering; it is rather an un-gathering, a site of disjuncture (xx). Memory acts performatively.

Telling one’s own life story enacts a type of congratulatory announcement, declaring, by the very act of speaking in the memory of or to the memory of an-other or of an event, that we have control of the language which we use to speak. Reading and listening allows for both a bringing of the world closer and always already being removed from it. Reaching out and snatching up the words, we delude ourselves that we therefore have the power to pull back, that we survived. Instead of loss, it offers megalomania, the triumph of being alive and the illusion of being immune to emptiness. Survival, however, is not necessarily met with euphoria and happiness. Instead, existence is a place of relentless thinking in which pulling back is paradoxically impossible.

Indeed, testifying is also quite melancholic, because of its need to capture the past, interiorize it, and assuage the feelings of emptiness or loss. Yet the act of testimony—that is, the telling and retelling of experience—is an act of return.<sup>23</sup> This return is fraught with possibility (to reshape the past as one retells it) and pain (from never representing it precisely—a reminder of the separation between us all). Still, one never entirely leaves the text; there is indeed a repetitive act that accompanies all.

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<sup>23</sup> See Sigmund Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia” for a discussion on the psychical effects and the economic structure of melancholy.



Stein's work and, more specifically, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, exaggeratingly engaged in the dual temperament. On the one hand, the incessant repetition in the text opens a space in which interpretations and multiple meanings rush in to fill it, and it is precisely that filling that Stein manically attempts to collect or own, like the artwork on her walls. This is fundamentally troubling for Stein because that space allows for excess—indeed like a vacuum, the space sucks in all it can. Excess allows for countless possibilities and because of this Stein is unbound, free to choose and determine any wording, any combination with and without fragmentation; thus in a delusional frenzy, Stein, as the manic does, believes she has absolute will and agency. For the reader this excess can overwhelm, agitate, and produce unwelcomed anxiety. While Stein's text functions manically, it produces the unintended affect on Stein, perhaps, but assuredly for her reader, it produces melancholy. Readers interiorize Stein's words as a way, perhaps, to make sense, and she knew all too well that her "sentences do get under their skin [...]" (70), metaphorically inside readers.

In a similar way to Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther*, Stein's *Autobiography* is a text that longs for her beloved lover; though present, she is never present enough. Taking the name of her love, as if one would repeat the name of a dead lover, with language she creates and touches scenes and objects that seem to constitute the never present enough loved one in hopes to validate her existence and seal her name. Therefore, Stein's *Autobiography* is also a text about desire. It is in part about desiring the other who is never close enough. Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok write that "[t]he illness of mourning does not result, as might appear, from the affliction caused by the objectal loss itself, but rather from the feeling of an irreparable crime: the crime of

having been overcome with desire” (110). What is longed for the most is a love that is denied by law and societal expectation. Taking Alice’s name hints at a diabolical tendency to violently harm that which can never be close enough, Alice.

“The hegemonic character of genre,” Ziarek points out, “is covered over [...] on a metadiscursive level, where strategies for winning are transformed into normative discourse” (90). Lyotard agrees that in so doing, genre of discourse will create new differends: “The norm is what turns a prescription into a law” (§ 204). This is why for Lyotard, the political act links to phrase regimens with competing discourses to bear witness to the wrong that was done when the genre of discourse effectively silenced other phrases. The nature of the predicament in Lyotard’s differend is the no longer and the not yet of a trauma that still needs to be articulated. Nietzsche’s statement that we are still yet undetermined or Derrida’s observation that the problem with trauma is that it has not yet happened, the wound comes too early and the experience of it too late. This positions the human in the space between the no longer and the not yet. But, as I will show in the next chapter, this space is no space, it is an impossibility. The nature of the predicament of this dissertation is that the human to come is untenable.

Reading Stein’s *Autobiography* involves listening to the hesitations, interruptions, and silences in the act of testimony. These silences, Lyotard teaches, are phrases that link to other phrases. Thus, the experience of the aporia is the experience of opposition and contradiction, the experience in which too much is happening—a space of undecipherable noise. Still, the system in its disjunction is also ripe with promise. Derrida writes in *Memoires for Paul de Man*, it “provokes the thinking of the very

possibility of what remains unthinkable or unthought, indeed, impossible” (101) Thus, the performative proves to be radically unstable from and through the aporetic event.

Repetition also necessarily includes variation—the inability to say something or to tell, to testify, and have it perform identically to the previous utterance. Because language is always performative, it promises itself to itself, and in so doing it makes slips of the tongue; it misspeaks itself. In *Allegories of Reading*, de Man contends that “language itself dissociates the cognition from the act...to the extent that is necessarily misleading; language just as necessarily conveys the promise of its own truth” (277). For Derrida, the “aporetic event” is the very misfire of language in which a promise never occurs, “never happens, but which cannot not occur” (*Memoires*, 101).

The nature of memory, of *memorializing*, requires a repetition of the utterances—a repetition that language itself demands, to incorporate the memorialized other or to reject and triumph over that other. Through this repetition, the act never remains solidified and constant because between each utterance there is a gap, the aporetic event. Any attempt at articulation is always at the impasse between cognition and act, between the utterance and the aimed outcome, because it is not anterior to language, but always works within language.

Testimony, too, is a discourse that is both a subject and product of the function of language. The aporetic structure of *testimony* may be understood in terms of testing and attesting. It is a *test* of language and it *attests* to language; in and through attesting to the test of testimony it is always engaged with the future. This act of attesting implies an affirmation of the subject, the contents, and events. Assumed, in some sense, is stability in the utterance and to what that utterance lays claim.

However, testimony also engages in a kind of test. The speaker is asked to account for an experience (not necessarily the speaker's experience) and to account for what has been witnessed, what he has learned. This test marks a crisis, a critical and a crucial moment for memory; when memory attempts to affirm the experience while at the same time never representing an event in its totality, it misfires. Testing is an act that requires one to account for a critical moment when the very moment cannot actually be accounted for—we always fail the test. The test asks us to account for a past that has never really been absolutely past, which has never occurred in its entirety, and a future that has not yet come. The memory and the act of presenting for the present is not a full gathering, or presence, but rather the site of disjunction. This is why the audience—the reader and the listener—must be acutely sensitive to the hesitations and silences that inhabit the testimony.

The aporia in autobiography, between laying claims on truth, and the constant slipping of the referent and the aporia in testimony, see to it that the sequential narrative remains impossible. The abysses within autobiography and the abysses within testimony exponentially increase in complexity when these two modes of discourse collide. In other words, the aporia within autobiography and within testimony alone are noisy, transmitting nothing but static, but the noise increases exponentially within the aporia between autobiography and testimony. In the gaps between all phrases, between utterances, and discourses as well as the explicit meaning, the human leaves a trace.

If life-writing and the testimonial “I” that necessarily accompanies it is the literary space that most explicitly attempts to articulate the definitional excursions concerning the human, then the treacherous climate of this very literary genre attests to the

inaccessibility and reflects the incomprehensibility of the essential quality of the human. Kurt Zemlicka asks: “What if the question of what it means to be human is an answer in and of itself?”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> See Kurt Zemlicka “The Rhetoric of Enhancing the Human: Examining the Tropes of ‘the Human’ and ‘Dignity’ in Contemporary Bioethical Debates over Enhancement Technology,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, vol. 46 (2013): 257 – 279.

## Chapter Three

### **(De)composition of the Body: Gertrude Stein's *The Geographical History of America or The Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind*, and Virginia Woolf's "The Sketch of the Past" and *On Illness***

Politics, however, is the threat of the differend. It is not a genre, it is the multiplicity of genres, the diversity of ends, and par excellent the question of linkage.

—Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*

But of all this daily drama of the body there is no record.

—Virginia Woolf, *On Being Ill*

#### **The Discursive Human**

Previous chapters have attempted to build on Lyotard's observation that genres of discourse -- specific to this study, life-writing and quasi-fictions -- are characterized by conflicts and breaks. In life narratives the testimonial "I," which signifies a universal human subject, is constituted by a fantasy of a masculinized subject. Furthermore, persistent cognitive breakdowns in perceiving the human at the confluence of the singular subject "I", the universal "I", and language have been investigated.

In response, this chapter proposes that the tension between representations of human embodiment and the materialization of the human body in Virginia Woolf's "The Sketch of the Past" and *On Illness*, as well as Gertrude Stein's *The Geographical History of America or The Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind*, have the effect of disempowering these generalizations by the way their texts interrogate and destabilize language. By way of Lyotard's notion of discursive linkage, this chapter

attempts to illuminate moments where the body is both written (composed) and unwritten (decomposed).

On a metaphysical level, feminist thinkers have passionately debated the nature of the body, specifically whether our conceptions of the body are extrinsic to language and discourse, or if we can only perceive bodies through imagery evoked by language. In *Essentially Speaking*, Diana Fuss offers an example of such a divide:

For the essentialist, the body occupies a pure, pre-social, pre-discursive space. The body is 'real', accessible, and transparent; it is always *there* and directly interpretable through the senses. For the constructionist, the body is never simply there, rather it is composed of a network of effects continually subject to sociopolitical determinations (5).

Here, Fuss breaks down the essentialist/constructionist debate and shows how social constructionist ideas rely on essentialism and essentialist ideas rely on constructionism. Despite the fact that it is not difficult, as Fuss's critique suggests, locating each philosophical position in the other's formulations, each position, nevertheless, clutches to their *constructed* discourse and theories. Essentialism, Fuss defines, is "a belief in the real, true essence of things, the fixed properties which define the 'whatness' of a given entity" (xi). Interestingly, Fuss shows the following, by way of a Derridean deconstruction: "We can never truly get beyond essentialism...Despite the dislocating effects of deconstruction's strategies of reversal/displacement we can never get beyond metaphysics, and therefore, since all of Western metaphysics is predicated upon Aristotle's essence/accident distinction, we can never truly get beyond essentialism" (13). By ignoring the complex relation between essentialism and social constructionism as they relate to the body, inadvertently stymies the potential for new forms of meaning-making. Perhaps the only way out of this linguistic stalemate is to reimagine

essentialism and sociology. Such a study, however, falls outside the goals of this project.

Conversely, Stein and Woolf contend with the body very differently. Stein, throughout her oeuvre, appears to describe a metaphysical separation of the body from the world, and therefore disrupts all meaning linked to the body. Instead, Stein, through word and syntax play draws attention to context, but only so that it can as well as discourse become a parody of self-critique. In comparison, her deconstructive style is akin to a de Manian theory of deconstruction.

De Man's theory is distinct from Derrida's, in that Derrida posits that readers actively contextualize the meaning they derive from text—meaning comes from the context. Conversely, de Man asserts that text is “always already” deconstructing at the literary level, completely separate from context. Derrida's mode of deconstruction lends itself to politics; whereas, de Man's analysis is essentially apolitical (perhaps, even anti-political).

Many of these epistemological dichotomies prevalent in Western philosophy have long been jockeying to persuade readers. Lyotard explains that “[h]egemonies of genres [...] are like figures of politics” (141). Thus, Lyotard puts great value on the politics of linking phrases. The event (the happening) of the phrase exceeds, as Ziarek describes, “the structure of representation, the event brings an always unexpected interruption of the existing hegemonic arrangements and renews the possibility of conflict and the necessity of judging the linkages” (87). Between each phrase is a space in which there are no “preexisting connections” and the absence allows for countless possibilities and new antagonisms. But they also open to new injustices.



As such, the possibility of antagonism or injustice has been theorized as the politicizing agent for the necessity to link (ibid). Although linking must occur, neither nature nor identity is predetermined. In this vein, Stein describes the function of sentences as an example of Lyotard's concept of "phrase" as event. Anne Tomiche offers in "Lyotard and/on Literature" an extensive analysis of Lyotard's reading of Stein. In it, she points out a moment in Lyotard's linking in which he responds to the "ands," "moreovers," "and neverthelesses" as phrases that "unite what [they] separate" (157). Lyotard further observes that Stein's phrasing invites other phrases and discourses to link up. Tomiche adds with the following:

The differend is indeed reinforced in the very 'conflict' between linking and not commenting. Literary text such as Gertrude Stein's thus bear witness to the differend not because they try to describe or narrate the paradigmatic experience of the differend (the Shoah) but because in their very writing they question the traditional linkage of one sentence onto the next, based on causality, continuity, and logic (ibid).

Tomiche makes the crucial point that bearing witness to a differend does not exclusively entail specific discourses competing over narrative approaches to experience; rather, Stein bears witness to the law of genre itself.

Woolf, on the other hand, is not a deconstructionist, but does disrupt tradition and contextualize her critiques. By foregrounding the necessity to link without rules, the notion of (dis)embodiment -- with it its physical pain and illness -- as it relates to Woolf's and Stein's abstract work with the body and the "I" to which it is supposedly attached, opens this methodology to a potential for a politics of the human to come. For example, Woolf's texts describe a body that is simultaneously *awaiting* an assault from an other— from illness and death—and a body *already* in the throes of suffering. For Woolf, the abyss that opens between a particular life and the narrative that represents it both

destabilizes the embodied self and gives meaning to an embodied self that is presented in the world through the representative force of language.

Moreover, Toni Morrison's affirmation during her Nobel speech suggests that language speaks to experience, but language is not a substitute for experience. Language cannot offer an unmitigated presence of experience. At the same time, language, as Morrison contends, can touch or be touched by experience. In other words, language can shape how something is experienced; that is, language can transmit affect between those who bear witness and those who listen. However, language can also be changed by experience. Experience can alter a discursive framework and invent new words. Language cannot reproduce the actual event, person, or world. Woolf, who interrogates narrative form (a discursive construct formed by language), explores the ways in which language influences perceptions of the self and the world by forcing disruption in narrative structures.

In *The Geographical History of America or The Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind*, Stein deliberately focuses on the abyss between representation of the human mind and the ipseity of an embodied human. Stein employs several rhetorical techniques to create textual suspensions aimed at illuminating this chasm, including parody, repetition, and stylized grammatical interruptions. Unlike Woolf's texts, which move in the melancholic haze of her allusive self, Stein manically rejects, feverishly laughs at, and mocks the continued decomposition of (her)self. Regarding identity, Stein says: "Indeed what is imagining anything. It is done a little at a time or is it done a whole at a time and is it done all the time" (226). Readers would expect a question mark, not the full stop period. On the one hand, Stein statement offers an invitation for other to

consider. But, on the other hand, it forecloses with her use of the full stop glyph. Those who are familiar with Stein's work would likely conclude, and I also, that she intended for the statement to be one that invites imagination and yet also close it off to imaginings. For Stein, the condition of identity is one in which involves imagination and ignorance. Regarding ignorance, she wonders how identity is appropriated and the rules followed and reification a success.

Stein argues that she does not directly take herself on as a subject. Therefore, she takes on Alice's name; however, this ghosting in no way means that Stein is actually taking on Alice's identity, but rather is constructing an identity called "Alice". Because readers are led to believe that Alice is Stein's longtime partner, Stein effectively constructs an identity of Alice. Thus, it is not Stein, but Alice, whom Stein establishes as pretext in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. As a result, Stein attracts more attention to the self as readers are compelled to question the rationale for substituting the name Gertrude for Alice in the title and throughout the autobiography.

Both explicitly and implicitly, the representation and misrepresentation of the self in Woolf's and Stein's texts question the meaning of "human". Woolf and Stein are caught in what Kurt Zemlicka accurately calls the *tropological regress*, which he defines as "[an] endless procession of linguistic tropes that are artificially linked to transcendental conceptions" (262). All discourse—and the mobile army of metaphors that constitute it—shape perceptions of self, the world, and others. As Zemlicka writes, discourses define "the essential qualities of 'the human'... [that] rely on precise linguistic definitions [that must] articulate something that supposedly rests in an 'objective' reality

outside of linguistic signification” (258). In other words, there is no inherent link between the signifier, “human”, and a material, universal “human” referent.

In addition to transcendentalism, this study also considers the immediacy of human embodiment as a material presence. For example, Lacan contends that language is the only means through which we have some kind of access to meaning; yet, this is by no means guaranteed. Alternatively, we can turn to Levinasian transcendentalism. According to Levinas, we need language because we are radically separated from objective meaning.

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas characterizes the face of the absolute other as incomprehensible. Language, in other words, is the force which reveals “the other” (73). Simply put, language is a bridge that connects isolated bodies and minds. On the other hand, language can be understood as a hypernym that includes nonlinguistic modes of communicating, such as eye-to-eye contact, touching, and the transmission of affect via body language, even in complete silence. These so called “other” forms also require interpretation, as in any text. There is something beyond and outside the text which paradoxically resides in the absences *in* all texts. Accordingly, Derrida consistently points to the human preoccupation with naming itself.

With respect to immanence, Charles E. Bennett notes that in the works of the Roman poet, Titus Lucretius Carus (95-52 B.C.E.) -- and even Democritus (460 B.C.E.) before him – one can clearly see a commitment to the physical world. For Lucretius and Democritus, the physical world consists of atoms that “are constantly flying off from the surface of all bodies...and form a succession of images that cause sight, hearing, taste and smell...Man, like everything else in the world, is fashioned of lifeless atoms” (xx-

xxi). Here, Lucretius seems suspicious of belief systems which rely on imaginary figures, or of transcendental notions that claim to be extrinsic to the material world. He thought of poetry as having the “purpose of freeing men’s minds from the bonds of superstition [and fear]” (xv). Immediately apparent in this phrasing is the idea that immanence might be the only philosophy which can emancipate people from metaphysical bondage (see *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* and *Ethics*); whereas, transcendence, or the belief in an imaginary Being beyond the material world, is considered fallacious.

Further tension between representations of human embodiment and the human body as material is found in the productions of meaning. The concern over meaning, as it relates to representation, already exists in the space of embodied language. Therefore, questions of meaning develop into questions on the function of language. However, if the human body is understood as something that exists outside or before language—therefore, is not constitutive of language—then it is nothing more than a chunk of material incapable of symbolic and associative acts indicative of meaning. If one inverts the roles of language and body, wherein language is instead the space that requires bodies, then the body would be understood as inherent to language. Put another way, language, as simple body gestures or elaborate symbolic system, is contingent on the body. For example, Mark Johnson argues:

[H]uman embodiment directly influences what and how things can be meaningful for us, the ways in which these meanings can be developed and articulated, the ways we are able to comprehend and reason about our experience, and the actions we take. Our reality is shaped by the patterns of our bodily movement, the contours of our spatial and temporal orientation, and the forms of our interactions with objects. (xix)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) and their later co-authored text, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought* (1999) in which they

But if the analytic position that regards language as beyond the material world is reversed and the material world is understood as intrinsic to language, then the terms “transcendental” and “immanence” are only simply inverted and a new hierarchy valuing immanence (and with it the body) is established—we are still caught in the hierarchical realm of *being*. Alternatively, there can be a continual dynamic interplay between language and the body, making it impossible to distinguish one from the other.

Thinkers engaged in critiques of race, gender, and class -- as well as the critical intersection among them -- include Iris Marion Young, Toril Moi, Gail Weiss, Jay Prosser, Donna Haraway, Franz Fanon, Audre Lorde, Susan Bordo, Linda Alcoff, among others.<sup>2</sup> While these thinkers dismantle the foundation of Cartesian dualism to collapse the patriarchal structure that subordinates the body, Elizabeth Grosz delivers the deathblow to this argument in *Volatile Bodies: Toward A Corporeal Feminism*:

The body is seen as a unique means of access to knowledge and ways of living. On the negative view, women’s bodies are regarded as an inherent limitation on women’s capacity for equality, while on the positive side, women’s bodies and experiences are seen to provide women with a special insight. Both sides seem to have accepted patriarchal and misogynist assumption about the female body as somehow more natural, less detached, more engaged with and directly related to its ‘objects’ than males’ bodies (15).

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declare that Western philosophical tradition has us duped. In fact, Lakoff and Johnson contend, “reason is not disembodied” (1999, 4) but “inherently embodied” (3); reason is “mostly unconscious...[and] emotionally engaged” (4). See also John Brockman interview entitled, “Philosophy in the Flesh:’ A Talk With George Lakoff, in *The Third Culture*, Edge 51, (1999) where he responds to questions on *Philosophy in the Flesh*.

<sup>2</sup> See Iris Marion Young’s essays “Pregnant Embodiment,” “Breasted Experience,” and “Menstrual Meditations,” in *On Female Body Experience: “Throwing Like a Girl” and Other Essays* (2005). Young argues that girls and women are made to feel ashamed or oppressed by the social, institutional, and medical interventions on natural bodily processes.

In an attempt to avoid the pitfalls Grosz describes, many thinkers ignore the body altogether (15).<sup>3</sup> However, abandoning the body for a metaphysical abstract can be a form of violence that both harms the concept of the body—making the body susceptible to real bodily violence—and risks impeding thought. After all, thinking cannot go on without the body. And yet, bodily thinking still occupies a large part of philosophy.

### **This Monster, the Body**

Alexander Garcia Duttman writes in *At Odds With AIDS: Thinking and Talking About a Virus*, “[Illness] unhinges the ‘stabilizing arrest’, which one calls the subject” (90). Earlier in the same text he states, “The Being-not-one of time as Being-not-one with AIDS represents the collapse of the subject, through and for which the unity of life exists” (4). Given that illness is ubiquitous, how is a stabilized subject or the sense of a unified life even possible? Woolf writes more specifically on the collapsed self in *On Illness*:

Considering how common illness is, how tremendous the spiritual change that it brings...what ancient and obdurate oaks are uprooted in us by the act of sickness, how we go down into the pit of death and feel the waters of annihilation...it becomes strange indeed that illness has not taken its place with love and battle and jealousy among the prime themes of literature (3-4).

Literature, Woolf continues, “does its best to maintain that its concern is with the mind;” yet “all day, all night the body intervenes...it must go through the whole upending process of changes...but of all this daily drama of the body there is no record” (4-5). Thus, avoiding the body may actually be an attempt to thwart death. Alternatively, Woolf

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<sup>3</sup> See Elizabeth Grosz’s *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* for a brief review of Cartesian dualism and its consequences, as well as an overview of alternative thinking by Spinoza, Foucault, and Deleuze. Grosz also reviews feminist scholarship that develops new theories of the body “outside patriarchal and racist categories” (15).

may be referring to a more basic attempt to escape from the body's maladies, injuries, and general discomforts. In any case, Woolf's and Duttman's descriptions of a self that is unencumbered by pain reflects what Elaine Scarry refers to in *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*:

...[w]hatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language...Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it...For physical pain—unlike any other state of consciousness—has no referential content. It is not *of* or *for* anything. It is precisely because it takes no object that it, more than any other phenomenon, resists objectification in language" (5).

Although not part of Scarry's discussion, psychological pain frequently manifests in excruciating physical pain, and *vice versa*. In this construct, parsing out physical and psychological pain is often difficult. Nevertheless, the essential condition of a fragmented self becomes obvious under the extreme circumstances of pain and illness.

Western philosophical discourse has profoundly impacted perceptions of the body, and persistently re-inscribes the Cartesian dualistic framework that separates mind from body. The tradition holds that mind belongs to the spirit, rendering it above the body. The body is therefore perceived as nothing more than a shell to be shed. In contrast, Duttmann and Woolf describe the body and language as being actively and intrinsically linked by the truism that without a body, language would have no place. In speculating reasons why philosophy and literature have avoided the body, Woolf describes a scene in which the body's health and maladies both bear and inhabit the mind:

All day, all night the body intervenes; blunts or sharpens, colours or discolours...The creature within can only gaze through the pane—smudged or rosy; it cannot separate off from the body like a sheath of a knife or the pod of a pea for a single instant; it must go through the whole



unending procession of changes, heat and cold, comfort and discomfort, hunger and satisfaction, health and illness... (4-5).

In doing so, Woolf reminds her readers that the condition of the body affects perception. The body, when invaded by a virus or bacteria, will feel agony.<sup>4</sup> Such sensations affect perceptions of the self and, consequently, perceptions of others and the world that contains them.<sup>5</sup> For example, when one is relatively healthy, one's use of the singular subject "I" is often unconsciously and quickly dismissed, functioning as a universal syntactical placeholder. On the other hand, when one is sick and faced with the possibility of imminent death, then one's use of "I" takes on a very different role. Under these circumstances, language used to describe the self takes on meta-magical phrasing, given that at any moment the self may never utter another word. Whether or not it is formally diagnosed, illness leaves those afflicted to deal with unexpected pain and discomfort, and the newness of the experience necessitates meaning-making.

*On Being Ill* was composed shortly after *Mrs. Dalloway*, a text that Woolf claimed was an "adumbrate...study of insanity and suicide: the world seen the sane and the insane side by side" (*Diary* 207). It also preceded *To the Lighthouse*, which was written

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<sup>4</sup> In the weeks after the first known AIDS cases were made public in 1981, an international effort commenced to coin an official name for the virus. The general public first called it GRID (gay-related immune deficiency). According to Sander L. Gilman, doctors referred to "the four groups labeled as being 'at risk'" as the 4-H's: homosexuals, heroin addicts, hemophiliacs, and Haitians (87).

<sup>5</sup> See Eliot Freidson's "The Social Construction of Illness" in *Profession of Medicine* for a description of the social and personal consequences of making diagnoses: "[W]hen a physician diagnoses a human's condition as illness, he changes the man's behavior by diagnosis; a social state is added to a bio-physiological state by assigning the meaning of illness to disease. It is in this sense that the physicians creates illness...and that illness is...analytically and empirically distinct from mere disease" (223). See Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor* for a thorough analysis of the way in which diseases are referenced to describe the moral character of those who are afflicted—as metaphors around illness situate positions of blame differently, either the fault for the infliction lies with individual "immorality" (producing shame) or collective "immoral" practice (producing guilt). See Michel Foucault's *The Birth of the Clinic* for an argument for new language to replace the eighteenth-century "dialogue between doctor and patient" to change the question from "What is the matter with you?" to "Where does it hurt?" (xxi). The latter approach prioritized empiricism and limited discourse and the precision of diagnoses and positive prognoses.

“in a great, apparently involuntary rush...I suppose I did for myself what psychoanalysts do for their patients” (*Moments of Being* 81). As Lee reminds readers, Woolf “was at the most intimate stage of her absorptive, seductive relationship with Vita Sackville-West” (xi).

Interestingly, the initial essay version of *On Illness* was entitled “Illness: An Unexplored Mine”. In the 1930 publication, the essay’s title was revised to *On Being Ill*. Here, Woolf exchanges the noun “illness” for an abstruse “ill”. Instead of naming a condition, she describes conditions and actions. Does the original title imply that illness is the unexplored “mine”, or is it—as the change to “on being” might suggest—“being”? The unfamiliar mine may be interpreted as a separate, unfamiliar structure. Perhaps it is a metaphor for the self. The original title may be an unconscious self-inscription describing illness as “mine”, belonging to Woolf. “Mine” is a word that carries multiple meanings and functions as both a noun and possessive pronoun. The text invites readers to consider multiple uses of the term simultaneously: a cavernous space, the first person possessive (as in “that is mine, that illness”), and an explosive device. One might imagine Woolf saying, “This illness is a mine and will likely blow my body to smithereens” (8).

The revised title suggests that Woolf is writing about the “being” of illness, in its ontological context. In other words, illness is, here, an entity. The problem with assigning illness an ontological status is that this status removes the term from the historical conditions of the one who is afflicted.<sup>6</sup> *On Being Ill*, as the title suggests, is

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<sup>6</sup> See Owsei Temkin’s essay “The Scientific Approach to Disease: Specific Entity and Individual Illness” in *The Double Face of Janus and Other Essays in the History of Medicine* for a discussion on the differences between ontological and physiological approaches to medical conditions. Temkin argues that

not only a text on illness, but also an illness that is personified. Throughout the work, Woolf gives illness an (id)entity and space to speak. She is, in fact, representing illness as a body. Illness grows and evolves in the body, displaces the self, and presents a new and altered body and perception. Therefore “being ill” is not only the condition of a body, as in influenza, it is also describing “being”. While the title of Woolf’s text has been altered, it remains a text that, as Lee observes, “treats not only illness, but language, religion, sympathy, solitude, and reading” (xi).

In chronicling her persistent struggle with illness in *On Being Ill*—particularly her battles with mental illness and the painful physical co-morbidities that so often accompany it—Woolf composes a text to personify *illness*. It is a deliberate attempt to pass illness onto readers.<sup>7</sup> As such, *On Being Ill* is a body (of work) that is defined by repeated acts of decomposition, incomprehensibility, narrative break-downs, breaches in temporality, and a rejection of the boundary between self and other.

Despite Woolf’s intentional rhetorical performance, she is not always conscious of the ways in which she stages the self. Woolf—like all people—is not always aware of the identities that shape her, or of the injurious events that affect her. War, madness, and family violence, for instance, produce a traumatized embodiment that—although immanent to the self—simultaneously constitutes a form of disembodiment. Unsurprisingly, Woolf constantly questions the body’s absence in philosophy and literature:

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the physiological approach allows for cultural, historical, and biographical accounts to be part of diagnosing and treatment.

<sup>7</sup> See Thomas C. Caramagno’s *The Flight of the Mind: Virginia Woolf’s Art and Manic-Depressive Illness* for a discussion on the effects of mental illness on the body. See also Kay Redfield Jamison’s *Touched with Fire*.

[L]iterature does its best to maintain that its concern is with the mind; that the body is a sheet of plain glass through which the soul looks straight and clear, and, save for one or two passions such as desire and greed, is null, and negligible and non-existent...those great wars which the body wages with the mind a slave to it, in the solitude of the bedroom against the assault of fever or the oncome of melancholia, are neglected. (4-5)

Ancient Greek philosophy postulated that all things are structured by dualities. However, the notion that the world is constructed by dualities does not itself address the questions of how and why the body was ever (and continues to be) seen as a site where oppositions struggle for dominance and the notion of dualism is seen as a necessary world view. More importantly, however, are the processes by which the body continues to re-emerge, albeit subtly, in literature, philosophy and psychoanalysis.

Indeed, it cannot be certain that after death the body re-emerges intact, or even fully formed. Woolf offers readers a potential answer by suggesting that “[t]his monster, the body, this miracle, its pain, will soon make us taper into mysticism” (6). The body re-emerges in hunger, pain, and general wanting, reminding readers that it is an essential constituent of the self. Woolf also notes that “in health, meaning has encroached upon sound. Our intelligence domineers over our senses” (21). In other words, the body is often forgotten in our everyday good health. Only in sickness, Woolf admits, is there “a childish outspokenness...things are said, truths blurted out, which the cautious respectability of health conceals” (11). After negligence takes its toll, the embodied self returns with fury toward its forced marginalized and repressed existence. It cannot help but speak to the unspoken. In each return, the embodied self is noticeably altered. The certainty that the body will continue (until its death) to return in the future, bearing the scars of the past, instills a relentless anxiety in the wait for the monster to come.

## The Sketchy Self in Woolf's "A Sketch of the Past"

Woolf, after reading Herbert Read's autobiography, describes the masculinized autobiography as "little sand castles...", and she refers to herself as "the sea which demolishes these castles" (340). The architecture of the autobiography is what "gives shelter to the occupant" (340). If there is something else beyond the insubstantial autobiographical structures written by those who Woolf refers to as "little boys", then it comes from the outside: from the margins, gaps, and silences, and from the oppressed, repressed, forgotten, and denied.

Woolf further suggests that the reason why most memoirs might fail is that "they leave out the person to whom things happened. The reason is that it is so difficult to describe any human being" (65). To write one's own narrative is to write an autobiography of becoming. Woolf philosophizes that "we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself. And I see this when I have a shock" (72). This narrative is powered, in part, by the openings produced by the *metaphoricity* of language.

Woolf's own autobiography suggests that becoming is the exigency for which she writes in the first place; but, it is also a text that oscillates between embodiment and disembodiment. Woolf declares that "one's life is not confined to one's body" (73). However, when she reminisces about learning the concept of greatness, Woolf claims that "it is a bodily presence; it has nothing to do with anything said" (158). In *On Being III*, Woolf clearly makes a case for the need to narrate the vicissitudes of the body. In "A Sketch of the Past", however, she permits the tension between embodiment and disembodiment to be elaborately enacted. This raises the question of whether or not there is something about the genres of life writing and autobiography that suspends the

self between representation and referent, between discourse and the world it purports to represent? *On Being III* is considered to be non-fiction; it is written in the first-person and reveals autobiographical accounts. However, it is not intended to be an autobiography, and therefore, is not bound to the criteria of life-writing genres and the scrutiny of fact-checking that accompany these categories. “A Sketch”, on the other hand, is an autobiographical essay, and is subject, to some extent, to the readers’ expectations which govern its form.

In the title, “A Sketch”, readers are introduced to a vague and indefinite subject, and at the same time, a life narrative centered exclusively on one person: Virginia Woolf. It is just a sketch, the one and only. It is an autobiographical blueprint of Woolf’s past that, at the same time, offers readers an alternative to the male-defined model of testimonial writing. She argues that women must undertake “the horrid labour that it needs to make an orderly and expressed work of art; where one thing follows another and all are swept into a whole” (75). Woolf knew well the horrendous—and for that matter, impossible—chore of accounting for the known and unknown fragments that comprised her identity, and which, indeed, comprise each of us. Writing about someone else was not a new experience for Woolf. She knew the protocols involved in both biographical and autobiographical writing. Woolf’s body of work included memoirs such as “On Being III”, “Reminiscences”, *Roger Fry: A Biography*, and a number of lectures including the extended essay, “A Room of One’s Own”, that, in part, reflected her experiences in the professional writing field.

Woolf opens “A Sketch” with an admission: “As it happens that I am sick of writing Roger’s Life” (64). It is impossible not to consider the reasons why Woolf may

have been bored with writing about her good friend, Roger Fry. Readers should assume that her friendship with Fry presented her a great barrier standing in the way of constructing a biography that would take a form with which he was familiar and of which he would approve. That form, however, was precisely the male-defined paradigm found in life-writing that so constricts Woolf's creative and self-actualizing power.

Unsurprisingly, Woolf was happy to take a brief break from Fry's life so that she could "spend two or three mornings making a sketch" (64). Woolf's text was not counterintuitive to the form of linear narrative making. In fact, she knew that a presentation of herself would involve "a sledge-hammer force blow" (72) to the masculinized narrative structure. There was something productive in the "sudden shocks" her writing produced. They are, Woolf maintains, "what ma(de) me a writer" (72). Woolf reflects on the pieces left behind and said, "[i]t is only by putting it into words that I make it whole...[it is] a great delight to put the severed parts together" (72). Woolf's mission was two-fold: she demolished the meta-narrative dictating the protocols of life-writing and weaved some trace of herself into and through a new presentation.

The title itself begins with the indefinite singular "A". It represents a singular sketch among many possible sketches of both Woolf and the world. However, it is still a singularity among many. Should readers understand it as a unique sketch? If so, how? A "sketch" of oneself is, at best, an outline. It is a brief or rough idea of a particular singular "I". The title represents a rough outline of Woolf's past, written in the present and scrutinized by future readers.

Similar to *On Being Ill*, "A Sketch of the Past" is a text that attempts to bear witness to visceral violence, loss, and anguished melancholy. It is also a life narrative

that struggles to unfold in sequential time. Sections are punctuated by the death of a loved one, acquaintance, or fellow writer. “A Sketch” is also a text that is aware of its own narrative entanglements. It is peppered with incomplete thoughts, yet is consciously attempting to follow readers’ expectations of an autobiographical narrative.<sup>8</sup> Woolf admits that it “is so difficult to describe any human being...[therefore] I offer only a sketch!”. Just prior to this admission, however, Woolf also questions the very possibility of her presence in the world and her difficulties with writing (65). At the end of at least five sections in her short autobiographical sketch, Woolf invokes the notion of stillness—of endings and of death—by frequently referencing the death of her mother.

Interestingly, Woolf opens the text with a discussion on being and non-being. Woolf struggles to choose words to describe the world and people about whom she writes. Woolf acknowledges that she is “obsessed” with the presence of her dead mother: “I could hear her voice, see her, imagine what she would do or say as I went about my day’s doings. She was one of the invisible presences...” (80). Attesting to life—both her own and her mother’s—requires that Woolf possess the capability to analyze these “invisible presences” (80). Woolf’s readers are entangled in the aporia that structures representations of human embodiment, actual human bodies, and the selves once with them.

Woolf is compelled to remind readers (and herself) of their own terminal embodiment, as she is also engaged in a repetitive act aimed at remembering and experiencing the finitude of being. The self is haunted by the certainty of its demise. In many ways, one is traumatized by an event that has not yet occurred, but will with all

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<sup>8</sup> It is argued that Woolf planned to make “A Sketch of the Past” into a larger autobiographical work. Even if Woolf had written a much larger text, readers may not assume that she would have offered a different title. “A Sketch” is the title she chose and which shapes the meaning of her autobiography.



certainty happen. It is not an act that celebrates death, because death is mute. Rather, the act is one that holds life between the two poles of being and non-being. With each insertion of the signifiers “death” and “end”, Woolf is attempting to (re)experience her deceased loved one. This tactic is persistently repeated, however, because the experience is never reached. The absoluteness of losing a loved one cannot be wholly experienced because the other cannot come back from the dead. For example, the admission that her dead mother is an “invisible presence [that]...play[ed] so important a part in everyday life” suspends the mother between being and non-being (80). Cathy Caruth describes the same phenomenon in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* as the nature of trauma, wherein a victim is “possessed by an image or event” (5). Holly Laird notes in “Reading ‘Virginia’s Death’: A (Post) Traumatic Narrative of Suicide” that, while trauma is usually associated with a specific event or illness, “no term or condition has also proven more slippery to define...” (251). The loss of her mother is one of several traumas that haunt Woolf’s text.

The repeated attempts to bear witness to loss, family violence, war, and her debilitating bouts of melancholy provoke the need to *tell*. In *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*, E. Ann Kaplan argues that “telling stories about trauma, even though the story can never actually repeat or represent what happened...[may] permit a kind of empathic ‘sharing’ that moves us forward” (37). While the possibility of “moving forward” remains unknown, the act of repeating difficult events or losses constitutes a form of “empathic sharing”. Often, the compulsion to tell is linked to a wish for connection and an affirmative answer to the haunting question, “do you understand?” Therefore, the impasses opened by the aporia between representation

and referent reveal a possible bypass to empathy, by way of connecting with others. Again, Woolf describes the function of a life-writing by telling her reader that without the invisible presence, very little would be known “of the subject of the memoir; and again how futile life-writing becomes” (80). This invisible presence belongs to the story; but it is precisely that presence which does not make itself obvious to the haunted who attempt to reveal it, or to whom its story is conveyed. As such, it is the very part of the narrative that would require empathy.

The desire to be precise preoccupies Woolf’s “A Sketch”, especially when she tries to pin down dates. Woolf opens “A Sketch” with the note, “Two days ago—Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> April 1939 to be precise...”. Despite the openness that the invisible presences offer between representation and referent, life and death, or being and non-being, Woolf decides to inscribe a date to mark the precise moment of composition. It is a singular point. Michael Levine writes of Celan’s use of dates:

[A]ttempting to remain mindful of such dates’ means being doubly bound to them as their captivated keepers...it is not merely a question of actively ‘writing ourselves from and toward such dates,’ but also at the same time of being passively written by them—having such dates ascribed to us, inscribed and incised upon us” (587). It is not unusual to use dates in life-writing. Woolf offers an explanation for the reason to use dates: it separates, “I now, I then” (65). Like the comma, it holds temporality in place. But Woolf must ask the question, “Who was I then?” (65), as if the function of autobiography prevents the exploration of “I now.” On the one hand, life-writing on the self (“I”) attempts to form and appears to engage the past self in the present of a future reader.

On the other hand, future readers will attempt to fill the gaps in Woolf’s narrative, and therefore, alter the memory that Woolf attempts to convey, even if only with provisional imaginings. Emmanuel Levinas describes the “human ‘I’” in *Unforeseen History* as “not a self-enclosed unit like the unit of the atom; it is an opening, the opening of

responsibility that is the true beginning of the human” (130). The opening of responsibility might, therefore, be an empathic sharing necessary to narrate and make meaning—to situate bodies in time, if for only a brief moment.

Woolf describes a moment of shame when she catches her reflection in the mirror: “I must have been ashamed or afraid of my own body” (68). She presents a unique moment of a disembodied embodiment, similar to what Levinas later postulates in *Otherwise than Being* as the epiphany of the other’s face as it appears “with a skin—a face weighted down with a skin, and a skin in which even in obscenity, the altered face breathes—already absent from themselves” (89). In line with Levinas’ thinking, it is Woolf’s own face in the mirror that presents the other of her being. Woolf’s everyday being-in-the-world is interrupted by the presence of her own otherness. The other, however, is not entirely unrecognizable; she is just strange.

The strangeness of the self as it looks back is not so much, as Levinas would have us believe, the peculiarity of the other; but, in fact, is also the shock of the self that is confronted. The self appears in a temporal and spatial context separate from the source, the self, it is reflecting. At the same time, the other looks outside the self to see the self in others. This logic leads one to ask: How is the self and the other distinguished from one another? Could Woolf, or her readers, have known this distinction between the self or the other? Evidently, the abyss between Woolf and the other -- and Woolf and herself -- is neither spatial nor temporal; it is, instead, constitutive.

The trauma of her sexual assault by her half-brother, Gerald Duckworth, highlights the already vulnerable structure of Woolf’s self-being. It is not that trauma

creates disjunctions, multiples, and contradictions; rather, these are already fundamental parts of being human. Trauma will, instead, exaggerate the fundamentally fragmented experience of being human. Indeed, these exaggerations will alter perceptions of others and the world. It takes “a sudden violent shock”, as Woolf tells her reader.

She shared another moment of family violence in which, after weeks of “non-being, she and her brother Thoby began “pommeling each other with [their] fists”. Woolf wondered, “[w]hy hurt another person?” She dropped her fists and “stood there, and let him beat [her]” (71). She continued later to describe the paralysis that swept through her body. In *Humanism of the Other*, Levinas succinctly wrote that “all that is human is outside” (59). If being human is at all possible, it is only because there are others exterior to the self that call on one’s being. Levinas might have responded that it was the face of the other, her brother, that disrupted her initial impulse to “pommel” her brother, Thoby. By bearing his strikes, Woolf was allowing him to beat the other in her.

### **“I am not sure that is not the end”**

Some of the concerns that shape Woolf’s text also shape Stein’s work. In concurrence with Woolf’s entire literary corpus, “A Sketch of the Past” contends with the desire to return focus to the body, while acknowledging that we lack the language to fully account for it. Stein, however, appears to be cognizant of the multi-positionality of the self and the human “I” that conditions the self. Stein draws attention to the gap between the representation of human embodiment and the actual human body by pressuring language and employing the rhetorical strategy of repetition.

Both Derrida and Stein describe repetition as a process that produces *différence*. This is why history, geography, and the human are crucial in Stein's work. The displacements and substitutions that come with repetition also produce fluidity in the meaning of objects, persons, and various styles of writing. Like Woolf, Stein also fragments narrative structure—though not with the sledgehammer Woolf uses to pound structure. Rather, Stein uses a chainsaw to tear through structure.

During her speaking tour in the United States in 1935, Stein returned to Chicago to deliver a speech entitled "Narration". Toward the end of the speech, she tells her audience that she will be paying closer attention to history in her upcoming works: "Next time I am going to write more history for you" (351). She keeps her promise in *What Are Master-pieces* and *The Geographical History of America*. The more difficult philosophical account, *The Geographical History of America or the Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind*, contains a meditation on the dynamism between "relation" and the self, autobiography, reading and writing, and historiography and their relation with representation and historical referents. Stein emphasizes the precariousness of experience found between immaterial and material representations of self and the world, and actual persons and objects.

Consider for a moment Stein's sentence: "Because here is the pause they pause and the cause the cause is that they pause and they cannot pause" (47). At first glance, it appears that she does not intend to make sense. Stein dislocates form from content, but the performative acts of language in *Geographical History* points to the opposite meaning. Before the connection can be made, readers must pause and wait, as Stein so often demands. In that pause, Stein invites thought. But the text also creates a

strange sensation, a bodily experience, wherein it allows for the possibility of embodiment. For example, the language soothes readers with the repetitive “s” sound, as if to hush and lull them to sleep. Readers are being suspended within the pause.

Stein contends with self-writing in the following manner: “No not for autobiography because be comes after” (184). Here, readers may begin to rethink the relation between writing, the self, and “humanity”. “Being” is produced by the autobiography, or by something outside itself. At the same time, the spatial and written pause that readers encounter in reading “be”, “comes”, and “after”, calls into question the chronological position of being. “Be”, it would appear, is in the present as the presence of being, but only after the narrative. Does the autobiography exist because it becomes after the life that came before? The uncertainty that her statement invokes is precisely her goal in her writing. Her text is about unsettling certitude, as it relates to any notion of the Human.

Throughout her works, Stein repeatedly reminds readers that she and her brother are substitutions for the premature death of two infant Steins. Presumably, if they had not died, she would not be (have “be come”). Here, Stein is referring to the social, economic, and political body. This might explain why Stein begins her text by referencing the month of her birth, and repeats this fact throughout *The Geographical History*. Immediately following the reference to her birth, she moves to the subject of death (45). At the very start, the reader is confronted with time, structured by her birth and death. By this point, the reader is suspended, much like they are in Woolf’s text. The invocation of her birth represents a narrative wish to slow down time, but only for a brief moment. Soon after, readers are asked to consider death, in general. Stein, no

doubt, is referring to the death of loved ones who have already gone, as well as those yet to pass. In response, the reader is compelled to consider his or her own death, but time, for Stein's reader, is troubled from the start.

The function of time is reinforced by Stein's repeated request for readers to "wait" or "pause." For Stein, it is not enough to simply say it; she must create the narrative situation that leaves readers with no other option. The pause is also formulated in the approach to rush along when she orders, "no hesitation" (86). Here, Stein makes an explicit call to forge ahead; but it is performed as a pause. Readers are called on to hurry-up, only to be slowed down. It is a trick. The text, in these moments does not do what it says. While her content tells readers to hurry, her style produces the opposite effect. On the one hand, the text itself prevents stabilization and repose and, as such, prevents readers from resting. On the other hand, the difficulty of the text prevents readers from moving on too quickly.

Time in Stein's work—especially in *The Geographical History of America*, where the present is always something that has passed as soon as it is just beginning to become thought—is precisely that which is thrown into question through Stein's discursive gestures of appropriating and denying time simultaneously. The future is based on a clearly paradoxical structure. A structure, to be sure, that reflects the paradox inherent in history and historiography and the present. As such, readers are suspended and unable to settle on a direction, or even a stable meaning. The past that is yet to be told comes from the future. The unknowable reaches across temporalities, influencing and effecting the present, past, and yet to come. In Lecture Three of "Narration" Stein explains, "...and still all history and autobiography and biography have

yet to come that it is here but we have yet to come to know how and where it does come from” (351). In *Stein’s Writing*, Stein postulates:

Now this might mean that there is identity if you were to say that this is so which it is but nevertheless there it is not because to-day is never to-morrow or yesterday although if it is if to-morrow is today that is what she can say she can say that if to-morrow is nearer to to-day, so some can say so she can say then to-morrow is to-day but if to-morrow is not anywhere near to-day which is what he can say then to-morrow cannot be to-day (180).

The above quote is written in typical Steinian fashion. For readers, the textual performance of her writing style at this moment in her text exaggeratedly links identity, and the self it represents, in a kind of chaotic timelessness. Time, and with it identity, is disconnected from any sense of origin.

The impossible textual demands that Stein makes of readers is a way to peel back the layers of discursive definitions. When removed, readers are confronted with the unknowable: “Which one is there I am I or another one. Who is one and one or one is one...How are you what you are...I am I because my little dog knows me” (99-100). While these exemplary few lines are a mere fraction of how this text, her entire corpus disrupts the perceived logical linearity and assumed inherent structure between representations of the embodied self and the actual body. In exposing the gap, Stein alerts her readers to the shifting and fluid nature of the self, other, and world. During these disruptions, access to experience is delayed. During this delay, readers are constrained and compelled to waver in the pause that the disruption produces. At the same time, the disruption is declared and denied by the incessant repetition and constant metamorphosis between signifier and signified, that is, between the word “I” and “dog” and the material entities those words claim to signify.



The ubiquitous and exigent acknowledgment of Stein's writing style attests to the difficult work that comes with reading many of her texts. Let us return briefly to Gold's reaction raised in the first chapter of this dissertation as a case in point. Gold alleged—and the sentiment is repeated frequently—that Stein writes for the sake of writing: “She did not communicate because essentially there was nothing to communicate” (para 14). However, is it even possible to write only for the sake of writing? One can hear Nietzsche's questions on art in the *Twilight of the Idols*: “[W]hat does all art do? Does it not praise? Glorify? Choose? Prefer? With all this it strengthens or weakens certain valuations” (55). If readers accept, only fleetingly, that Gold is correct and Stein writes only for the reason to write, then we would be obliged to assume that the deliberate motivations behind Stein's work is the only generator of important content. After all Stein's text emerges from a particular historical context and diffused in that context are social, familial, political and economic factors that both consciously and unconsciously get reinscribed into her text.

It is true that Stein's texts are exceptionally difficult to discern any one meaning. In part, this is because her texts generally offer no traditional linear narrative structure and words repeat and rearranged—sometimes appearing along other words that challenge any hope for sense making. But it is precisely because Stein's linguistic acrobatics produce deferrals and with it excess meaning, I would argue, that her texts speak to more readers as readers are allowed the creativity produce new meaning. For example, in section of *The Geographical History* entitled, “Autobiography I,” Stein ruminates: “When I was one that is no longer one of one but just one that is to say when I was a little one, but not so little that I meant myself when I said not one” (172).

The term “one” in Stein’s statement could signify a number of meanings (age, individuality, and/or identity) and action (self-negating and/or fragmenting). But the argument that Stein was not communicating anything, as Gold claimed, is an argument that is caught in the phallogocentric network of narrative making, where a linear sequential structure, a stable subject and a unified self is understood as a inherent. Interestingly, Stein unsettled this paradigm in the autobiographical genre, the very genre, which traditionally requires a stricter adherence to its rules.

Earlier in the same article, Gold describes Stein’s less “popular” texts as irrational and infantile work that one might find in the “private wards of asylums” (para 5). He points out, however—albeit disparagingly—that Stein is “not insane” and concedes that she might have written in search of “new sensations” (para 11). Setting aside his *ad hominem* attacks, Gold may be onto something. If Stein had been searching for new sensations, then she was promoting new experiences and understanding. Contrary to Gold’s claims, Stein’s work is not a futile exercise in testing language for the simple sake of testing it. Rather, according to Michael J. Hoffman in *Critical Essays on Gertrude Stein*, her commitment to the examinations she undertakes is intended to provoke unexpected and difficult thinking (9). In as much as it is a provocation to thinking, Stein also seeks to generate an affective response and even a bodily response.

This sort of dislocation of language from meaning is a motif that generates a variety of contradictory affects. Articles in both scholarly and commercial periodicals have frequently noted that Stein’s writing produces affects that disorient, reorient, smother, liberate, irritate, assuage, and, as one critic describes, even makes the reader

feel “itchy” (Isherwood, para 12).<sup>9</sup> Stein recognizes this in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*: “[...] sentences do get under their skin” (70). What the history of Stein’s criticism and her own observations suggest is that language is both the apparatus and subject of her experiment. Stein’s literary performance is what accentuates the precarious work that belongs to, as Stein would have readers experience, the unsettled self, identity and body.

In *The Geographical History*, Stein refers to “identity, human nature, human mind, universe, history, audience and growing” as characters in a play. Within this text, she includes a section titled “Autobiography” and arranges the chapters non-sequentially. Stein’s organization is designed to disrupt readers’ expectation—forcing rereads and closer inspection. In this same section, Stein suggests that her own identity is linked to her dog. She writes, “I am I because my little dog knows me” (136). Identity, for Stein, is linked to human nature, meaning that the notion of being is a being that is in the world among other beings. The human mind is not concerned with identity—it transcends identity. This is because, as Stein points out, it knows no age and no history. For Stein, the dichotomy is structured by the relation of human nature to the human mind, whereby the embodied world and representations of it are not static.

Stein may offer the reader a bypass to the impasse structured at the limit of representation of self and historical referent of the self. As Stein writes, “[s]omebody tears come to my eyes when I say somebody, and why well because the word sounds like that that of something like a dog that can be lost. Anything that can be lost is something anybody can get used to and that is identity” (199). First, Stein recognizes

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<sup>9</sup> See Charles Isherwood’s *New York Times* theater review: “The There That’s There: Mapping a Modernist’s Way With Words;” Kirk Curnutt’s *The Critical Response to Gertrude Stein*; Ray Lewis White’s *Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas A Reference Guide*.

that the aporia between representation and referent is, in a sense, regulated by loss. Stein identifies the loss produced inevitably when the word fails to present the person, object or situation exactly. Stein participates in empathic sharing. To be clear, empathic sharing does not imply the stabilization of identity and self. The possibility of empathic sharing is in the relational shifting between self and other through the fluid movement of narrative and meaning making that is required for connecting lives and world shaping.

As readers pause and sway in Stein's texts, they also waver beyond and outside with them, where the search and trials for meaning and categorization are difficult to order and read. When reading *The Geographical History of America*, readers, like Stein, are participants in an experiment that encourages them to look into the abyss and think anew, while treading on the horizon of the unknowable that her text suggests they are.

*The Geographical History of America* is just one text among many written in an experimental style that, as with all Stein's works, contains within it many rhetorical and narrative experiments. They are part of an *oeuvre* that is also, itself, an experiment. For this reason, the struggle to stabilize meaning in Stein's work is made infinitely harder. This difficulty is echoed in discussions concerning how to read Stein's experiments and define the *oeuvre*. Stein's style itself prevents conclusions and necessitates continuation. The constant testing is a testing of the testimonial "I" and, thus, the human that "I" is assumed to speak within and from.

### **The Self that Does Not Make "I" Its Subject: Reviewing Criticism**

The criticism of Stein becomes part of her *oeuvre*. For example, Marianne DeKoven advocates reading Stein's body of work chronologically. While Ulla Dydo

suggests a structure in which the texts are organized synchronically. Marjorie Perloff compounds the already impossible task of ordering Stein's corpus by categorizing the works into "at least six basic variations" (96). Stein's work produces anxiety around organization for readers.

Surprisingly, Stein also attempts to arrange her writing. She places the works into two categories: "identity writing," which emerges from human nature and is intended to appropriate the reader, and "entity writing," which originates from the human mind, is meditative, and uses a more private language. Shortly before her death, in a note that begins the now canonized compilation, *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein*, Stein endorses the selection and arrangement edited by her friend Carl Van Vechten: "And now I am pleased here are the selected writings and naturally I wanted more, but I do and can say that all that are here are those that I wanted the most."

The collection includes *The Autobiography of Alice B Toklas*, selected passages of *The Making of Americans*, *Tender Buttons*, and selection from *Wars I Have Seen*, among others. Given that Stein's note to Van Vechten was written a month before her surgery for stomach cancer (a surgery in which she never woke from), the wish for "more" may not only be the desire to live on in the textual space that bears her name, but also to simply live life.

Another provocative analysis of Stein's work is Harold Bloom's introduction to *Modern Critical Views: Gertrude Stein*. In this critique, Bloom describes Stein's writing as "dissociative rhetoric," and its main function "is to break down preconceived patterns in our response, so as to prepare us for discourse that will touch upon the possibilities of transcendence" (1). He defines Stein's work as a "crucial episode in the history of the

literature of American pragmatism,” reminding the reader of Stein’s literary and intellectual forebears, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, Wallace Stevens, and Hart Crane—it should not go unnoticed that Bloom lists only men as Stein’s forebears.

Stein’s narrative approach in *The Geographical History*, as well as her approach in her *oeuvre*, is not something that she had absolute authority over. One could say that Stein has a compulsion for the inexplicable experience for questioning. Stein is a wanderer, outsider, and incessant questioner on identity as a woman, Jewish, lesbian, member of the upper class. There is no outside in the Steinian text; but this does not make Stein’s texts exceptional. All literature is, to some degree, continually exposed to exegeses that bring to bear unforeseen readings. The act of writing and the texts produced are incessantly dependent on restless judgments.

Nevertheless, Stein’s writing is exceptional in its magnified play with form and content and in the literary and global historical contexts in which her entire corpus resides. The work is also exceptional for the way it disrupts conventional historiography: narration can no longer follow a sequential trajectory. The usual rules of genre are extravagantly dismissed, as the autobiographical feature weaves in and through the texts. All account for the palpable break that Stein makes with most literary and narrative conventions, including those regarding logic, syntax, and genre, as well as any sense of traditional meaning (Kellner, 11). In other words, the texts are a glaring pronouncement that the habitual ways of accessing meaning are being tested.

To put it differently, such a writing style puts language in radical and continual play, thus allowing readers to enter into and, at the same time, produce meaning.

William H. Gass describes it as something that “demonstrates far more than it proves, and although it is in no sense a volume of philosophy, it is, philosophically, the most important of her texts” (23).

### **Bodies in (Dis)content**

Woolf and Stein shared an interest in autobiographical writing, both lived during World War I and World War II, both had relative economical security, both were in love with women, both were educated, and both resisted the entrapments of traditional narrative structures and discursive practices that shaped narratives of the self and world. While it is the contention of this dissertation that their resistance had—and continues to have—real consequences for discourses on narrative and narrative making, my project is also cognizant of the comparatively privileged conditions in which both Woolf and Stein could ruminate on the subjects of narrative structure and representation and embodiment in the first place.

Chapter one attempted to demarcate the trouble with genre rules and traditional narrative structure that assumed a masculinized subject. In particular, the first chapter explored the faults and aporia produced by the parodic staging of the self and narrative structure itself in Woolf’s “The Mark on the Wall” and Stein’s *The Autobiography of Alice B Toklas*. With them, readers of this dissertation examined the vulnerability and displacement of the “I” through its relation to memory and to language.

The chapter also evaluated the effects patriarchal perceptions of the self have on certain nonconforming bodies. This then leads to chapter two which explored the aporetic structure between representations of human embodiment and the actual

human embodied in Woolf's "A Sketch of the Past" and *On Being Ill* and Stein's *The Geographical History of America or The Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind*. At the center of the second chapter is the question over who precisely is the referent in human rights laws? And at the center of both chapters—though articulated from different sites of entry—is the argument against a single discourse or stable referent; and, for this reason, this project attempts to reimagine a human rights with a process that allows for radical heterogeneous of phrases. With James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* and Samuel Beckett's "The Unnamable" as literary case studies, the final chapter will explore what human rights without a referent (human) restricted by a totalizing discourse might look like.

Reimagining the human experience as open to heterogeneous phrases and discourses might offer a new approach for those who seek justice for a crime when the crime is not even recognized as such? Baldwin traverses the Kafkaesque world of differends with layers of inflexible rules that are altogether withheld from Baldwin, as they from Kafka's Joseph K. "The trial", Joseph K. despairs, "is closing in on me in secret" (187). During the first cross-examination, Joseph K recognizes that the judge is giving secret signs: "The examining magistrate here beside me has just given one of you a secret signal" (48). Contrary to negative theology that posits the law as some "pure and empty form" (43), Deleuze points out that the law is powerful in that it carries meaning for those who authorize a certain set of phrases and discourses, in Lyotardian terms. In doing so, they delegitimize all other phrases and discourse. Therefore, some have the means to articulate an experience or a wrong while others are deprived the potential for meaning-making.



Robert Harvey offers a solution in *Witnessness* to the certainty that “being a witness is not for everyone” (x). His observation is based on, at least in part, the answers to questions he asks in a prior text titled, “Telltale at the Passages”. In it, Harvey considers Lyotard’s prescription issued in *The Differend* instructing that we must bear witness to the differend. This becomes doubly complicated. Harvey asks: “Am ‘I’ to bear the differend forth? Or am ‘I’ to bear its weight” (102)? How can a victim, who has been rendered speechless and unable to articulate in any intelligible or recognizable discourses, speak of her injury, or when denied all access to meaning making, articulate the traumatic event? Not everyone can engage in the political act of bearing witness to a differend. The differend can overload the emotional registers making it difficult to simply exist. Again, to link passages to a differend, call it out, so to speak, is not for everyone. Or to simply know of the crime might also be too much to handle. How would one seek redress, if she were unable to articulate or even find another person to translate the untranslatable? Harvey’s rejoinder: “We can witness by proxy,” Harvey argues, “by means of our imagination” (103). Whereas the site where the differend appears impossible to bridge and unthinkable to fill, he proposes that “a special type of betweenness where witnessness goes to work, unbothered even if the differend is yet unresolved” (105). Building on John Sallis’ *Force of Imagination: The Sense of the Elemental*, Harvey establishes a new kind of politics, witnessnesses, which is first rooted in “an ethics for everyone” and engages the world by transforming imagination into empathy (xi, 133). Within this ethics, the human would change from a being thought of as possessing a unified and isolated “I” to “no longer an individual,” but the bridging of

“we” (131). The bridge of “we” is possible only through the work of imagination which is, Harvey also describes, the “‘to come’ in the now” (123).

## Chapter Four

### Human Rights Without Frontiers: Subverting Borders in James Baldwin's

#### *Giovanni's Room* and Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable*

It seems that a man who is nothing but a man has lost the very qualities which make it possible for others to treat him as a fellow man.

—Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*

Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law.

—U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Art. 6.

The Rights of Man are the rights of those who have not the rights that they have and have the rights that they have not.

—Jacques Rancière, "Who Is the Subject of the Rights of Man?"

#### Naturally Human, Right?

After the Second World War, people became accustomed to speaking in the discourse of human rights, rather than in terms of natural rights. In 1947, before the United Nations established the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Margaret MacDonald reminded the attendees at the Aristotelian Society meeting that "[d]octrines of natural law and natural rights have a long and impressive history from the Stoics and Roman jurist to the Atlantic Charter and Roosevelt's Four Freedoms" (225).<sup>1</sup> Theories on the concept of natural rights are as numerous as they are deeply rooted in human history. In "Aristotle and the Origins of Natural Rights," Fred D. Miller argues that despite the common perception that "the concept of rights is a modern discovery," this misconception is "itself a comparatively recent development. Commentators in the nineteenth century and much of the twentieth century translated [...] Aristotle's *Politics* in terms of rights" (873). For example, Marcus Tullius Cicero's notion of "self-evident" in

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret MacDonald was a British philosopher and student of Ludwig Wittgenstein.

the letter to his son entitled *On Duties* influenced Locke's concept of natural rights outlined in *The Second Treatise on Civil Government*. Thomas Aquinas profoundly influenced Jacques Maritain's philosophy and political thought in the subjects of natural rights and human rights.<sup>2</sup>

Maritain and MacDonald were both writing during and just after the Second World War. The backdrop of much of their thinking took place while the Nazi crimes were on full display at the Nuremberg Trials and the Subsequent Nuremberg Proceedings between 1945 and 1949. At the same time, a new international document for universal rights was being debated and subsequently established called, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. MacDonald was explicit in linking her address entitled *Natural Rights* to the atrocities of that war when she asks whether simply pondering the preferred comfortable state of democracy over totalitarian governments would "have been sanctioned between 1939-45" (225). MacDonald guides readers on an analytical journey through the topography of natural rights. Again MacDonald asks: "why should people [...] continue to suppose that they have 'natural' rights, or rights as human beings, independent of the laws and governments of any existing society" (227). If natural rights are understood as fundamental and existing outside of culture and no government is the source of them, then from what source are they derived? MacDonald continues to question whether the source is God, Laws of Nature, or just simply nature. Ralph McInerney pointed out in "Natural Law and Human Rights" that Maritain "confronts a problem posed by the fact that signatories of the 1948 Universal Declaration of

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<sup>2</sup> Jacques Maritain contributed an article and wrote an introduction to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) *Human Rights: Comments and Interpretation* for the emerging human rights document that would eventually be called the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Human Rights held radically different views of what is human and what is right [...]” (§10). Maritain provided a link between human rights and natural rights: “The philosophical foundation of the Rights of man is Natural Law” (80). In *Man and the State*, Maritain makes it clear that the foundation of Natural Law is “there is a human nature [...] and] human nature is the same in all men [...] man is gifted with intelligence” (85). William Sweet explicitly positions Maritain’s concept of natural law in *Philosophical Theory and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*: “man is an existential being and not predetermined in some essential way” (114). Human rights rests in a concept of natural law (not natural rights) that no longer assumes a subject that stands outside of language, law or culture, which is seen as predetermined and passive. Instead, rights are based on natural law, understood as having “the power to determine [...] the ends” (86).

Whether the concern is over the term human rights or natural rights, the fact that the subject of rights requires conscious engagement means that rights were never “common sense.” Just as Maritain explains and MacDonald suggests in questioning, there is something about the human that prevents consensus and resists being encapsulated by any one discourse (or, for that matter, by a network of discourses or phrases). That said, the Shoah was the catalyst for devising an international law of ethics outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Interestingly, the terminology changed from natural rights vocabulary to human rights vocabulary in the wake of the Second World War. If there was any sense prior to this war that the human was sacred, the mass torture and annihilation fundamentally changed the concept of the human. Natural rights, according to Locke and others, is the right to life and self-

preservation. Lyotard theorizes that the SS, by eliminating individual names (serial numbers instead were used) and “the collective name (Jew),” completely divested life. “The deportee, according to this authority, cannot be the addressee of an order to die, because one would have to be capable of giving one’s life in order to carry out the order,” there was “nothing to kill” except death (§157). Prisoners’ bodies no longer resemble what we have come to recognize as human, and yet those bodies are not yet dust. However, the large-scale atrocities against humanity were not enough to ensure the seriousness that a call for human rights should have provoked. Johannes Morsink notes that “[i]n the late 1940s believers in human rights had to fight for intellectual legitimacy, a battle they finally won on account of the horrors perpetrated by the Nazi” (xi). As the facts of the crimes began to find their way into world consciousness, albeit after many years, the term human rights gained legitimacy, still not without disputes.

### **It’s Only Fiction!**

That the same publisher of his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, rejected James Baldwin’s following novel, *Giovanni’s Room*, is a well-known fact. His agent, Helen Strauss, even told the author that the latter novel “would ruin his reputation” (Weatherby, 119) and suggested that he “burn the manuscript” (ibid). These events point to the permeable boundary between context and text.<sup>3</sup> Baldwin’s novel was a text that, according to Douglas Field, exacerbated 1950s national “Cold War anxieties about race and homosexuality” (89). Baldwin’s first-person narrative fiction examines how identificatory categories such as race, sexuality, and class shape perceptions of the self

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<sup>3</sup> See Fern Marja Eckman’s biography *The Furious Passage of James Baldwin* for a description of Baldwin’s experience writing *Giovanni’s Room* and his response to publishers’ rejections.

and the body. At the same time that he explicitly challenged these boundaries, he also traversed national borders as an immigrant.<sup>4</sup> Evidently, Baldwin's fiction was too real for 1950s sensibilities. This is evident in one of the most notable early reviews of his work. In 1957, James W. Ivy wrote in an article entitled "Faerie Queens" for *The Crisis*, the official periodical of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), that the "scabrous subject of homosexual love...[and] frustration, despair, and death" that befall the characters are "comic rather than tragic."<sup>5</sup> Josep M. Armengol, a professor of Literary and Cultural Studies at the University of Barcelona, delineates the critical reception of Baldwin's text: "If many reviewers in the mainstream press described Baldwin's new novel as sexually deviant, African American critics saw it as racially deviant as well" (671). Baldwin was aware of "the national convulsion called McCarthyism" ("No Name in the Street" 370), which entailed Senator Joseph McCarthy's curious justification for targeting civil rights organizations and labor unions, as well as individuals suspected of being homosexual.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, Baldwin set out to overtly exasperate these 1950s prejudices. As is the case for all writers, literature offered Baldwin a place to cross borders and challenge the social, political, and

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<sup>4</sup> For a thorough discussion of Baldwin's racial and sexual border crossing, see Marlon Ross's "White Fantasies of Desire: Baldwin and the Racial Identities of Sexuality" in *James Baldwin Now*.

<sup>5</sup> *The Crisis*. 64, no. 2 (1957), p. 123. See also "Race: Passing as a Cold War Novel" in Douglas Field's *American Cold War Culture*, in which the author reexamines the novel "in relation to the Cold War" and suggests that it "reveals the ways that it probes, examines and critiques rigid post-war identity categories" (89). The attempt to censor Baldwin was not limited to publishers and critics: As Field also notes, the FBI compiled a dossier of "some 1,700 pages...[about Baldwin and] placed on the Security Index ('the list of 'dangerous individuals' who posed a threat to national security)" (90). Field writes, "Baldwin's FBI files testify, was also motivated and maintained by the twin domestic fears of racial integration and sexual deviance, which in turn quickly linked to communist activity" (90). See Baldwin's "The Devil Finds Work" in *Baldwin: Collected Essays* for an additional discussion on the policing effects of McCarthy's policies and a thorough account of Baldwin's "first encounter with the FBI" in 1945 (546).

<sup>6</sup> See John D'Emilio's *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, in which the author notes that the McCarthy's witch-hunts regarded the LGBT community as naturally subversive: "Even one 'sex pervert in a Government agency,' the committee warned, tends to have a corrosive influence upon his fellow employees" (42).

economic assumptions and practices of his time. More than any other genre, fiction—whether literature, film, or television—is constituted by a permissive opening through which appeals for justice and demands for rights are more easily articulated and received by others.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, documentaries and docu-dramas are more effective in disseminating stories and, they can thereby play a significant role in shaping public discourse and ultimately influencing public policies. However, because documentaries are beholden to the same accuracy requirements (if not more so) as written testimonials/memoirs, it is easy to understand the concern that journalist and documentary filmmaker, Nayntara Roy reviews in “Risky Business: A New Report on the Dangers of Doc-Making” that this genre of filmmakers shoulder almost all of the “financial, physical, and legal risks.”<sup>8</sup>

While Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* challenges conceptual categories of race, sexuality, and class, as well as the effects those categories have on the body, Samuel Beckett’s *The Unnamable* stages a textually disseminated embodiment through which he challenges the conceptual boundaries of the self and the other and produces an utterly inconsolable solitude. Beckett’s shifting and elusively named narrator attempts to define itself: “I’m in words, made of words, others’ words...” (386). The border crossing and bypasses that Samuel Beckett’s narrator enacts blocks any attempt to organize a

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<sup>7</sup> See Jacques Derrida’s *Acts of Literature* where he writes: “The space of literature... allows one to say everything...in every way” (36). Fiction often provides a space where injuries caused by state and non-state actors can be voiced.

<sup>8</sup> See also Patricia Aufderheide’s study entitled *Dangerous Documentaries: Reducing Risk when Telling Truth to Power*. It is a thorough review of the constant challenges and risks documentarians face. Some specific examples noted in the study include the “frequent detainment by Homeland Security and ICE” of documentarian Laura Poitras when she would cross the “U.S. border during productions, including her film about Edward Snowden’s release of classified documents, *Citizenfour*. Fredrik Gertten was handed a lawsuit by Dole Food Company after production on *Bananas!*, *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price* faced a million-dollar PR assault, and SeaWorld accused *Blackfish* of factual inaccuracy” Where does this quote begin?(5).



well mapped identity—especially as it concerns the self and its physical visage. The “I” referred to throughout the text is never the same “I.” Beckett writes, “I, say I. I seem to speak, it is not I, about me, it is not about me” (291). Later in the text, he emphasizes this point: “[O]n the subject of me properly so called, so far as I know I have received no information up to this date” (336). In *The Fiction of Samuel Beckett: Form and Effect*, H. Porter Abbott writes, “Beckett narrows his focus in *The Unnamable* to the speaker’s search for a self behind the self, that which pushes the words, for which as yet neither story nor image exists” (127). Like the narrator, readers are caught in a search for the self in a nearly infinite succession of selves that ultimately leads to what Jonathan Boulter calls in *Interpreting Narrative in the Novels of Samuel Beckett* a “radically decentered subject” (93). Readers sense that *The Unnamable* is an ethical exigency to tell, urged by the narrator’s desperate need for the impossible affirmation for presence. However, no interlocutor or other who can recognize the narrator’s calls and appeals is presented.

For Baldwin and Beckett, unsettling conceptual and embodied boundaries are also a kind of call for responsibility, justice, and political action. Baldwin’s use of the first person narrative in *Giovanni’s Room* asserts claims to human rights by exploring the often brutal consequences of discursive identity practices regarding race, sexuality, and class. In a 1984 interview with Jordon Elgrably for the *Paris Review*, Baldwin conceded, “I certainly could not possibly have—not at that point in my life—handled the other great weight, the ‘Negro problem.’ The sexual-moral light was a hard thing to deal with. I could not handle both propositions in the same book.” The absence is structured more as presence, however, as Robert Reid-Pharr points out in *Black Gay Man: Essays:*

“[T]he question of blackness, precisely because of its very apparent absence, screams out at the turn of every page” (125). Reid-Pharr continues, “Baldwin’s explication of Giovanni’s ghost-like nonpresence, his nonsubjectivity, parallels the absence of the black from Western notions of rationality and humanity, while at the same time it points to the possibility of escape from this same black-exclusive system of logic” (126). The autobiographical “I” is a position that Baldwin confesses in the interview with Elgrably “is the most terrifying view of all.” Baldwin takes the terrifying “I” to the next level and jumps on the slippery terrain where he morphs between the white protagonist, David, and the black author, Baldwin (Reid-Pharr, 126). Baldwin is not looking, however, to provide a detour around the dangerous terrain. Instead, by crossing conceptual boundaries and highlighting the discursive practices that enforce categorical claims on bodies that reinscribe perceptions of self, *Giovanni’s Room* becomes a complaint submitted on the author’s behalf—as well as on the behalf of individuals who have or will experience racial, homophobic, or economic violence. Although Baldwin might have considered submitting a formal complaint to what was then called the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (as of March 15, 2006 it is called the United Nations Human Rights Council) against the United States for violating his rights under nearly all of the Articles, such a complaint would have required a complex narrative web of overlapping chronological events, multiple kinds of human rights violations, and persistent repression through state sanctioned institutions and non-state actors such as commercial companies and corporations. I will return to the possibility of Baldwin’s complaint later in this chapter. It is nevertheless notable that as was the case in 1956 when *Giovanni’s Room* was published, Baldwin still today could not submit a complaint

against businesses and corporations. The Human Rights Council's complaint procedure only applies to violations of states.

Beckett's *The Unnamable* attests to the persistent sense that we are entangled in a world of non-recognition, in which all language is utterly unintelligible and thus, devoid of any hope, including what E. Ann Kaplan calls empathic sharing. This chapter is motivated by the question of whether the United Nations Human Rights Council, a recognized global authority dedicated to protecting human rights, would or could address crimes against marginalized individuals and groups for whom injuries have caused a radical sense of dispossession and loss of narrative making. In other words, how can a victim submit a Human Rights Council Complaint Procedure Form, if she is divested of the cognitive ability to narrate her injury? In other words, the horrors were so extreme that it shattered any possibility to articulate a simple sentence. In this case, this victim is also unable to find anyone to tell the crime to—no group or NGO that might file the complaint on her behalf in accordance with narrative guidelines. How does a victim seek redress or simply petition the Council for recognition of an injury, if she cannot reach across the border between self and other—an act required for communication to take place? To participate in the work of narrative making is to undertake political participation that traumatic events—and the psychic and physical effects of such events—challenge or attempt to foreclose.

The “I” of the first person narrative position has the potential to significantly shape and define collective local, national, and global struggles and movements by bringing language and discourse closer to readers—regardless of whether it is fiction or non-fiction. In “Conjunctions: Life Narratives in the Field of Human Rights,” for example,

Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith point out that personal storytelling “plays a central role in the formulation of new rights protections, as people come forward to tell their stories in the context of tribunals and national inquiries” (4). Schaffer and Smith offer examples of rights that are supplementary to those outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

Post-World War II struggles for national self-determination and equality for women, indigenous peoples, and minorities within nation-states led to the rise of local and transnational political movements and affiliations—movements for Black and Chicano civil rights, women’s rights, gay rights, workers’ rights, refugee rights, disability rights, and indigenous rights among them—all of which have created new contexts and motivations for pursuing personal protections under international law. In each instance, personal storytelling motivated the rights movements. These collective movements have gained momentum and clarified agendas for action through attachment to the goals of the Universal Declaration [of Human Rights] and attendant discourses, events and mechanisms.<sup>9</sup> (3)

Such personal narratives are presented as testimonial evidence of particular crimes. Testimonials are crucial to procedures for redress and corrective action against human rights violators. Witnesses come forward, sometimes with the help of a collective movement, professional human rights advocate, or publisher who carries specific commercial hopes, to testify to particular horrors. Personal accounts are important because they offer both cognitive access and empathic connectedness following terrifying violations and crimes.

Accounts are offered in a number of formal adjudicatory settings. For example, the Nuremberg Trials were designed to prosecute and punish the leadership of Nazi

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<sup>9</sup> Schaffer and Smith suggest that these movements (assisted in some part by first person fiction and non-fiction narratives) led to the 1969 adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), the 1981 adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the 1993 creation of the special agency for the International Labor Organization concerning Indigenous and Tribal Rights, and the 1993 Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People.

Germany for crimes against humanity. Those involved in the trials, including the witnesses, knew that the aim was to enforce retribution against those who perpetrated the crimes. Another tribunal format, however, is directed by what is commonly called a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Here, the purpose is to address some past injury through witness, victim, and perpetrator accounts with the expectation that impunity will lead to the truth and guard against historical revisionist attempts. Numerous commissions have been assembled. An early use of this format was initiated by the newly elected President of Argentina, Raul Alfonsin, who formed a commission in 1983 called, Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas (CONADEP), National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (NCDP) to investigate the disappearance of thousands during the military dictatorship between 1976 and 1983. The Commission, nor did its eventual report “Nunca Más,” have the authority to determine or enforce punishment for the crimes committed during this time. The hope was to obtain an accurate testament of the events. Less than a decade later in 1990, President Patricio Aylwin of Chile established a tribunal called the National Commission for Truth and Reconciliation (also known as, the Rettig Commission, after Raúl Rettig who chaired the commission). Here, they sought witness and victim accounts of crimes under the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet. Encouraged by the Chilean Commission, the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission was formed in 1995 to restore dignity to victims and perhaps begin a national healing process. In this case, the Commission had the authority to grant amnesty to those who committed the crimes. It is understandable why many might object to the implementation of a TRC, especially one that grants amnesty to those who commit gross crimes against others. However, the

restorative justice approach behind some Commissions offers a narrative space that better captures the subtleties of overlapping and yet nuanced individual horrors. In fact, these types of juridical hearings offer the possibility for greater flexibility to different styles of telling such as non-linear narrative, poetry, and improvisation, among others.

Another benefit of a TRC is that it allows for stories from members of targeted groups that are subject to constant harassment and humiliation to share injuries created by persistent threats. For example, in the United States, certain communities are persistently subject to discriminatory practices by police such as routine traffic stops, police patrol patterns that function as a constant reminder that a community is under surveillance, “stop and frisk” pat-downs, and extrajudicial killings, to name a few. The ubiquity of these human rights violations and the testimonies shared among community members affects each member, as Amnesty International reminds us in the study “Threat and Humiliation: Racial Profiling, Domestic Security and Human Rights in the United States:” in “virtually every sphere of their daily lives and often has an impact that goes beyond” (xiv) the particular incidents. Indeed, it also affects those in subjected communities who have not (yet) been directly approached and still share in the injury caused by police practices. That is, the persistent threat to a community is a shared violation against all members’ bodies. In short, it is a collective injury. And a TRC format can better accommodate such experiences and witnessing.

At the same time, TRCs’ are bound by their juridical duties to provide accurate narrative; therefore, when a testimony, or any form of life-writing is scrutinized for inaccuracies, it will inevitably fail examination or cross-examination. While TRCs are a more open hearing, they still, nevertheless, discourage unconventional forms of bearing

witness (i.e. poetry, song, and art). In *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*, Leigh Gilmore notes an assumption that grounds the expectations of testimonial discourse: “[A]utobiography draws its authority less from its resemblance to real life than from its proximity to discourse of truth and identity, less from reference or mimesis than from the cultural power of truth telling” (3). One who has suffered traumatic human rights abuses is thus asked to subject the self to the pain of bearing witness. Subsequently—and often due to political motivation—the witness’s own account is often called into question, and she is charged with presenting inaccuracies. The charge that a witness fictionalizes and, therefore, deliberately misleads, misses the point that in the textual gap between non-fiction and fiction; she may present a more accurate portrayal of her abuses.

The personal threat to her integrity and potential psychological pain of being called a liar may lead the witness to choose other modes to tell her story (Gilmore, 5). Fiction is a significant discursive practice for bearing witness to trauma caused by human rights abuses. In *Inventing Human Rights*, Lynn Hunt notes that the eighteenth century was a culminating period for human rights discourse: Cicero, Hobbes, Locke, Kant, Rousseau, and Voltaire each inspired the journey that led to such seminal national documents as the United States Declaration of Independence (1776), the French National Assembly’s Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizens (1789), and, more recently, the United Nations Universal Declaration on Human Rights (1948) (15-19). According to Hunt, the rise of the novel was also crucial to the rise and evolution of human rights discourse. With the advent of the printing press, the eighteenth century novel made literary texts accessible to more people. Readers could identify with the

narrative's characters and thus, according to Hunt, become more empathetic to the struggles of their fellow denizens. Hunt argues that the novel created new frameworks and attitudes about the self and body. Hunt suggests that the popularity of epistolary novels like Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *The Solitary Walker* and *Julie* was due to the fact that these works opened empathic psychological transmittal links between readers and the works' protagonists. This took place during an increasingly secular period when novels, Hunt suggests, "taught their readers nothing less than a new psychology and in the process laid the foundations for a new social and political order" (39). Hunt continues, "Novels made the point that all people are fundamentally similar because of their inner feelings...In this way, reading novels created a sense of equality and empathy through their passionate involvement in the narrative" (ibid.). Hunt further elaborates that the "claim of self-evidence, crucial to human rights even now...gives rise to a paradox: if equality of rights is so self-evident then why did this assertion have to be made and why was it made in certain times and places? How can human rights be universal, if they are not universally recognized" (19-20)? In this example, the recognition of mutual dependency and human dignity continues to be the backdrop. The fact remains, however, that the many organized programs designed to create a more humane world by establishing national and international human rights laws have had limited success in securing dignified lives for most.

Before the eighteenth century, the vague notion of human rights was generally used to distinguish humans from animals. The term eventually evolved to refer to "politically relevant rights such as freedom of speech or the right to participate in



politics” (Hunt, 23). Furthermore, the concept of “selfhood depended on qualities of ‘interiority” (48). Novels—and especially the epistolary novel—allowed readers a glimpse into the thoughts and feelings of characters. The affect of the epistolary novel is due not to its structure of written letters, but rather to the first-person narrative form. The first person point of view is particularly effective as a rhetorical technique to draw readers into a character's world. As readers begin to “experience” the inner lives of characters who are separate from them, they begin to internalize those characters. The transmission of the *other* found in the texts, regardless of whether the other is a fictional character or real person, is essentially the discursive structure of a self, presumably human. This leads to the notion that human rights are “self-evident.” Hunt argues that this narrative technique that positioned characters and/or the writer as an obvious human being, combined with an increase in literacy in the eighteenth century, partially informs current discursive and legal formulations of human rights.

In a lecture entitled, “Reflections on the Origins of Human Rights”, Talal Asad critiques Hunt’s argument and asks, “Why [is it that] the public infliction of pain and death didn’t introduce empathy in previous times?” This cautionary question reminds readers that empathy cannot be the exclusionary approach to rights. And indeed, Hunt also acknowledges the limitations of empathy and the notion of “self-evident.” Indeed, several historical factors influenced changes in perceptions of the human and the rise of human rights discourse—including, as Asad notes, changes to laws of proof.<sup>10</sup> Asad makes a crucial point when he cautions against overstating that human rights are based on a sense of solidarity. Asad writes that there is an “important room for rights

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<sup>10</sup> Talal Asad references John H. Langbein’s argument in *Torture and Law of Proof*: in the seventeenth century, criminal procedure no longer depended on confessions, which were often obtained through torture.

regardless of solidarity [and] that certain things are rights due to certain principles and certain criteria, regardless of how I feel or regardless of how you feel” at any given moment. Asad’s concern suggests a tendency of states, populations, groups, and individuals to deny certain humans basic rights—especially to those with whom they struggle to empathize. This is a concern shared by Hunt. Obviously an impasse exists between both thinkers; Hunt, for example focuses on empathy and identification while Asad prefers to critique human rights on the basis of dis-identification. Nevertheless, both positions are not as irresolvable as it may first appear. Is it possible to identify with the unidentifiable? Is it possible, then, to have empathy for those whose experiences and practices are utterly unrecognizable?

On the one hand, the novel can function as a kind of call to action that inspires substitution where readers occupy the imaginary emotive space of a novel’s characters and experiences.<sup>11</sup> In this space, readers imagine themselves in the character’s experiences; in effect, displacing readers’ selves for the fictional character’s *other*. The transfer exposes at least two compelling situations: first, the influence that fiction has in establishing identity and the self and second, the necessity of the other’s (imaginary or not) presence in producing the self in the first place. In fact, the continual refiguring of one’s self and identity is tethered to the constant engagement with the other. But this constant engagement does not come easily. The persistent reconstruction of the self is also paradoxically the loss of the other and the loss of the other in the self.<sup>12</sup> This, then,

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<sup>11</sup> See Karla McLaren’s *The Art of Empathy: A Complete Guide to Life’s Most Essential Skills* for a more recent root of the term empathy where she notes Robert Vischer’s use of *einfühlung* in his 1873 dissertation entitled, *On the Optical Sense of Form: A Contribution to Aesthetics* to “describe both our capacity to enter into a piece of art or literature of art (or any object) with meaning and emotion” (22) This was later translated into English as “empathy” by psychologist Edward Titchener in *Lectures on the Experimental Psychology of Thought-Processes* (1909).

<sup>12</sup> See Diana Fuss’s *Identification Papers* where she describes the process of identification as that which

may be what allows for the other, the other I never met and never will, to affect me. It is this identificatory process that eventually yields the transitory nature of empathy. And yet it might be because of the transient nature of empathy that there is a drive to narrate in the first place. Empathy requires some shared principle, some kind of standard that is recognizable. But shared principle, thinking back to Asad, is contingent on empathy. Together, Hunt and Asad's conflicting positions allow us the possibility to acknowledge the suffering of those whom we will never meet. We move, then, simultaneously in the impasse between rights through empathy, and rights through principle.

As readers absorb Baldwin's novel *Giovanni's Room*, they too are tossed around in the space between self and the otherness of the characters. Readers occupy the novel's situation formed by the conditions of sexual exploitation, racism, economic violence, and homophobia. If a call for justice is said to come from Baldwin's novel, then the call first requires that readers offer up the self and enter the other in order to allow for the other to enter the self. What makes this call even potentially more radical, however, is the very subtle way that it pushes readers to consider a very basic question regarding the stability and assuredness in the signifier, "human." Baldwin's novel—much like many fictional accounts of collective traumas—unintentionally exposes a kind of general frenzy regarding referentiality. That is, victims seek to restore the *sense* of belonging to the identity called human. But the human identity, as is all identity, is something before and permanently elusive to the self. Nearly every character, for

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"operates typically as a compromise formation or type of crisis management. The ego patrols the borders of identity by means of policing mechanism of its own: identification. Those objects that cannot be kept out are often introjected, and those objects that have been introjected are frequently expelled [...] Identification thus makes identity possible, but also places it at constant risk: multiple identifications within the same subject can compete with each other, producing further conflicts to be managed; identifications that once appeared permanent or unassailable can be quickly dislodged by the newest object attachment...The history of the subject is therefore one of perpetual psychical conflict and of continual change under pressure" (49).

example, in *Giovanni's Room* represents otherness, which is formed through the processes of differentiation from what is perceived as normal. The frenzy is the result, not of those who represent the margins, or of those who attempt to read the unreadability and inaccessibility of the referent for the human. Rather, the novel offers an identificatory process that opens readers to the other. It also simultaneously displaces the self and maintains the “shared” principle required to incite empathy, but which is not contingent on empathy. It stands to reason that to identify as human would require first and foremost other humans. But the relation between self and other is a relation of distance and one of utter aloneness in the mind—in both Levinas’s and Beckett’s sense.

Like any other identity, the human emerges from competing and multiple discursive practices that render any certainty over its meaning (at best) naïve and (at worst) dangerous. For these reasons, human rights, as it is currently defined and practiced requires a reexamination, especially given that much of the redress procedure rests on the assumption that the human is an animal “endowed with reason.” The precise meaning of “reason” remains unclear, however. But certainly, traumatic experiences can derail any attempt to approach something that might resemble reason or the formation of a logically structured, sequential narrative.

This chapter is concerned with human rights grievances and petition procedures, as outlined by the United Nations Human Rights Council, and their failure to recognize and address the complaints of victims who do not have the language required to bear witness to human rights violations. I will show below how this relates to Baldwin and Beckett’s texts. This limitation effectively forecloses unconventional calls and the

redress that such calls demand. The United Nations Human Rights Council's procedures for redress carry the unintended consequence of (at best) discouraging victims from coming forward and (at worst) preventing victims from pursuing complaints of human rights abuses. This is due, in part, to the fact that the mechanisms in place assume a fixed notion of the human—a human that has already come. As is noted in the “Human Rights Council Complaint Procedure Form,” the human must objectively recount, in a coherent sequential narrative “the facts and circumstances of the alleged violations including dates, places and alleged perpetrators and how...the facts and circumstances described violate...rights” (p. 2). The discourse that shapes the Complaint Procedure Form produces, in effect, a differend. The form essentially authorizes a limited selection of possible ways to communicate a wrong, therefore, subjecting victims of additional wrongs. Unable to turn to the organization created to address wrongs and potentially collect damages, the victim has no other recourse. Suspended between the no longer and the not yet, the victim might offer new kinds of phrases that might allow the victim to articulate the crime. There are countless moments of possibility—public acts of protests (see Black Lives Matter), creating or interpreting art, writing or reading fiction, etc. Trauma has an uncanny way of producing unexpected narratives and presenting new and novel modes for sharing. Trauma opens a space for the divergent ways a call for justice might be resounded.

These are critical factors informing human rights for the “human to come.” The contestation fundamental to the conceptual definition of the human, combined with the contestations fundamental to the boundaries of bodies, require that human rights are always understood as political struggle. Baldwin’s novel acts as a political act in the

struggle for rights. *Giovanni's Room* also functions as a national and international grievance against state sanctioned institutional abuses and injuries and non-state actors that use violence through neo-liberalism.

### **The Aporetics of Closed Borders**

In addition to challenging the boundaries of respectability and the policing authority of publishers, agents, and critics, Baldwin's work traverses a number of other boundaries. This is signified in the opening paragraph: Baldwin suggests to his readers that the intersection of race, gender, sexuality, and class complicates calls for redress: "I watch my reflection in the darkening gleam of the window pane. My reflection is tall, perhaps rather like an arrow, my blond hair gleams. My face is like a face you have seen many times. My ancestors conquered a continent, pushing across death-laden plains, until they came to an ocean which faced away from Europe into a darker past" (221). It is easy to overlook the numerous signposts that signal to readers the conceptual frameworks of class, race, gender, sexuality, and national identity in Baldwin's text. After all, these concepts are embroidered in the imagination and, unbeknownst to most, shape our perceptions and experiences of the self and its body—of others and the world.

The first of the many boundaries crossed is, as Reid-Pharr writes, "his use of the autobiographical 'I.'" Reid-Pharr adds that Baldwin, "[b]oth conflates his identity with that of his protagonist, David, and signals us that what he is interested in here is the subject of identity formation. David's consideration of his reflection demonstrates, moreover, Baldwin's fascination with the relationship of the Object to the Inverse, the One to the

Other” (126). In fact, the question of who occupies the place of the “I” in *Giovanni’s Room* indicates that the “I,” and the self it represents, are subject to multiple border crossings. For Baldwin, the “I” is a placeholder for one’s self and the self of an other. In other words, the “I” that the self assumes is the “I” of the other. It is also a place where fiction and non-fiction intentionally and unintentionally collaborate. Through the main character, David, an American expatriate in France who studies his reflection, Baldwin informs the reader that the “I” is as much an other as it is the self. It is an object to be examined to reveal its parts. As so many have already noted, the object to be analyzed is a disseminated, unremarkable, white body with “blond hair”—the image in western imagination of the quintessential human. Baldwin, a black gay man, crosses over the “color line” and begins to bear witness to the multilayered frameworks that complicate overt discussions about insidious racism, homophobia, and economic violence and their corrupting effects on those they subjugate.<sup>13</sup> The learned self-hatred that is shared through the characters of David, Giovanni, and Joey, all of whom are eventually abandoned, illustrates the clever effect of the outside world turning against the self:

[T]he desire which was rising in me seemed monstrous. But, above all, I was suddenly afraid. It was born in on me: *But Joey is a boy...*The power and the promise and the mystery of that body made me suddenly afraid. That body suddenly seemed the black opening of a cavern in which I would be tortured till madness came. (226)

The terrifying monster is born, not with him, but *in* him. The power is terrifying because the monster—the newly discovered desire for the same sex—is unbound and unintelligible as its presence begins to emerge.

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<sup>13</sup> See also Mae G. Henderson’s “James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room*: Expatriation, ‘Racial Drag,’ and Homosexual Panic.” In it, Henderson explores the literary strategies that Baldwin undertook to articulate “the role of witnessing and suffering as profoundly constitutive of identity” (313).

Some part of the self must survive, because David now speaks of it. A monstrosity may render others permanently mute on the subject, however. The weight of that newness, without a life-affirming discursive framework to interpret it, may lead to madness. Baldwin attempts to form a discourse, but only after having created some distance between himself and the subject matter. He must weave real-life experience in and through fiction, creating language and scenes that are accessible to others. In fiction, he has more narrative flexibility to identify the intersection of race, sexuality, and class.

On the one hand, the lack of a positive discursive framework to position queer identities contributes to the radical destabilization of one's sense of self. On the other hand, once the experience is no longer new and the full force of homophobia bears down, the violence—and internalization of that violence, which is complicated by economic deprivation—leads Giovanni to say, “I want to escape...this dirty world, this dirty body” (238). Giovanni grievously shares with David, “you could have been fair to me by despising me a little less” (265). David responds, “a lot of your life *is* despicable” (265). This leads to a discussion on Giovanni's sex work: “You think...that my life is shameful because my encounters are. And they are. But you should ask yourself *why* they are” (266). Entangled in these scenes are multiple registers of violence: Baldwin depicts homophobia, Giovanni's economic exploitation, and racism. He presents the internalization of these hatreds and the alienation that it produces.

*Giovanni's Room* was published during the Montgomery bus boycott. In November 1956, the United States Supreme Court acknowledged that segregation on public transit was unconstitutional. Prior to this, the Supreme Court's 1954 ruling in



*Brown v. Board of Education* declared that segregated schools were “inherently unequal.” The ruling was vehemently challenged for years, however. Baldwin’s text must be read in the context of the struggles to which he was responding. It is also a text that is relevant and inspires empathy today. In this way, Baldwin’s text also crosses time. As a literary work, *Giovanni’s Room’s* continues to be relevant, even if the frameworks and discursive practices have changed—for better and for worse. Today, the story could be read in the context of the November 2014 Supreme Court ruling in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, which declared that denying same sex couples the right to marry is unconstitutional. Of course, some continue to challenge the declaration—usually on religious grounds. Interestingly, however, the Supreme Court has never heard a case in which economic violence is considered to be a violation of constitutional rights. In addition to Baldwin’s text, other popular stories and films (film adaptations), to be sure, have helped shift public opinion and led to the eventual recognitions that same-sex relationships are constitutionally protected—i.e. Moisés Kaufman’s play, *The Laramie Project* and Annie Proulx’s 1997 short story “Brokeback Mountain.” These notable cases demonstrate literature’s contribution to human rights discourse and how reframing the subject of violence and abuse can open up new ways to seek redress.

In addition to the border crossings mentioned thus far, Baldwin’s text presents another, as David reflects on his former lover, Giovanni, and his impending execution. Giovanni will be executed sometime before morning for the murder of Guillaume, a wealthy, older gay man who owned the bar where Giovanni worked. The line between life and death will soon be crossed again. Through the character of David, Baldwin becomes a voyeur examining the bodies of others. David’s reflection in the window,

which lacks corporeality, is the impetus for the search of other bodies—specifically, for the embodied other. Although the reflection is, by nature, not material, David nevertheless situates himself before an object that casts back his image, over which he commences a reflection—a mental casting back. When he thinks back, he does so while staring at a semitransparent self: “And yet—when one begins to search for the crucial, the definitive moment, the moment which changed all others, one finds oneself pressing, in great pain, through a maze of false signals and abrupt locking doors. Of course, it is somewhere before me, locked in that reflection” (227). It is not so much locked in David’s reflection as it is locked in others: Giovanni and Joey. Crossing the border between love and desire comes at a cost. David will only ever have a memory of Joey—a history that will haunt and disturb him. Joey’s position is like that of a ghost: it is both fundamental to David’s past and himself. At the same time, David will attempt to do some ghostbusting by denying and repressing his experience, but inevitably through those same mechanisms of repression, the ghost will continue to haunt. Giovanni also functions like a ghost, but in a different way: he is scheduled to meet the guillotine by daybreak in a state sanctioned punishment for murdering Guillaume. While imagining the fate of Giovanni and his immediate but temporary circumstance in the prison cell awaiting execution, David, who ultimately denied Giovanni love, says: “I might call—as Giovanni, at this moment, lying in his cell, might call. But no one will hear. I might ask to be forgiven—if I could name and face my crime, if there were anything, or anybody, anywhere, with the power to forgive” (311). Giovanni exposed David’s angst. Although David claims to be leaving Giovanni for Hella, Giovanni reminds David: “You are not leaving me for a *woman*. If you were really in love with this little girl, you would not have

had to be so cruel to me” (336). David left Giovanni “for some other reason” (336). Giovanni knew what David was only coming around to learning; David’s desire for Giovanni frightened David: “his body was burned into my mind, into my dreams... the war in my body was dragging me down” (339). To stop the war between himself and his desire for Giovanni is to sacrifice Giovanni, to annihilate the *other* in David. David is responsible for conjuring the blades that will cut and cause Guillaume’s eventual death. This is reason why, in the end, David desires to drink “across that criminal ocean” (257). David is not only responsible for the death of his lover, but he is also the inheritor of a nation that abducted and transported people from Africa across the Atlantic Ocean to force them into slavery; thus, he is implicated in the centuries of slavery and related crimes. The ocean connects him to another death intertwined with race, sexuality, and class. He is partially responsible—because he abandoned his economically deprived Italian lover.

Baldwin’s David crossed national borders, borders of time, and the line between life and death. David confessed to readily ignoring a potential call by Giovanni from within his prison cell to the other cell, Giovanni’s room, which David occupied. In a lecture entitled “The Human Condition: Vulnerability and Survivability,” presented at the Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona, Judith Butler states,

The boundary of the body is always under negotiation. And that negotiation takes place through specific kinds of norms. We have to think whether the body is rightly defined as a bounded kind of entity. What makes a body discrete is not an established morphology, as if we could identify certain bodily shapes or forms as paradigmatically human bodies. In fact, I am not at all sure we can identify a human form nor do I think we need to...there is no singular human form.

In a related discussion, Butler writes in *Frames of War*: “In other words, the body is exposed to socially and politically articulated forces as well as to claims of sociality—including language, work and desire...To say that life is precarious is to say that the possibility of being sustained relies fundamentally on social and political conditions, and not only on a postulated internal drive to live” (3, 22). The very idea of borders, or boundaries, as Butler argues, is partially determined by frames or networks of frames that produce specific interpretations and experiences. For David, same-sex desire undermined the expectation of a heteronormative life. In a letter to his father, David writes about a secret: “I found a girl and I want to marry her” (321). The “secret” defies readers’ expectations. If his confessed desire to marry is a secret, then it is a widely predictable and, conversely, not much of a secret. Readers might have instead anticipated the letter to confess a love for Giovanni. It is also true that readers know the real secret: that David is in love with Giovanni. For David, the body and its boundaries are always already contested sites where ideologies and narratives harass, intimidate, and persecute, but also caress, support, and comfort in incessant attempts to fix meaning. This is in part Baldwin’s dilemma: Some frameworks attempt to describe or define not only desire, but also the meaning of the human. While everyone should fall somewhere in the spectrum—or rather, hierarchy—of human worth, some humans are absent. Who gets counted as human and what is counted as human? Who decides and based on what entitlement?

Butler’s suspicion that it may be impossible to identify a human form is significant here: often, when all other definitions of the human fall short, people rush to the comfortable fallback position and point and declare, “There is a human.” Presumably, I

define another as human because the other “looks” similar to “me,” and “I” am, of course, “human.” Implicit in the anxiety over defining what is a human is a tension between the ontological and epistemological status of “me,” “you,” and “us.” Butler reminds readers that the ontological quest to determine the nature of “our” being is fundamentally an epistemological journey that begins and ends in epistemological frameworks. Epistemological frameworks emerge in fields of study, which seek to discipline, regulate, and correct ways of interpreting the world. The concept of the human is no different: it too, is disciplined and regulated. Indeed, the question over the meaning of human is contingent upon discursive practices and differing epistemological contexts. Furthermore, the frameworks from which we come to understand the human have a significant influence over the kinds of laws created and societal and state practices affecting people.

For example, constructions of borders and walls designed to keep people out and others in is directly related to discursive practices and conceptual frameworks to which a state or society adheres. Boundaries, however, whether imaginary lines or real walls separating states or nations, are assumed to be impermeable. But boundaries are frequently crossed. In *Giovanni's Room*, Baldwin says of the room, “This was not the garbage of Paris, which would have been anonymous: this was Giovanni’s regurgitated life” (290). In this case, multiple boundaries are crossed. The many items that clutter the room, in fact, say something about Giovanni—the newspapers he reads, the wine he drinks, the food he enjoys or lets spoil, the music he listens to, the instrument he plays, among others—reflect the particularities of a person. In some sense, then, it appears that pieces of his identity have been thrown up all over the room. It is not clear,

however, whether Paris is not in some way represented in that room. In other words, the once purchased merchandise, of which he consumed in some fashion, existed in the shops or streets of Paris. The life represented in that messy room was purchased, at least in part, in Paris. The identity entangled in the life of Giovanni was to be bought outside himself in Paris. Of course, the inverse, and equally true, is that the impulse to ascertain those specific items that serve to represent Giovanni is associated with personality traits inherent to him. The outside world both offered expression, but too, limited how the identity of his self would be expressed. Other borders at work in making a modern Western self, namely, commercialism and nationalism. The boundary between the self and the outside world (including items and ideologies), and the self and the other are so porous as to make distinguishing them impossible. Therefore, the items scattered around Giovanni's room represents both the garbage of Paris regurgitated and the sold and bought for parts of a self-identity.

The concept of boundary and the actual walls that constitute the room morph and become indistinguishable. Thus, it becomes impossible to discern real experience from imagined experience.<sup>14</sup> In other words, Giovanni's psychic life, partly unknown to Giovanni—and certainly to David—encapsulates the culture, laws, discursive practices, meaning making networks, and narrative frameworks that act on the unconscious self and body. What Giovanni regurgitated was the anonymous exterior world made interior. The illusory belief in the impassability of boundaries hides the passages and access

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<sup>14</sup> See Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* for an argument on the nation as an imagined political community. Although Anderson is speaking strictly on the construction of national identity and nationalism, the concept can be expanded to understand identity more generally. Just as the notion of the nation requires conceptual frameworks and specific language that are adopted by its users, so too do other identities require language and frameworks. In both cases, language and frameworks are often appropriated and translated into a kind of shared experience.

points that are constitutive of any border. The denial of its permeability makes the boundary more permeable. The seemingly hidden and contained room—and the frightening disorder that decorates it—is, in fact, described through a framework and reflection on the intersection of imposing subjugations. Various borders and boundaries are constructed by and through a complex network of political, social, and economic discursive frameworks, as well as psychic functions.

Like his characters David and Giovanni, Baldwin migrated to France. Borders and border crossings are sometimes instigated by warring factions—between countries, armed gangs, and militias, as well as families, friends, and neighbors. At the same time, border crossing is an act intended also to preserve life and, thus, may be required for survival. Refugees escape war or migrants flee armed gangs involved in complicated drug wars in order to acquire their basic needs. Individuals seek a new identity or safe shelter from family violence. For Baldwin, moving to France offered safety and shelter from racial and homophobic violence in the United States. In *Giovanni's Room*, the characters also seek a new identity that, perhaps, reflects Baldwin's own quest.

Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* represents a testimonial fiction that could function as a grievance against racial and homophobic crimes and economic violence in America. According to Tardu in *United Nations Response to Gross Violations of Human Rights: The 1503 Procedure*, even the United Nations Commission on Human Rights lacked a meaningful complaint procedure between 1945 and 1970 (559).<sup>15</sup> If Baldwin would have

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<sup>15</sup> In the 1960s, in response to emerging low and lower-middle income countries and non-democratic states, the Commission created a number of "human rights treaty bodies" made up of independent experts. They included the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (CCPR); Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR); and Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD). Tardu writes: "In a further development, debates initiated in 1965 at the request of the United Nations Special Committee on Decolonization led to the adoption, by small majorities, of ECOSOC resolution 1235 of June 6, 1967 and 1503 of May 27, 1970" (560). Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) is one

submitted a complaint in the 1950s to the Commission on Human Rights, he would not have been treated as a formal complainant and his case would not have been investigated on its own grounds. The Commission would have lacked the mechanisms to address the complex grievance Baldwin outlines through the fictional account. Even today, the Human Rights Council and its treaty bodies could not effectively address Baldwin's concerns, in part because it lacks any meaningful redressal and preventive measures, but mostly because Baldwin is attesting to a particular gestalt of social experience.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, reason as a noun is "the mental faculty which is used in adapting thought or action to some end; the guiding principle of the human mind in the process of thinking." As a verb, reason is to "think in a connected or logical manner." Reason is not only a characteristic that humans are said to possess, but also a kind of action humans perform. When Universal Declaration of Human Rights describes the human as that which is endowed with reason, the assumption is that shared conclusions will be drawn from facts and together with the ability to elucidate through logical order. Basically, reason embodies certain narrative expectations that is both something that the human possesses and an act with consequences. If reason is the ability to distinguish humans from other animals, then this conceptual framework already creates a hierarchy. Once the notion of "hierarchy" is introduced into the framework, it disseminates throughout human rights thought and applications. In other words, it is through this framework that distinctions of worth among humans are already justified based by the founding principle that humans reason. Therefore, the principles

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of the six main organs of the United Nations (Art. 7, Charter of the UN) under which it houses, among other committees, the Human Rights Council (the name was changed from "Commission on Human Rights" to "Human Rights Council" in 2006).



laid out in human rights discourse are undermined through certain assumptions behind the language of human rights. For example, Articles 1 and 2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights assert that humans are free, equal, and “endowed with reason” and, as such, “entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinions, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.” But the act of reasoning obviously requires the ability to discern and make decisions. Decision-making requires prioritizing or selecting one possibility among many and, eventually, excluding all other possibilities. Reasoning, then, is an act that necessarily discriminates and marginalizes. The point here is not to disavow reason or discourage its use, but rather suggest that claiming it to be a criterion for the concept of the human forecloses the human identity for many people and to the world in general. Not to mention, defining reason and then arrogantly declaring that this is what we are presumes a kind of superiority.

Reasoning should not be conflated with other harmful acts of discrimination or painful exclusion, but grievance procedures and mechanisms that require it unintentionally prevent many forms of bearing witness. In *Giovanni's Room*, readers are introduced to David, the protagonist, a white, gay, middle-class American who is staring at his reflection in the window, while reflecting on the events that brought him to the night before his lover's execution. David begins the story meditating on a number of regrets. First he laments over rejecting an earlier lover, Joey. David could not believe how much he enjoyed the excruciating delight in making love to Joey precisely because, “*Joey is a boy*” (226). He describes Joey's body as appearing to be the “black opening

of a cavern” (ibid). And just a few lines down, David somehow finds that cavern in his mind: “A cavern opened in my mind, black, full of rumor, suggestion, of half-heard, half-forgotten, half-understood stories, full of dirty words. I thought I saw my future in that cavern. I was afraid” (ibid). The overwhelming joy they gave each other that night was blunted by David’s very present, but unarticulated fear over it, which culminated in a “decision” (ibid). David confesses that he once prided himself on his “ability to make a decision” and then having the will-power to follow through with it (233). And in reflecting on how it is he arrived at the night of Giovanni’s, his recent lover’s, execution, David makes this observation:

People who believe that they are strong-willed and the masters of their destiny can only continue to believe this by becoming specialist in self-deception. Their decisions are not really decisions at all—a real decision makes one humble, one knows that it is at the mercy of more things than can be named—but elaborate systems of evasion, of illusion, designed to make themselves and the world appear to be what they and the world are not. (235)

What David once thought of as rational and reasoned responses to his experiences with Joey and Giovanni, are now understood as self-deluded weaknesses. David recognizes that in his response to Giovanni’s desperate pleas for reciprocated love, he attempted to deceive himself into believing that his leaving was provoked by Giovanni and took the opportunity during an argument with him to say: “I feel nothing now, nothing. I want to get out of this room, I want to get away from you, I want to end this terrible scene” (337). Instead, it was David himself that from whom David was trying to escape. David was no longer yelling back at Giovanni, but at himself and the sounds of his own frustration and betrayal. Consequently, Giovanni, who is deprived of his love, is left destitute and sexually assaulted by a former employer who reacts to the relentless violence by

murdering the wealthy and well-known perpetrator. He is now on death row and waiting his imminent beheading.

Consider the international standard-bearer for human rights, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights' (OHCHR), claim in the Complaint Procedure Fact Sheet:

It is through *individual* complaints that human rights are given concrete meaning. In the adjudication of *individual cases*, international norms that may otherwise seem general and abstract are put into practical effect. When applied to a *person's real-life situation*, the standards contained in the international human rights treaties find their most direct application [my italics]. ("Introduction to Fact Sheet," para. 2)

The Fact Sheet continues to outline the required information for an effective complaint:

Claim should be in writing and signed. It should provide basic personal information—your name, nationality, and date of birth—and specify the State party against which your complaint is directed. You should set out, in chronological order, all facts on which your claim is based...You should also detail the steps you have taken to exhaust the remedies available in your country." (para. 10-11)

In addition to the fact that the grievance must be written in a sequential linear narrative, it must also reflect the "real-life situation" of an "individual." In real life, however, people within traumatized communities often share and appropriate stories of repetitive and sustained violence. In doing so, the collective trauma is a personal/individual trauma. Therefore, it is often impossible to distinguish between harms against an individual and harms against the collective of which that individual is a member.<sup>16</sup> Today, for example, Black Lives Matter as well as the recent Moral Monday movement, Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street and the anti-austerity movements in Spain called Movimiento 15-M and

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<sup>16</sup> In "The Most We Can Hope For: Human Rights and the Politics of Fatalism," Wendy Brown responds to Michael Ignatieff's defense of a human rights program justified by and in service to economic liberalism. In Brown's response, a distinction is made between human rights as an individual right and human rights as a collective right.

Indignados, are collectively responding to the ongoing confluence of neo-liberalism and the pervasive state and corporate violence conducted in its name.<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, the grievance mechanisms of the United Nations Human Rights Council do not offer a procedure that accounts for the collective “real-life situations” or rather, the real-life violence and harassment some groups experience daily. For this reason, those in Baldwin’s position in the 1950s, or those who today and tomorrow are subjected to any number of forms of oppressive policies and violent acts by both state and non-state actor (including businesses and corporations), require a new thinking about the human that does not rely on the Cartesian notion of the human for a human rights project.

### **The Exhausted: Beckett’s *The Unnamable***

While James Baldwin’s novel offers a complex challenge to the Human Rights Council’s Complaint Procedure, Beckett’s *The Unnamable* presents a blunt force blow to those very same grievance mechanisms. In refusing to use any form of a recognizable narrative structure, Beckett provides an example of a kind of witness who could not follow even the basic requirements of the Human Rights Council’s Complaint Procedure. Beckett’s text lacks time and place and is absent of plot and a discernable protagonist. *The Unnamable* functions on multiple levels. First, it undertakes the discourse of fiction written by a particular writer named Samuel Beckett. Second,

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<sup>17</sup> See the official website [www.blacklivesmatter.org](http://www.blacklivesmatter.org) for a comprehensive guide to the movement’s principles which includes: “Black Lives Matter affirms the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, black-undocumented folks, folks with records, women and all Black lives along the gender spectrum. It centers those that have been marginalized within Black liberation movements. It is a tactic to (re)build the Black liberation movement.” Find also the interconnection of movements on the Moral Monday movement’s homepage at [www.moralmondayga.com](http://www.moralmondayga.com). Initially, this movement began in response to state reduction in Medicaid, the implementation of Stand Your Ground laws, and laws that undermine voting rights, and today the movement includes protesting and building coalitions in a shared campaign to change the “regressive immoral and hateful policy directed toward communities of color, the poor, the sick, our children, immigrants, women, voting rights, the environment, and religious minorities” as well as reducing excess “materialism and militarism.”

Beckett's text is itself situated in a historical context that attempts to both consciously and unconsciously respond to past events to be read in the future present. An amalgam of the first and second levels, the third transforms Beckett's text into a victim, perhaps of its readers who try to force a discourse on it. Readers must prevent summarizing and totalizing discourses that inevitably suppress meaning; and instead, allow for the text to speak. *The Unnamable*, assuredly, is a text that attempts to say something—even while that message is largely unintelligible. In many ways, Beckett's unnamable narrator is in the throes of a traumatic experience, unable to recognize the self, place, time, situations, or others.

Beckett aberrantly and paradoxically stages an "I" that is unendingly called into question. The narrator speaks, "I, say I. I seem to speak, it is not I, about me, it is not about me" (291). Maurice Blanchot raises questions regarding the authorial position of the "I" in Beckett's text: "*The Unnamable* is precisely experience lived under threat of the impersonal, the approach of neutral speech that speaks itself alone...Who is speaking here, then? Is it the author?" (*The Book to Come*, 213). Beckett disentangles the "I" from the speaker and reveals it as a kind of proxy devoid of any possibility for personal appropriation. The "I", for Beckett, is an unspecific and external placeholder that lacks all intimacy between it and the self it attempts to reference. The "I" is a logical placeholder by its users, then, that simply is habitually employed without thought, specificity, or personal attachment. Inasmuch as language is not the property of the speaker—that is, language does not come from speakers—it is impossible to tell private stories of one's own experience distinctly. The result is a concept of the self that is no

longer unified or capable of recounting, in any logical or chronological fashion, an experience.

In *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*—known together as *The Trilogy*—Beckett suggests, through the four narratives, that identity, representation, and origin are not locatable. This point meets its apex in *The Unnamable* where the narrator attempts to bear witness to some oblique experience that is made inaccessible, due to the enigmatic and fragmentary condition of language. Blanchot continues: “[*The Unnamable*] is already no longer Beckett but the demand that led him outside of himself, dispossessed him and let go of him, gave him over to the outside, making him a nameless being, the Unnamable” (ibid). Almost two decades later and in a different context, Blanchot restates in *The Writing of the Disaster*, “The ‘I’ cannot be lost, because it does not belong to itself. It only is, therefore, as not its own, and therefore as always already lost” (64). This is evident in Beckett’s text, in which the unnamed narrator attests to an unknowable “I”: “I, of whom I know nothing” (304). On the one hand, the sense of alienation and melancholic paralysis that accompany *The Unnamable* are palpable. This final text of the *Trilogy* begins (at least explicitly) in *Molloy*. *Molloy* is structured by two separate narratives—the monologue of Molloy who escapes prison to find his mother (his attempt, I would argue, to locate his origin) and the monologue of the character Moran whose job is to locate Molloy ends with his body decomposing and the two characters never meet. This is a text that not only reads as an unintelligible traumatic testimony, but also in which the experience of reading it is itself a kind of traumatic event. By breaking the link between signifier and referent and,

therefore, producing a textual opening, however, the text allows for new and unnamable narrative possibilities to emerge.

In *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett: A Reader's Guide to His Work, Life, and Thought*, Ackerley and Gontarski suggest that "one useful starting point for reading Beckett may be Beckett's own reading" (x) of other works such as pre-Socratic Greek philosophy:

[Beckett's] ontology, a sense of discontinuous being or lack of fixity of any sort, owes as much to the contretemps between Heraclitus and Parmenides as it does to post-Freudian psychoanalysis. Heraclitus's emphasis on a world of becoming, a liminal world in perpetual transition, reverberates through Beckett's works where to utter "now" is always late, an afterthought, consciousness itself always belated. To utter "I," then, is inescapably retrospective, a corrupt distortion of memory, nostalgia for a present moment, as Kant suggested, always inaccessible to empirical consciousness. (ibid)

Beckett discursively stages Heraclitus's fire and Parmenides's block universe: "I owe my existence to no one, these faint fires are not of those that illuminate or burn. Going nowhere, coming from nowhere" (294).<sup>18</sup> Readers are suspended between the continual change that fire represents and Parmenides's motionless, structureless, and timeless (as in, no origin and no parts) invisible block (*The World of Parmenides*, 112). Beckett presents the dual and simultaneous assault of relentless change and entropy against speakers (and his readers).

In addition to Beckett's aporetics of time, Simon Critchley in *Very Little...Almost Nothing*, points out that *The Unnamable* "is an endlessly elaborating series of antitheses, of imploding oxymoron's, paradoxes and contradictions" (167). Critchley observes that Beckett's narrator is also suspended in "the aporia between the inability to

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<sup>18</sup> See Popper's *The World of Parmenides: Essays on the Presocratic Enlightenment* for an instructive collection of essays that offer an understanding of the Pre-Socratic philosophers, especially in relation to Parmenides.

speak and the inability to be silent” (ibid). Speaking from a present “I” that is personal only to the one who speaks is impossible. One must still tell. Beckett’s narrator wonders, however, whether additional suffering will usher the “I” into existence: “[T]hat’s why I don’t feel a body on me [around me], I’m not suffering enough yet...not suffering enough to be able to stir, to have a body, complete with head, to be able to understand to have eyes to light the way” (412). In “The Exhausted,” Deleuze describes the state of exhaustion as the condition in which one “can no longer possibilize” (152). Deleuze quotes Beckett’s *The Unnamable*: “That the impossible should be asked of me, good, what else could be asked of me?” (ibid). Deleuze continues, “There is no more possibility” (3). The “I,” or self, is no longer possible. Exhausting all of the possibilities exhausts the subject, as Deleuze aporetically situates it.

If readers accept Deleuze’s description of exhaustion, then how would the exhausted petition the Human Rights Council for redress of a human rights violation? Presumably the exhausted would have no energy to even present their bodies or to speak and therefore lack the means to articulate a request. Can the exhausted, like Beckett’s narrator, request redress for injuries? Perhaps only a grunt is uttered, maybe. How can the United Nations Human Rights Council address complaints, if the victims are unable to tell and, thus, provide the sought after testimony? Victims may be unable to communicate in any way with the working group in charge of communication, or with an outside interested party. The Human Rights Council is the only international body that addresses crimes against individuals and peoples. A testimony must conform to the narrative expectations of being written in “one of the six official UN languages,” and not exceeding eight pages or including “insulting or abusive language.” Otherwise, “such



complaints are inadmissible.”<sup>19</sup> There are no alternatives for those who cannot produce even one sentence of intelligible testimony.

Jacques Rancière paraphrases Hannah Arendt’s claim in *Origins of Totalitarianism*: “[T]he Rights of Man are the rights of those who are only human beings, who have no more property left than the property of being human. Put it another way, they are the rights of those who have no rights, the mere derision of rights” (298). On the one hand, the condition describes the circumstances from which the unnamed narrator dwells. On the other hand, readers are still unsure of who or what the narrator is. Gary Adelman collected a number of responses to his solicitation for comments on Beckett and posted them in *The Michigan Quarterly Review* under the title, “Beckett’s Readers: Commentary and Symposium.” Adelman quotes a response from the poet Leslie Scalapino that Beckett demonstrates that:

language and life and real-time as equally fictional (in the sense of illusion-making). He exploded real-time so that it is also the time of the text. The speaker in *The Unnamable* is not a character making a representation of his life. Hearing is not arising there in a virtual picturing of oneself (the reader) as if moving in Beckett’s landscape animated as mind, which is then spoken (by his speaker) as gone—it is in relation to literal hearing of a sound only that’s the text’s sound. Not virtual, actual. His examination of “being” as text is basic, laying a ground for our continuing to write in a way that could undertake what’s real. (¶ 7).

Scalapino implies that the question about *being* human is, for Beckett, already a textual undertaking that has inscribed within it fictional qualities. Terms such as “individual,” “person,” and “human” operate in a conceptual network that is also inherently fictional. The question of the human in human rights, then, is blown open to include other humans to come—and to other animals.

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<sup>19</sup> These criteria are described by the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner on its public website.

It is precisely because the ontological and epistemological status of the human is incessantly unsettled that its meanings are contested. At the same time, the irresolvable contestation regarding defining the human is what keeps it open to new meanings and binds it to human rights and the political in the first place. Of course there is also a risk in the unknowable. Because the border of what we are and what we are not is persistently called into question, that border can become a site where atrocities and violence occur as well. Bearing witness (whether through a firsthand account or through a proxy, as Harvey points out) to what happens on that border challenges the power of those who seek to control a discourse. Politics, Rancière pointedly states, “is about the border. It is the activity that brings it back into question” (303).

## **Conclusion**

In preparation for this chapter’s analysis into why human rights projects fail to address and prevent abuse, I argued in previous chapters that defining the human based on Western notions of personhood, individualism, and reason produces a differend in which most world denizens are excluded from its meaning. In fact, I have tried to show how the testimonial “I,” as it is understood in the Western imagination, is not a position that most can identify with or comfortably “use.” The question that haunts this project is: How in the shock of an injury, especially persistent injurious conditions, where often numerous parties are involved in inflicting violence, can victims bear witness in the conventional narrative framework? Moreover, how can victims tell their stories if they are limited to only that mode sanctioned by states or organization like The United Nations Human Rights Council? This chapter examined how first-person fictional

storytelling is an effective alternative to bearing witness to the harmful consequences of discursive practices and institutional and extra-institutional policies and practices. Fictional story telling functions in many ways like Harvey's proxy in his text, *Witnessness* (see my discussion in the previous chapter). Sometimes fictional accounts can lend voice to a disruptive violence that renders that same voice silent. Through the voice of fiction, smothered voices and stories, which were once divested of language, can have their say. The chain of signification and discourses that emerge from them do not affix definitive meaning to the concept of human. Rather, they reveal a continual, constitutive opening where the human to come belongs.

## Conclusion

### The (In)Justice of Human Rights

The civilized have created the wretched, quite coldly and deliberately, and do not intend to change the status quo; are responsible for their slaughter and enslavement; rain down bombs on defenseless children whenever and wherever they decide that their 'vital interests' are menaced, and think nothing of torturing a man to death.

—James Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work*

The Rights of Man...had been defined as 'inalienable' because they were supposed to be independent of all governments; but it turned out that the moment human beings lacked their own government and had to fall back upon their minimum rights, no authority was left to protect them and no institution willing to guarantee them.

—Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*

### Trickle-down Human Rights

James Baldwin's quote above was written three decades after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was adopted; yet Baldwin reminds readers of the dangerous duplicity in the perverse justification for destroying human bodies, while proudly declaring human life as sacred. While Baldwin did not explicitly name a human rights text or document at the close of his statement, readers may detect a reference to a broader human rights discourse. Baldwin, however, was not alone in recognizing the painful contradiction in the white Western imagination that characterizes itself as "civilized."

In an attempt to disrupt the contradiction, Ajamu Baraka, an associate fellow at the Institute for Policy Studies, offers a new human rights strategy titled "'People-Centered' Human Rights as A Framework for Social Transformation," in which he seeks to rethink and rebuild a human rights project from the perspective of the oppressed. Baraka begins by critiquing Louis Henkin's view that human rights are universally

accepted.<sup>1</sup> The notion, for instance, that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is, in fact, *universal* is partially the reason why contemporary human rights practices fail to address systemic forms of oppression: Assumptions behind the universality of the UDHR program are tethered to a Western vision of the world, framed by a complex network of assumptions and concepts that privilege white, patriarchal, neo-liberalism. At the same time, many people who actually require protection are victims of certain institutional practices and systemic violence that are upheld by those very interrelated conceptual frameworks embedded in the Western world-view. Audre Lorde provides a case in point: The author observes that “Black women have on one hand always been highly visible” (42) in the collective racialized bodily marker of Blackness. But “on the other hand,” Lorde continues, “[black women] have been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism” (ibid) that is blind to the unique characteristics and lived experience of each person; thus, divesting her of the possibilities open in being human. Therefore, “to survive in the mouth of this dragon we call America, we have had to learn this first and most vital lesson—that we were never meant to survive. Not as human beings” (ibid). For the most part, contemporary human rights programs may be considered well-intentioned. However, the framers, along with those who continue to implement these programs, are ultimately blind to the experiences of the other whom the universal excludes. Thus, UDHR and its treaty bodies are weakened by their complicity with the Western vision that invariably results in hegemonic imperialism.<sup>2</sup> In

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<sup>1</sup> Louis Henkin’s *The Age of Rights* is a foundational text on the origins of the contemporary idea of human rights, especially as it involves the changing notion of the individual evolution of related concepts and application of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and its accompanying documents for nation-states.

<sup>2</sup> Hegemony is a complex, but key concept in Antonio Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*. Chandra Talpade Mohanty takes as a case study white, middle class, Western feminist scholarship to show the political effects of hegemonic representations on women who occupy space outside the dominate Western

“Gramsci’s Concept of ‘Egemonia,’” Gwyn Williams aptly sums up Antonio Gramsci by stating that hegemony exists when “one concept of reality is diffused throughout society in all its institutional and private manifestations, informing with its spirit all taste, morality, customs, religious and political principles, and all social relations. An element of direction and control, not necessarily conscious, is implied” (587). Other thinkers, such as Slavoj Žižek in “Against Human Rights,” argue that human rights, as they are envisioned by the West, carry with them the assumptions that structure liberal capitalism—for example he examines the function of freedom of choice, individualism, and privacy.<sup>3</sup> For Baraka, the term “universal,” then, is simply a substitute for another term: cultural neo-liberal imperialism.

In addition to overlooking the hegemonic imperialism implied in the claim that the UDHR and its practices are universally accepted, another consequence is often ignored: Implicit in the assertion of universal acceptance—if the universal were even possible—is the idea that rights are outside or beyond the political; that is, rights are seen as natural. This creates the illusion that Human Rights are an apolitical program. But a depoliticized human rights program ignores the social, philosophical and political discourses that often determine the structures and relationships to those structures. The refusal to recognize the political nature of human rights denies the social and political conditions that gave rise to it in the first place and ultimately limiting human rights.

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philosophy and practice in “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses.” See Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa’s *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings By Radical Women of Color* for an exploration into the convergence of race, class, gender, and sexuality as a result of global economic, social and cultural influences.

<sup>3</sup> Whether a human rights violation complaint is submitted to one of eight of the nine Human Rights Treaty Bodies or to the Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council, according to the United Nations, the complaint is lodged against a state. And it would be a state “that is party to the treaty in question” (Human Rights Bodies - Complaints Procedures). Therefore, individuals or groups cannot petition the Human Rights Council for violations committed by companies or corporations.

For example, the modern notion of human rights and its culminating document, UDHR, emerged from a particular historical event: World War II. They developed at a time when, according to Baraka, “the assumptions, world-views and social practices of Western, liberal, white supremacist, patriarchal, colonial-capitalist states were dominant” (para 2). Almost seventy years later, the vision outlined in the UDHR still “serves as an ideologically-driven instrument for rationalizing and maintaining the dominance of the Western colonial/imperialist project” (para 3). Of course, one must concede—and Baraka does—that the project is not without merit and, in fact, has been significant in the “development towards real human liberation” (ibid). But if human rights are understood as something natural and, therefore, beyond the political, the framework and the implementation ignore the real social, historical, political and economic experiences that those rights are meant to protect.

In concurrence with Baraka’s argument that human rights are ideologically organized by the Western world-view, I would add that at its core—that politically-limiting Cartesian notion of the *human*—the United Nations Human Rights Council operates through a state-centered approach that amounts to a trickle-down human rights practice. In other words, the Human Rights Council and its Treaty Bodies primarily engage at the nation-state level. As an analogy to the notion of “trickle-down” economics—and as André Frankovits observes in “Rules to Live By: The Human Rights Approach to Development” (2)—the United Nations fails to establish regulatory laws of rights enforcement on states and does not require any form of economic redistributive accountability by governments. Here, the ideology of market fundamentalism seeps into distinct institutional practices, with the naïve and dangerous assumptions that no real

enforceable incentive is required for nations and states to voluntarily distribute and facilitate rights. The failure of a state to adhere to the prescription handed down by the HRC could potentially result merely in public condemnation.

The goal of this project has not been to suggest that we should throw our hands up despairingly, walk away, and abandon human rights altogether. What is called for, however, is a radical approach that includes a re-conceptualization, re-organization, and new practices of human rights. One such example of a new rights model involves the important feature that distinguishes Baraka's people-centered, bottom-up, approach from the Western/neo-liberalist top-down approach. Baraka's proposed approach requires a reconceptualization "of human rights from the standpoint of oppressed groups," where the standpoint is prioritized to restructure the "prevailing social relationships that perpetuate oppression." Oppressed groups, therefore, have the power to "bring about that restructuring" (para 10). Baraka is not explicitly concerned with the consequences of a Western notion of reason as something that is typically described as being an essentially human trait. His argument, nevertheless, points to a related consequence: claims to supremacy—whether those of white supremacy, economic supremacy, or a general human supremacy over animals and the environment.

In the same way that Western assumptions behind the concept of human nature and its universality essentially depoliticize human rights by suppressing alternative experiences of the human and limiting the full potential of rights, the notion that reason is a *quality*—with an almost ontological status—rather than an *act* that one does, also depoliticizes *reason* and, with it, the *human*. In other words, by assigning reason as a kind of human quality, one assumes that it is outside of the public realm and, therefore,



unaffected by interrogation and analysis; simply put, human nature just *is*.<sup>4</sup> After all, who would debate a simple truth? The sun sets and rises, regardless of whether the view is obscured by clouds—although, assuredly, not for all time: the sun too will die. But the relation between reason and human is far more complex and suggestive. In fact, the law (and reason) legitimize certain concepts of the human, and human, as defined by Samera Esmeir in *Juridical Humanity: A Colonial History*, is “a concept/figure that stands for a specific species, a certain status, a particular form of life” (1).<sup>5</sup> For Esmeir, as I contend in this dissertation, this particular life form is produced through law and reason, and it will be re-imagined and redefined in different eras. Esmeir offers a compelling point as it applies to law:

When modern law endows itself with the power of humanization, and declares that its absence signals dehumanization, modern law effectively binds the living to the powers of the state. The human is chained to the power of modern state law, not simply because the state’s laws are imposed on the human, but because they decide its status as human (2).

Esmeir examines the historical and theoretical relationship between law and the human in the context of colonial Egypt. In the context of this project, reason, rather than law—though they are intricately linked—inscribes the concept of the human. At the same time, reason is not only about “writing” the human: it is, at once, intimately linked to the ontological status of this “particular form of life.” In other words, law that determines the status of human is authorized by reason—thus, reason legitimizes law and in effect naturalizes it.

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<sup>4</sup> If reason is a human instinct—or considered inherent to human nature—then the political and social risks for those born with severely impaired intellectual and developmental functioning, or those who have extremely diminished cognitive abilities, such as dementia or Alzheimer’s, are that they might be seen as less than human.

<sup>5</sup> See Gil Anidjar’s “The Meaning of Life,” in which the author opens the essay by examining a contradiction in our understanding of life as “biological,” or “the historical novelty of biology as a modern science and set of technologies [and life] understood according to biological protocols that seem void of history” (697).

The goal of this dissertation has not been to construct a new program, but rather to explore the effects of the self and its designate “I” as they traverse different literary terrains, repositioned in different genres and experimented upon through chronologies that lack linearity. I look at where rules break down and discursive practices attempt, but ultimately fail, to situate them. In the preceding chapters, I have illustrated through literary case studies drawn from exemplar modernist texts that the discursive practices that are said to produce the self, and with it the human, are undermined by those very practices. Gertrude Stein’s *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and *The Geographical History of America: The Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind*, as well as Samuel Beckett’s *The Unnamable* overtly pressures language in very similar ways that force readers to reconsider the notion of identity, the self, and the human. They differ, however: Stein’s texts take readers on a anti-representative journey outside of the self, only to call into question representations of the self as involved in the world. Beckett’s text, on the other hand, is an anti-representative journey of the internal self that calls into question representations of the self as involved in its own psyche. Beckett’s unnamable narrator offers readers a glimpse into a psyche that attempts to bear witness, but is ultimately unable to tell—it will, nevertheless, continue to tell. It is a text from which it is impossible to arrest lexical meaning. It seems to establish no stable narrative, when read out loud. If the narrator is telling a story, then it is surely a story that defies all transitional narrative practice. And readers must attempt to access it by new means, sometimes even invented on the spot.

Both writers encourage their readers to reconsider concepts and figurations that inscribe “this particular form of life” we call human. This project contends that the

abysses that function in discourse prevent stable definitions, whereby the signifier never fully encloses the referent. Never encapsulating the referent allows for the new, novel, and unfamiliar to enter—for what may be described as the human to come. The concept of the human, then, is structured by the abysses that function in the discursive practices that attempt to define them. Foucault says of “man” that it is the product of the modern: “Before the end of the eighteenth century, *man* did not exist” (308).<sup>6</sup> Lynn Hunt notes that around the same time a concept of human rights had begun to take shape during the Enlightenment, when the novel—specifically, the epistolary novel—was becoming popular. Although Foucault calls what I term “human,” “man,” the concern for treatment of persons, it appeared, required some concept of the human.

Another concern that occupies this project involves two questions: 1) without a definitive concept of the human, how are human rights possible? 2) without the faculty for narration or access to a particular form of storytelling, how can victims of human rights bear witness to their injuries? The voice of Beckett’s unnamable narrator will “go on” (414), even if s/he or it is not understood. If we choose to make reading our work, then the lesson Beckett teaches is that readers are ultimately responsible to approach the narrative-making attempt on its own terms.

While Beckett’s text upends all traditional notions of narrative-making, it also unintentionally introduces an inherent problem in the expected requirements for petitioning the Human Rights Council (HRC) as it is outlined by Complaint Procedure

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<sup>6</sup> Foucault distinguishes between “man” and human in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. For Foucault, the human is simply a biological life. I argue earlier in this project that the term human is much more than a term, a certainly more than simply a biological life form. I also substitute “human” for man, given the obvious, gender-biased limitations that such a term denotes. Regardless of whether the human or body are understood in biological terms, they each remain influenced by discourses, technological practices, and mechanisms that Foucault observes.

form. Because United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner is the standard-bearer on human rights, many outside human rights projects adopt the ideological framework that structures the UDHR and its supporting procedures. It is, then, critically important that the procedures are also open to the unfamiliar ways a victim may attempt to articulate an injury. As it stands today, the HRC does not offer a procedure for radically different kinds of witnessing and even, for that matter, kinds of witnesses. The procedure simply does not meet the injured on the victims' terms. This is predictable, because the framework that is embodied in the UDHR and documents that clarify the charter are infused with a specific Western worldview that dictates how stories must be told. Stories must be narrated in a chronologically linear framework that bears witness to crimes against a particular self. It is a narrative requirement that privileges the individual over the collective, and the state over denizens—not every person, of course, who resides within the boundaries of a state is a citizen. Without the capability to articulate an injury—whether directly or through a nongovernmental organization—within the United Nations' assigned structure, the injured are denied the right to petition. Although Beckett's narrator is fictional, the lesson for its readers can be translated into real-world possibilities. For example, readers are not entirely sure who or what the narrator is; though, s/he or it is confronted by its own catastrophe—its annihilation. Consider for a moment that the narrator is actually a worm: The narrator is not only naming itself, but also describing itself. Perhaps it is a worm caught in a toxic dump, striving to get free, but knowing that it will die there.

A third question that motivated this project is as follows: "Who is owed human rights, and what do these rights imply?" If the human has all along been the human to

come, then the assumptions that drive present human rights discourse and laws will require the reexamination of its fundamental principles. In fact, the rights for the human to come would necessitate a constant and exhaustive reexamination. This is because the human to come includes, just to name a few, nonhuman animals, aquatic life, and the environment. A new human rights discourse and practice, which originates with the oppressed and the disempowered, would be a human rights for the human to come.

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