Presidential Address 2020

Literature and the Right to Be Human

SIMON GIKANDI

In memory of my beloved mother,
Charity Gakure, 1935–2019. *Thaayũ*.

Wherever something stands, something else will stand beside it. Nothing is absolute.

—Igbo Proverb[1]

I accept Brecht's thesis that in settled periods of history, culture—and literature which is its part, with criticism as its partner—can reflect reality. But that in traumatic times like ours, when reality itself is so distorted as to have become impossible and abnormal, it is the function of all culture, partaking of this abnormality, to be aware of its own sickness. To be aware of the unreality of the unauthenticity of the so called real, is to reinterpret this reality. To reinterpret this reality is to commit oneself to a constant revolutionary assault against it.

—Sylvia Wynter,
"We Must Learn to Sit Together and Talk about a Little Culture"

AS I WAS PREPARING THIS ADDRESS, I STRUGGLED WITH THE PROBlem of what Edward Said called beginnings and the complex set of circumstances that they entail: "What must one do to begin? What is special about beginning as an activity or a moment or a place? Can one begin whenever one pleases?" (xv). This challenge can be exacerbated by one's relationship to institutions and their history—in my case, the joy and pain of being both an insider and an outsider, a scholar of Euro-American culture from its margins. And so tonight I find myself in a situation that calls for celebration, but also in a place of uncertainty. I, Simon Gikandi, born in a colonial state of emergency, have had the luck to serve as the 129th

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president of the Modern Language Association of America. My sense of good fortune is, however, tempered by the reality that the state of emergency that characterized most of the twentieth century, including the circumstances of my own beginnings, has not gone away, as many of us had hoped, but has instead become permanent. Everywhere I go around the world, I keep on hearing echoes of Walter Benjamin's prediction that the state of emergency is "not the exception but the rule" and of his injunction that we must "attain a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight" (257). I find myself in a world where achievement and precarity go hand in hand.

But I also stand before you as an example of the MLA's openness to all its constituencies and, in an age of increasing isolationism, its ability to embrace the planetary. As I stand here today, I would like to pay particular tribute to those of my predecessors who came from elsewhere and brought their unique experiences to bear on our organization and its work. I stand on the shoulders of Peter Demetz (born in Prague), Victor Henri Brombert (born in Berlin), and Edward Said (born in Jerusalem). I have been inspired by Sylvia Molloy (born in Buenos Aires), Marjorie Perloff (born in Vienna), Marianne Hirsch (born in Timişoara, Romania), Kwame Anthony Appiah (of London and Kumasi, Ghana), and Diana Taylor (of Mexico City). I have been properly tutored by Domna Stanton, who arrived from Greece without a word of English but rose to serve the MLA as president and trustee. I cannot forget Anne Ruggles Gere, who came from a small place called Maine, a part of our planet, too. All these officers, and countless others not mentioned, have inspired me and reminded us of how the house of culture secures our common claims to be human.

Today, I will be arguing that the claim to be human is a burden and an obligation. It is a burden because we live in a world where human rights are constantly violated and we are hence forced to feel the weight of their loss. It is an obligation because everyone has the right to be human and to insist on their humanity even in the face of the violence of modernity. This situation is further complicated by the fact that not everyone knows why human rights are important. If we all knew what rights were, we would not be tolerating their egregious violation and the immunity of their transgressors. It has been the tragedy of our times that even when the claim to rights has been described as inviolable, they have been visible to us only in their absence or transgression. As scholars of the imaginative, we must continuously figure out both the misfortunes that lead to the violation of rights and the drives that make them an essential part of the planetary. I work from the premise that because the right to be human has only existed in the weight of its loss, making rights visible has always been the task and obligation of the imagination. Today, I will argue, as have others before me, that literature is asked to assert the obligation to rights and to carry the burden of being human.[2]

In reflecting on the burden that literature is asked to bear in the quest for the meaning of the human, I found myself thinking of the works of James Baldwin. I found myself rereading not just his now iconic and prophetic novels and essays but also the interviews he gave in the tumultuous decades that ushered in the still unfinished project of Black freedom. I thought of a famous 1970 encounter between Baldwin and the broadcaster David Frost, an interview with a title—"Are We on the Edge of Civil War?"—that seems pertinent to our moment:

> Frost: Are you Christian or Muslim?
> Baldwin: (Laughing) I was born a Baptist.
> Frost: It's not that funny!
> Baldwin: It is to me.
> Frost: And what are you now?
> Baldwin: I'm trying to become a human being.
> Frost: And when does one know when one's reached that stage?

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> Baldwin: I don't think you ever do. You work at it, you know. You take it as it comes. You try not to tell too many lies. You try to love other people and hope that you'll be loved. (93)

For Baldwin, being human could not be taken for granted; it was a debt and a demand without guarantees; the act of becoming human would always be a work in progress. What Baldwin could have added—and this is the starting point for my address—was that literature was that space and place where those who have been excluded from the domain of the human through economies and ecologies of gender, race, sex, and class, or through a philosophy built on the idea of "Man," which, in the words of Sylvia Wynter, "overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself" (260), would come to figure out who they were and, in the process, lift the burden of identities imposed on them by others.

So, the only beginning that I find proper for this occasion is the one that speaks to the unfinished project of being human in an age of crisis. Today I will tell many stories about how the imagination saved lives and secured selves. I will talk about how literature mattered to those caught in the violence of modernity, I will recognize the sentimental education that comes from reading in order to live, I will celebrate the fantasy of the library, and I will share my own understanding of how the imagination could rescue those condemned to "useless suffering," those who, according to Emmanuel Levinas, were forced to live out "the unpleasant and gratuitous non-sense of pain" concealed under "reasonable forms" (160).

A Sentimental Education

In the 1920s, a young aspiring South African writer named Peter Abrahams walked the streets of Johannesburg in a state of depression. Orphaned early in life and ostracized by a state that considered race to be the mark that separated the saved and the drowned, to borrow Primo Levi's terms (87), Abrahams struggled to figure out what it meant to be human where he, designated by law and custom as a Colored, was a product of miscegenation and hence an uncomfortable reminder of the original sin of colonial capitalism.[3] He was too far from the world of his Ethiopian father to claim kinship with the Kingdom of Judah on the Horn of Africa, not Black enough to belong to the African world that the state would designate as Bantu, and not white enough to claim kinship with the "master race" that called itself Afrikaans. As he tells us in his memoir, *Tell Freedom*, Abrahams's life could not escape what appeared to be an inevitable winter of discontent: "So the summer passed. The autumn came. The leaves went brown on the willows by the river. They fluttered to the ground and turned to mould. The long days shortened suddenly. The cold came. Winter had come to torture us again" (47).

His father having died in a gold-mine accident, Abrahams was unhomely in the city of gold, and his relation to the things that seemed to matter most—kin and country—only appeared to him in their absence: "Twenty-second Street, the street where we lived, was strange and alien. The noise was frightening after the quiet of Elsberg. After a while I grew interested in the dark stream of life about me and ventured down to the bottom of the street" (57). In this place where white capital yielded massive profits through the exploitation of Black labor, and in this polity where every shade of black was a stigma that locked one outside the promise of modernity, Abrahams struggled to assert his right to be human. And faced with the prospect of what Orlando Patterson famously called social death, Abrahams was imprisoned by the force of colonial history and his own expectations.[4]

But there was a way out of this prison house of race and social deprivation—a literary education. After three years of schooling, Abrahams learned to read and write, and

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literacy opened the door to the humanity that he sought and the cultural community that would provide him with a home (161). Abrahams's first set of books, which included Charles and Mary Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare*, Francis Turner Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*, and the Everyman edition of John Keats, became his "proudest and dearest possessions," feeding "the familiar craving hunger that awaits the sensitive young and poor when the moment of awareness comes" (161).

Abrahams was not craving literature from, or on, his native South Africa. In the 1920s, this literature was mostly made up of colonial romances that reinforced the inferiority of the nonwhite subject and would hence have made the prison house of racism even harder to escape. What he yearned for, first and foremost, was a reading list that could present a world of sense and sensibility, one that would transcend the violence of everyday life and open the doors to a measure of the human. Yet the passage from social death to the possibility of the human was not without turmoil:

> With Shakespeare and poetry, a new world was born. New dreams, new desires, a new self-consciousness, was born. I desired to know myself in terms of the new standards set by these books. I lived in two worlds, the world of Vrededorp and the world of these books. And, somehow, both were equally real. Each was a potent force in my life, compelling. My heart and mind were in turmoil. Only the victory of one or the other could bring me peace. (161)[5]

Shakespeare and Keats might serve as vectors of new dreams, desires, and even a new consciousness, but the world they conjured—of sense and sensibility—was also a stark reminder of the subject's struggle in the colonial city. For how could the world conjured by Shakespeare and Keats, a world far removed from a ghetto built on racism, become a place for nurturing the human? Indeed, could the transcendental claims that have made for literature and an aesthetic education in general countermand the forces of modern capitalism evident in the new white metropolis and the mounds of gold dust around it?[6]

For Abrahams, the answer to these questions came on the fateful day when he reported for work at the Bantu Men's Social Center, an association of Black men who sought to cultivate culture as a counterpoint to the regimen of colonial control.[7] Here Abrahams finally found revelation and salvation in literature, a third way between heart and mind, or at least the potential for their reconciliation.

When Abrahams entered the Bantu Men's Social Center for the first time, there was music in the air. Someone was playing Paul Robeson singing "Old Man River" on a gramophone. And in this song, Abrahams heard the resonance of a world that overflowed the confines of the racialized self. He then turned to the books on the shelf and saw the one book that would change his life:

> I moved over to the bookshelves. I wanted to touch the books but held back. Perhaps it was not permitted. Typed slips showed what each shelf held; novels, history, sociology, travel, Africana, political science, American Negro literature. . . . I stopped there. American Negro literature. The man had said Robeson was an American Negro.
>
> A man got up and came over. He ran his finger along the American Negro literature shelf and took out a book. "Excuse me [I asked], Can I look at these?"
>
> "Of course," he smiled.
>
> I reached up and took out a fat black book. The Souls of Black Folk by W. E. B. Du Bois. I turned the pages. It spoke about a people in a valley. And they were black, and dispossessed, and denied. I skimmed through the pages, anxious to take it all in. (192)

W. E. B. Du Bois's book would chaperone Abrahams toward an understanding of the terms of freedom as an essential condition of being human:

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> The Negro is not free. . . . I remembered those "Reserved For Europeans Only" signs; I remembered no white boys ever carried at the market or ran from the police; I remembered my long walks in the white sections of the city, and the lavatories, and the park benches, and the tea-rooms. . . . The Negro is not free.
>
> But why had I not thought of it myself? Now, having read the words, I knew that I had known this all along. But until now I had had no words to voice that knowledge. Du Bois's words had the impact of a revelation. (193)

Du Bois's book would help Abrahams see his lived experience anew (fig. 1).

These kinds of epiphanic moments were, of course, central to the aesthetic education of colonized subjects in the long twentieth century. For those who were dominated and oppressed, the naive and sentimental, to borrow Friedrich von Schiller's terms, was a calling forward to the yet unrealized space of freedom and a defiant rejection of the system that had reduced them to mere objects of labor (*On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*). These postcolonial epiphanies, produced in the "no longer . . . not yet" state between colonial and racial violence and the desire of universal emancipation,[8] should be required reading in these political times, when the idea of freedom itself can no longer be taken for granted. Here, I'm thinking of scenes of awakening through literature that would mark the passage from colonial subjugation to postcolonial reckoning as the first march to freedom itself.

I'm thinking about that scene in George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin* when one of the novel's main characters, a young man named Trumper, returns to Barbados after working as a laborer in the United States and discovers what he calls "My People" after hearing Robeson's big voice:

> The music was at an end, but Trumper went on reciting the words in a low, grave voice. I tried to memorize them as he spoke:
>
> "You know the voice?" Trumper asked. He was very serious now. I tried to recall whether I might have heard it. I couldn't.
>
> "Paul Robeson," he said. "One o' the greatest o' my people."
>
> "What people?" I asked. I was a bit puzzled.
>
> "My People," said Trumper. His tone was insistent. Then he softened into a smile. 1 didn't know whether he was smiling at my ignorance, or whether he was smiling his satisfaction with the box and the voice and above all Paul Robeson.
>
> "Who are your people?" I asked him. It seemed a kind of huge joke. "The Negro race," said Trumper. (294–95)

And I'm also thinking of Bakha in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, previously considered an outcast in Hindu society, coming to an awareness of his rights as a human being after listening to a poet imagine the invention of a machine that would render the work that makes him untouchable—the removal of dung—superfluous:

> Bakha had stood aside, beyond polluting distance, thinking vaguely of the few things he



Fig. 1
A bench from Apartheid-era South Africa, on display at the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg. Photograph by Simon Gikandi.

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> had understood from the poet's outburst. He felt that the poet would have been answering the most intimate questions in his (Bakha's) soul, if he had not used such big words. "That machine," he thought, "which can remove dung without anyone having to handle it, I wonder what it is like? If only that 'gentreman' hadn't dragged the poet away, I could have asked him." (156)

Above all, I'm thinking of Elizabeth in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*, a social and racial outcast unsure about her own capacity to survive, until she finds the one book that transforms her life:

> She turned and picked up a book from a table beside her bed. It had waited for a whole year to be read. It was: *The Gift Of A Cow*, by Premchand. It was a UNESCO publication of the classic Hindi novel which exalted the poor. In their introduction to the novel they wrote that it opposed the basic trend of Indian literature, which seemed to be a literature intended only "to entertain and to satisfy our lust for the amazing . . ." a retelling of magic, of ghosts, of the adventures of high-born heroes and heroines. . . . She had fallen from the very beginning into the warm embrace of the brotherhood of man, because when a people wanted everyone to be ordinary it was just another way of saying man loved man. As she fell asleep, she placed one soft hand over her land. It was a gesture of belonging. (222)

One word echoes through these bildungsromans—freedom. *Freedom* is the little word that the dominated could not take for granted and that literature was asked to recover and protect. Where freedom did not exist in the lived world, and where the dominated were always defined as people incapable of freedom, the literary universe provided a space for recovering and valorizing the repressed voice that says, *I, too, belong*.[9]

For my generation, emerging from the detritus of anticolonial struggles, there could have been no better claim to the right to be human than the plea to belong to an unfettered world. And almost universally, in a century defined by the strange conjunction of racial violence and freedom, a century defined by what Du Bois famously called the color line, literature would provide moments of transcendence, promising the subjected a sanctuary above the violence and chaos of the world.[10] The literary would be Du Bois's path to a world beyond the veil of race, to the house of culture, the promised land:

> I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color line I move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas, where smiling men and welcoming women glide in gilded halls. From out the caves of evening that swing between the strong-limbed earth and the tracery of the stars, I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all graciously with no scorn nor condescension. So, wed with Truth, I dwell above the Veil. Is this the life you grudge us, O knightly America? Is this the life you long to change into the dull red hideousness of Georgia? Are you so afraid lest peering from this high Pisgah, between Philistine and Amalekite, we sight the Promised Land? (82)

The library was one of the few sanctuaries available to those locked outside the structures of power; books were the means by which selfhood could be secured against a deracinating and cruel modernity.[11]

The claims made for the imagination as a humanizing agency can, of course, be countered with some harsh questions: How many lives have books saved? What has literature done to mitigate suffering in the world? Hasn't literature also been used by tyrants to propagate evil? These are all fair questions: slaveholders in the antebellum South were known to be people of culture, connoisseurs of the classics who could look to the works of Plato and Aristotle to justify slavery (DuBois; Gikandi, *Slavery*). There is no doubt that Lothar Von Trotha, the architect of the 1904

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genocide of the Herero people in Namibia, was a learned person. Born among Saxon nobility and brought up in the best traditions of the Prussian military elite, Von Trotha was probably schooled in the great tradition of German literature and philosophy, and it is not inconceivable that he relied on these for aesthetic nourishment as he undertook his assigned tasks in the brutal battlefields of colonialism from China to South West Africa (Namibia today). Cultural sensibilities are not, in themselves, antidotes to the antihuman projects of our time. In addition to being a Columbia University–trained psychiatrist, Radovan Karadžić, one of the architects of the massacre of eight thousand Muslims in Srebrenica during the wars in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, was a poet of some note.[12]

Yes, I will concede that literature, or the ability to master literary culture, does not in itself designate one's humanity and that poetry can be deployed in the name of genocide and other forms of violence. Still, I prefer to focus on the difference literature makes, or used to make, for the subjected, because I, too, have been its beneficiary. I prefer to think of Richard Wright's account of escaping from a world of abject poverty and oppression in Mississippi by using a white coworker's library card to borrow H. L. Mencken's *A Book of Prefaces*: "I was jarred and shocked by the style, the clear, clean sweeping sentences, " Wright would recall in *Black Boy* (248). Reading Mencken's book—discovering "style"—would help the Black boy break through the fire wall of poverty and racial violence that was supposed to be his destiny, opening up "new avenues of feeling and seeing" (252).

Reading, as my late colleague and friend Ross Chambers noted in *Room for Maneuver*, is "the name of the practice that has the power of producing shifts in desire; and desire does not produce just 'fantasy' but reality itself" (xii). And as Chinua Achebe once reminded Bill Moyers, while poetry could not stop the brutalities that defined the twentieth century, and while there are limits to what storytelling can do, it is the storyteller "who makes us who we are, who creates history": "The storyteller creates the memory that the survivors must have—otherwise their surviving would have no meaning" ("Chinua Achebe" 337).

Reading and Shifting Desire

Coming out of a situation defined by colonial violence I knew early in life that even if literature did not have the power to change the world, it held the promissory note to freedom. Still, I struggled to answer one question: This thing called literature—what work does it do? That is the question asked to me by my grandmother many years ago when I decided, against the wishes of the extended family, to study literature instead of the law at the University of Nairobi. Unable to find a suitable response, and certain that the usual claims made for literature by philosophers from Aristotle to Jean-Paul Sartre would not be adequate, I turned to the one authoritative language my family and community understood: "For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" (*New Cambridge Paragraph Bible*, Mark 8.36). I had assumed, rather naively, that literature was invested in soul making.

To be fair, there were good reasons for my family to be concerned about this thing called literature: unlike other forms of expression, creative writing was both magical—it enabled one to conjure stories—and dangerous. Gakaara Wa Wanjaũ, the famous Kikuyu writer, and perhaps the only creative writer my parents read and knew well, had been arrested at the beginning of the state of emergency in Kenya in 1952, and he had been imprisoned in one of the many camps for political prisoners set up by the colonial government. When I was growing up in the 1960s and 1970s, Wanjaũ was one of the many writers struggling to rebuild their lives after their passage through what has come to be called the British gulag in

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Kenya. After eight years spent in six prisons, Wanjaũ resumed his life as a writer and publisher, but to everyone, including the postcolonial government, he was a constant reminder of the dangers of literature.[13]

The association of writing with danger was further reinforced by the fact that many of the writers I thought exemplified what literature could do were in prison or in exile. In fact, my whole relation to literature was conditioned by the imprisonment or exile of writers; my reading formation, like that of other Africans of my generation, was framed by the idea of the writer as a person at risk. I discovered Wole Soyinka's plays when he was in solitary confinement in Kaduna Prison in Northern Nigeria; I was reading Chinua Achebe when he was virtually stateless after the end of the Nigerian civil war; the writers I interacted with and came to know well—John Ruganda and O'kot p'Bitek, for example—were refugees in Kenya; I was a student at the University of Nairobi when my teacher, the novelist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, was arrested and detained without trial. In these circumstances, it was hard to tell my grandmother that literature was the site for securing freedom. It only seemed to get one in trouble.

And yet, beneath the precarity of the writer in jail or exile was to be found a valuable lesson: when freedom was lost, or when the writing self was under threat, the imaginary became the custodian of the quality of the human, indeed a measure of the human. In *The Man Died*, his prison memoir, Soyinka would inform his readers that while he was in Kaduna Prison, books smuggled by sympathetic guards provided him with "the indescribably exquisite pleasure of reading." Determined to assert his freedom from the dictates of the military, Soyinka proceeded "to cover the spaces between the lines" of the smuggled books with his own poems (front matter). In prison, where he had been deprived of his name and reduced to a number, Ngũgĩ would defy the government that had imprisoned him by writing a novel on toilet paper. "Writing this novel has been a daily, almost hourly, assertion of my will to remain human and free . . . ," Ngũgĩ would assert in *Detained*, his account of a year spent in Kamiti Maximum Security Prison (6). The poet Dennis Brutus, trying to escape from arrest in South Africa, was shot in the back, captured, and eventually sent to the infamous prison for political prisoners on Robben Island. As a political prisoner, Brutus was permitted to write nothing but letters to members of his own family. To beat the system, Brutus disguised his poems as letters to his sister, Martha, producing some of the most memorable verses on imprisonment:

> The not-knowing
> is perhaps the worst part of the agony
> for those outside;
>
> not knowing what cruelties must be endured
> what indignities the sensitive spirit must face
> what wounds the mind can be made to inflict
> on itself;
>
> and the hunger to be thought of
> to be remembered
> and to reach across space
> with filaments of tenderness and consolation.
> (9)

Apparently, the censors couldn't tell the difference between a letter and a poem and we should be grateful for their ignorance, because it was through the publication of Brutus's collection of poems *Letters to Martha* in 1968 that the world heard, perhaps for the first time, what was happening on Robben Island. And for most of the 1970 and 1980s, activists would use Brutus's poems, together with the plays of Athol Fugard, to galvanize international opinion against apartheid in South Africa.

As good products of the post-1968 moment, my generation believed that literature was a form of witnessing; and if we turned to literature to mobilize politically, it is be-

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cause we believed it could make our suffering intelligible to others. Such affirmations were, however, also expressions of our deep anxieties about the capacity of the imagination to enable an interhuman relationship or even to help us see ourselves in relation to others. Still, we wondered whether literature, faced with the arbitrary exercise of power, would amount to anything more than an expression of piety. My fear was that after reading the narratives, dramas, and poems of imprisonment, we would wake up to discover that paramilitary units still controlled the streets and secret policemen sat in classrooms trying to sniff out dissent.

These were the melancholy thoughts that I found myself sharing with other young Africans in the summer of 1976, when our belief that literature did indeed have the capacity to change the world—a faith propagated by the Black Arts Movement—would be tested in unexpected ways. That summer, in Soweto, high school students rose up in revolt against the language policies of the state and the racial ideologies underlying them. The South African state had decided to make Afrikaans the medium of instruction in all Black schools, an act that students at those schools considered to be another attempt to restrict their claims for universal freedom by locking them in the language of the oppressor and in a semantics that was full of contempt for, and injury to, their bodies.

And if one particular image captured both the spirit of revolt and its violent consequences, it was Sam Nzima's photograph of the dead body of Hector Pieterson, gunned down by the police, being carried by a friend, Mbuyisa Makhubo, Pieterson's sister Antoinette Sithole by his side. The mood of the period would later come to be captured in "For Don M. Banned," a poem by Mongane Wally Serote, addressed to his colleague, the poet Don Mattera, who had been "banned" by the state and could therefore not be addressed publicly:

> It is a dry white season
> dark leaves don't last, their brief lives dry out
> and with a broken heart they dive down
> gently headed for the earth,
> not even bleeding.

To cope with the immense sense of loss that I felt as a teenager, I sought escape in books. I buried myself in Euripides's *Women of Troy*, seeking refuge in what Nicole Loraux has aptly called "the mourning voice of tragedy" (11):

> HECABE. O city, dead, deserted, I weep for you.
> Home where my babes were born, this is your
> end:
> Who would not weep? City lost, children lost,
> All lost! Was there ever heard such chorus of
> pain?
> When were such tears shed for a murdered
> house?
> Can even the dead see this, and forget to weep?
> CHORUS. In times of sorrow it is a comfort to
> lament,
> To shed tears, and find music that will voice
> our grief. (lines 601–08)

Exasperated by my choice of reading, some of my more radical friends would ask the inevitable question: What did the lamentation of captive women in Ancient Greece have to do with the political crisis of our times? Think of the cry of Winnie Mandela, not that of Hecuba.

It would take me years to realize that my kinship with the children of Soweto was pegged on an empathy born out of the violence of a shared colonial history and the collective suffering that it engendered, that the violent drama playing out in Soweto in 1976—police chasing protesters with armored vehicles and dogs—had been part of my own childhood. But because I had repressed memories of this childhood trauma so that I could move on in the brave new world of decolonization, the violent rite of passage that was taking place in Soweto taught me that it was only through the understanding of the sufferings and struggles of others that I could come to terms with my past,

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that only the sorrow songs of others, functioning as an echo, would "tell in word and music of trouble and exile, of strife and hiding" (Du Bois 185). Identity in difference would enable what Emmanuel Levinas called the interhuman perspective—"of *my* responsibility for the other person, without concern for reciprocity" (165). It is only out of this sense of responsibility that the suffering and struggles of the children of Soweto would be understood and our responsibility to them be seen not merely as an extension of a political project but as an ethics premised on the relationship of human beings to one another and to other species. The captured women of Troy belonged in the same world as Winnie Mandela mourning a husband sentenced to life on Robben Island and Antoinette Sithole mourning the death of her brother in Soweto on that morning in June 1976.[14] As "the other of politics," literature would perhaps help us recognize what it meant to live together across differences and divisions.[15]

Beyond the Human

It would, of course, be irresponsible of me to exalt the right to be human without acknowledging the fact that the human, a category that has preoccupied literature from its very beginning, has also—always—been compromised. Literature might well be guilty of overrepresenting the human as the prerogative of the species. As Wynter noted in 2003, "the struggle of our new millennium will be one between the ongoing imperative of securing the well-being of our present ethnoclass (i.e., Western bourgeois) conception of the human, Man, which overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself, and that of securing the well-being, and therefore the full cognitive and behavioral autonomy of the human species itself/ourselves" (257). One could go even further and ask whether we have a right to defend the rights of the one species—the human—that has brought so much suffering on itself and now threatens to destroy the earth.

But I don't think it is a choice between the human as concept and the human as species. In fact, we need to resist the temptation to see ourselves only in opposition to others—other peoples, other species, other words. We have to resist forms of knowledge and understanding that will lock us up in what Levinas calls "the marvelous alterity of the Other," an alterity that has been "banalized or dimmed in a simple exchange of courtesies which become established as an 'inter-personal commerce' of customs" (165). I still hold out hope that the imaginative constitutes what Victor Shklovsky calls "a special way of thinking . . . a way of thinking in images" (5). The purpose of art, notes Shklovsky, is to "recover the sensation of life . . . to make one feel things" (12). To imagine, as the famous Swahili poet Shaaban Robert once put it, is to affirm the necessity of justice:

> Haki ni jambo aula, walimwengu kutumia,
> Haki dawa ya madhila, nuru katika dunia,
> Na pindi ikitawala, udhalimu hukimbia. . . . (84)

> Justice is a good thing, for human beings to have,
> Justice cures many ills, for it is like light on earth,
> When it comes to rule, repression disappears. . . . (85)[16]

Amid the violence of the modern, this thing called literature has made it possible for many of us to recover the sensation of life and to yearn for values—including justice and beauty—that help us counter the logic of domination. I cannot say for certain that a life lived in literature offers any guarantees, but as we confront the challenges of the twenty-first century, a concern with small things such as words and images can perhaps enable us to recover a measure of the human in the larger universe of things. I have been honored to serve the MLA as its 129th president. As we say in East Africa,

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Kwaheri ya kuonana ("Goodbye and see you soon").

Notes

1. The proverb comes to us courtesy of Chinua Achebe ("Chi" 133).

2. For discussions on literature and human rights, see Nussbaum; Slaughter; Anker; Dawes; and the essays collected in Parikh.

3. The South Africa in which Abrahams was living had many of the characteristics Levi identified in the Nazi *Lager* (concentration camp)—it was "pre-eminently a gigantic biological and social experiment" (87), in this case committed to the production of docile Black bodies.

4. I'm thinking here of Patterson's discussion of the natal alienation of the subjected, more specifically the definition of the slave as a "socially dead person" alienated from rights and claims of birth and hence excommunicated from "any legitimate social order" (5).

5. When Abrahams was growing up, Vrededorp was a suburb of Johannesburg occupied by a mixture of white and nonwhite populations; in 1962, it was designated a white-only area.

6. The concepts of transcendentalism and aesthetic education I refer to here derive from Friedrich von Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education* (169). For Schiller and the double bind of the colonized, see Spivak 19–21.

7. A comprehensive discussion of the Bantu Men's Social Center and its use of culture to counter the deracination wrought by colonial labor in South Africa can be found in Peterson (113–35).

8. Hannah Arendt reflected on the gap between "a past which we have irretrievably lost and a future which is not yet at hand . . . , the abyss of empty space between the no longer and the not yet" (159).

9. Here I echo Langston Hughes's "I, Too": "I, too, sing America . . . / I, too, am America."

10. Du Bois's assertion is worth quoting in full: "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line,—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea" (16).

11. For an elaboration of this argument, see Gikandi, "Editor's Column"; for a discussion of the cruelty and violence of modernity, see Franco.

12. My concern here is not the quality of Karadzic's poetry but the fact that he did not seem to see a contradiction between his work as a poet and as a mass murderer. For samples of the poems, see "World's Most Wanted Man." An excellent discussion of poetry and war crime can be found in Surdukowski.

13. For some background on this period in Kenya, see Elkins. Wanjaũ documented his experiences as a writer in prison in *Mwandĩki wa Mau Mau Ithaamĩrio-inĩ* (*Mau Mau Writer in Detention*).

14. For a similar analogy between Winnie Mandela and the suffering women of ancient Greece, more specifically Penelope, see Njabulo S. Ndebele's powerfully lyric novel *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*.

15. Loraux claims that tragic drama could be considered antipolitical because it "can designate the other of politics, but also another politics, no longer based on consensus and living together, but [based on] the 'bond of division'" (23). Diverging slightly from Loraux, I conceive of literary expression as an "other politics," which negotiates a gray line between community (consensus and living together) and an acknowledgment of difference.

16. I have modified Ndulute's translation.

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