Language, Subjectivity, and Meaningful Change

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Abstract

Drawing from analyses of both fiction (Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* and Franz Kafka's short story "A Report to an Academy") and graduate student writing, this thesis discusses the relationship between individuals and language. I start from the premise that our attempts to make meaning of ourselves and the world around us depend on the cultural patterns of language use we either voluntarily or are obliged to acquire. In three independent but related chapters, I explore the implications of this premise for subjectivity formation, paying particular attention to the ways we know ourselves, our ability to engage in critical reflection, and the manner in which we represent ourselves in language.

The overall goal of this thesis is to examine the possibilities and limitations of individual autonomy and agency in social discourse. Together, these three chapters serve to outline some considerations for conceptualizing the participation of the subject in social change by identifying the function of language learning to transition and integrate individuals into particular cultural contexts.

Resumé

Basée à la fois sur l'analyse d'œuvres de fiction (Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, et Franz Kafka's « A Report to an Academy ») et sur des travaux rédigés par des étudiants de second cycle, cette thèse traite de la relation entre les individus et la langue. Je pars du postulat que les efforts que nous mettons pour tenter de comprendre qui nous sommes et le monde dans lequel nous vivons dépendent des schémas culturels d'usage linguistique que nous acquerrons volontairement ou sommes forcés d'acquérir. Dans trois chapitres indépendants mais interreliés, j'explore l'influence de ce postulat sur la formation de la subjectivité, en portant une attention particulière sur la manière dont nous nous connaissons nous-mêmes, sur notre capacité à faire preuve de réflexion critique et sur notre façon de nous représenter à travers la langue.

L'objectif général de cette thèse est d'examiner les possibilités et les limitations du positionnement et de l'autonomie individuelle au sein du discours social. Ensemble, ces trois chapitres suggèrent certaines avenues permettant de conceptualiser la participation du sujet dans le changement social, en identifiant la fonction d'apprentissage de la langue afin de permettre aux individus de s'adapter et de s'intégrer dans des contextes culturels particuliers.

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Insofar as a Master's thesis can be dedicated, I'd like to dedicate this one to Allison for whom despite all efforts no words seemed to suffice, and yet without whom there seem no words worth writing.

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Introduction:

> Through my language I understand that I am being spoken to, I'm not the one speaking. The words are coming from many tongues and mouths of Okanagan people and the land around them. I am a listener to the language's stories, and when my words form I am merely retelling the same stories in different patterns.
>
> Jeanette Armstrong, 1989, p. 181

When we learn to use words, and when we learn the functions they serve in the social contexts within which they operate, we learn ourselves to function in those contexts, we assume (willingly or unwillingly) functional roles and become recognizable subjects with useful, meaningful thoughts. We find ourselves transitioning.

This proposition is the line of thought that I will explore in this thesis. Since Saussure (1922/1983), Wittgenstein (1953/2001), and Bakhtin (1953/1986), there has been a significant conceptual shift in the way language is understood with consequences in seemingly non-linguistic fields as diverse as cultural studies, psychology, history, and philosophy (Hall, 1997). Increasingly, attention is now given to the constitutive effect of language in the meanings individuals make of their communities and their world. The importance of this relatively recent approach to language emerges in relation to an argument each of these scholars advanced in their own way: language is neither a product of our autonomous, individual minds, nor a neutral representational means revealing essential truths about the world. Rather, language is a social product and practice that allows meaning to be constructed and exchanged. Roy Harris (1988), who

provided the 1983 English translation of Saussure's major contribution, *Course in General Linguistics,* explained this point as follows:

> Language is no longer regarded as peripheral to our grasp of the world in which we live, but as central to it. Words are not mere vocal labels or communicational adjuncts superimposed upon an already given order of things. They are collective products of social interaction, essential instruments through which human beings constitute and articulate their world. (p. ix)

In as much as language has become a focus of attention in specific disciplines throughout universities, it has also, unsurprisingly, influenced the field of education. If language is central to thought, it follows that language must be considered in the activity of learning as well as the development of educational policy. The impact has perhaps been most influential in literacy studies. Discourse analysts from Kress (1989) to Fairclough (1989), and from Gee (2004, 1990/2008) to Lemke (1995), together have investigated the social implications of language learning and literacy acquisition, paying particular attention to the role of literacy practices in the reproduction of power relations. Yet, the "linguistic turn," as Rorty (1967/1992) has called it, has also been felt in other areas of educational studies. Drawing from Bakhtin, scholars in writing and composition studies have found it necessary to approach genres rhetorically. Viewing genres as social action (e.g., Miller, 1994), these authors have identified how writing functions differently in different situations. This has lead to the widely accepted assertion that competent writing is a social activity, and, as a result, cannot be

artificially detached from context in composition courses (Dias, Freedman, Medway, & Paré, 1999). In the sociology of education, scholarship has identified the intersection between language curriculum and racism in multilingual communities (Luke, 2008). While in the philosophy of education, there has been a concerted effort to expose learning as a form of semiotic engagement, a move that attempts to break with the mind/body, mind/environment dualism that prevails in traditional educational thought (Appel, 2004; Hirst, 1967; Stables, 2006).

An underlying theme permeates each of these recent approaches to language in education: the relationship between social patterns of language use and subjectivity formation. As Dias and Paré (2000) stated it: "participation in the regular discourse practices of a community shapes the individual's knowledge and ways of knowing" (p. 3); Gee (1990/2008) argued it as follows: "ways with words are connected to different identities ... [and] they are always acquired within and licensed by specific social and historically shaped practices representing the values and interests of distinct groups of people" (p. 212); or Appel (2004), drawing from Lacan: "far from human beings having an essence of consciousness or being structured into clear conscious and unconscious parts, we are, [Lacan] said, more like an assemblage of signifiers grouped around a proper name" (p. 99). This thesis picks up on this argument: if "language and discourse are not," in Luke's (1998) summary of the poststructuralist perspective, "neutral means for describing or analysing the social and biological world" (p. 49), and if all "thinking involves the use of words and sentences or symbols of some kind" (Hirst, 1967, p. 64), then our capacity for understanding ourselves, like our capacity for understanding the world, is inherently a social one. Our *individual*

attempts to relate to ourselves, and our *individual* attempts to understand the world must necessarily be recast in light of the very role social language itself plays in the task. This thesis will explore the implications of this argument as it relates to the following questions: How are subjectivities formed and reformed through engagement with language? What is enabled through language and how is it constraining? How does agency, as a capacity to act upon the social norms transmitted through social patterns of language use, emerge? And, furthermore, what considerations must be taken regarding language learning and language use in educational programs? If learning occurs in and through language, then education must concern itself with the subjective transformations it demands.

The questions considered in this thesis are not themselves new. They have received and will continue to receive attention in the university. My goal is not to provide further justification for or refute the claim that language matters in the ways suggested above. Rather, I hope to take a unique approach to interrogating its consequences, particularly as they relate to issues central to progressive education: issues of criticality, reflexivity, agency, and power. Insofar as the relationship of the individual to language is itself an act of subjectivity (re)formation, it is a relationship between *learning* and personal transformation. It follows, I believe, that the broad investigation of this relationship falls squarely on education's theoretical agenda.

In this vein, the following chapters examine some of the conceptual difficulties that emerge in the meeting of the individual with language and discourse within a poststructuralist paradigm. But they do not focus exclusively on language acquisition in educational settings. Rather, through three independent

but interrelated chapters, this thesis explores more generally the subjective processes involved in the engagement. It is at times, however, a disheartening study. In each chapter, although in distinct ways, the focus is on how people are constrained and/or hurt in and through cultural patterns of language-use. Coming to terms with what is realized and foreclosed in language is, I believe, a difficult first step towards what I hope will be a greater project understanding agency within social discourse and semiotics.

Investigating Language with Language

It is one thing to suggest that we think in languages that are socially shared, and that this has important implications that need to be investigated, and quite another to apply the argument to the actual investigation itself. Much of the theory I explore in the following pages seems to demand just that, that researchers be aware of how socialization influences their research. To follow through on this demand, to apply the theory I draw upon to the actual composition of this thesis, is to attempt to *do* what I *say*. In as much as it is possible to state that education might be thought of as a discipline proper (like philosophy or sociology) rather than a field of inquiry (like doing philosophy or sociology *in* or *of* education), its distinguishing feature, I believe, is that doing education is always ultimately an attempt to engage in praxis; as a discipline, education is both reflexive and recursive. A philosophical paper might have something to say, but a paper in the *discipline* of education is also itself a demonstration of what the paper has said. The focus on praxis has two implications for this thesis.

First, this thesis is realized through a language that is not completely my own. Ultimately, it is a product of my own engagement with a language (or discourse or social semiotic formation) that, as a student, I have embarked on learning; I find myself transitioning. That subjective transitions follow from our academic endeavours is perhaps not particular to student life but a consequence of any attempt to describe something anew, to say something one has never before said. In the *Use of Pleasure*, Foucault (1984/1990) asked:

> What would be the value of the passion for knowledge if it resulted only in a certain amount of knowledgeableness and not, in one way or another and to the extent possible, in the knower's straying afield of himself? There are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all. (p. 8)

Like the language learners I describe in the chapters to come, I am attempting to come to terms with new language, and consequently, attempting to appropriate the socially productive thoughts this language gives rise to. We can never really know at the outset where we will find ourselves in the end, or, for that matter, what we will have accomplished in doing so.

Second, the question of how the following investigations should be carried out. While the words I use are not, strictly speaking, my own, neither are they a neutral or asocial descriptive medium. The language I use is always to some extent situated, coming from somewhere and from some group of people. What,

then, are the implications of this argument on our modes of inquiry, on our methods of doing science or philosophy, or on our attempts to describe something anew?

In his essay "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man [*sic*]" (1971), Charles Taylor identified the interrelatedness of language, experience, and meaning which marks a group or community of people. "The range of human desires, feelings, emotions, and hence meanings," he wrote, "is bound up with the level and type of culture, which in turn is inseparable from the distinctions and categories marked by the language people speak" (p. 15). To say that meaning is inextricable from the language we use to exchange it, and that this language is itself particular to certain human communities, suggested for Taylor that we must necessarily rely on *interpretation* in our sense making efforts. Taylor explained:

> Already to be a living agent is to experience one's situation in terms of certain meanings; and this in a sense can be thought of as a sort of proto-"interpretation." This is in turn interpreted and shaped by the language in which the agent lives these meanings. This whole is then at a third level interpreted by the explanation we proffer of his [or her] actions. (p. 17)

We rely on words to understand experience and behaviour. And our words only have sense in relation to the social patterns of language within which they operate. There is no impersonal, asocial language that offers objective knowledge. We interpret. As Taylor explains, "we cannot escape an ultimate appeal to a common understanding of the expressions, of the 'language' involved" (p. 6). Despite our

pretentions towards truth, we are "bound up" in an interpretive exercise, at least in our attempts to study subjective experiences in human communities. To put it another way, as Terry Eagleton (1996) argued of literary criticism, "there is no reading of a work which is not also a 're-writing'" (p. 11); and this "re-writing" is necessarily carried out in a *language* common to particular communities.

Yet this is not to argue that nothing can really be said of anything. In the critical extensions of Saussure, Wittgenstein, and Bakhtin, the argument that the languages we use to produce and exchange knowledge are *situated* has lead to a greater acceptance of what Michael Peters (1996) described as a "plurality of reasons – irreducible, incommensurable and related to specific genres, types of discourse and epistemes" (p. 2). There are various ways of using language that might give rise to new and meaningful descriptions. Along this line of thinking, the three chapters that follow constitute three essays or *essais* – three tries, tests, or experiments – that attempt to *say* something meaningful about a topic I believe of central relevance to the thought and practice of education, knowing all the while that what is said must be a product of the experiment itself. What methods, then, should be used?

Literature and interpretation as methodology.

The turn towards interpretation has I believe a levelling effect. If "science" is the "systematic knowledge of the true causes of particular things" (Smith, 1997, p. 16), then it is the ostensible systematic methods which support it that are no longer viable as truth bearing methodologies. They are, instead, interpretations.

There is, therefore, not much to distinguish scientific, philosophical or theoretical accounts of human interaction from other interpretive approaches, including literature and literary criticism.

As such, it might be argued that the distinction between fictional (or literary) and non-fictional interpretations no longer holds. For example, in *Power/Knowledge*, Foucault (1980) appeared to deny the distinction:

> As to the problem of fiction, it seems to me a very important one; I am well aware that I have never written anything but fictions. I do not mean to say, however, that truth is therefore absent. It seems to me that the possibility exists for fiction to function in truth. (p. 193)

If philosophy and critical theory are *interpretive* attempts to "read the world," as preeminent critical educator Freire (1970) would have us do, then they are also attempts, in Terry Eagleton's words, to "re-write" the world. But what does it mean to re-write the world through philosophy or theory? The linguistic turn has shown that like literature there is an excess to the philosophical or theoretical language used. This excess can be traced back to its derivation from the larger social semantic structure from which it emerges. Scholarly language is, as a matter of course, literary. As Wittgenstein (1980) wrote, "I think I summed up my attitude towards philosophy when I said: philosophy ought really to be written only as a *poetic composition*" (p. 24). We read philosophy, theory, and literature in much the same way: we interpret its interpretation, we write its "re-writing."

It might be argued, therefore, that those valued advancements in philosophy and theory have been manifestations of a literary effort that has been found attractive. New ways of understanding human processes and interactions is a matter of description that cannot be detached from the form in which that description has been presented. One consequence of this argument is that philosophy and theory do not themselves hold pride of place in describing (interpreting) human organization; literature too might have something to contribute. While we certainly draw upon theory to read literature, we might equally draw upon literature to read theory. The first two of the following three chapters attempt to do just that.

In terms of the specific focus on language, meaning, and subjectivity this thesis takes, drawing upon literature is a profitable route. It is perhaps not surprising that we find in literature insightful explorations of the importance of words to thought. In Rorty's (1989) view, strong authors, or "poets" as he puts it, often find themselves working at the limits of meaningful language, and they may find the boundaries of language itself an important object for their fictional work. Nevertheless, determining the theoretical implications of such instances of fiction, as I attempt to do in chapter one and two, constitutes somewhat of a unique approach to analyzing literature. Traditionally, literary criticism has often been concerned with ascertaining the value of a text. Yet there have been multiple ways to assess this value: in the moral lessons conveyed; in its ability to affect and relay that which is essential to humanity; the manner in which literature makes the routine strange; or the ways in which the story illustrates constrictive power relations or undermines sedimented cultural truths. In other instances the value of

the text itself seems unimportant, what is important is revealing how dominant power operates through the text either ideologically or discursively to maintain unequal relations of social power. What is common in each of these approaches is that the object of the investigation is the text. The role of theory in this case determines what is relevant in a text (what characteristics should be valued or interrogated) but also how the text should be read. The directionality is from theory to text. But to draw on literature to advance theory is to regard the object of the analysis as shifting between text and theory. The relationship between the two is decidedly dialectical. While this might seem like a departure from how pieces of fiction are normally treated, this is not necessarily a novel approach: Levi-Strauss was deeply influenced by the binary structure Russian critic Roman Jakobson found in literature (Bertens, 2001), and the verse-like quality of Fanon's writing has been taken up in both Bhabha (1994) and Butler (2004) to advance post-colonial theory and feminist theory respectively.

The Essays

One way to extend the argument above is to suggest that new avenues for meaning-making might emerge from how language affects in ways that exceed, for the reader, the reality it points towards. Or, to put it another way, new avenues for meaning-making might emerge from how language affects a *break* from the normative discourse formations drawn upon by the reader to interpret the language in the first place. Here, I believe, begins an argument for a semiotic approach to agency. The present thesis falls short of exploring this ambitious

argument. Instead with these three chapters – these three *essais* – I hope to set the stage for examining such a project by exploring the transitions involved in language learning and the possibility for autonomy in social discourse.

The first chapter explores Chinua Achebe's (1958/1986) *Things Fall Apart,* whose significance for this thesis rests with its treatment of first contact in the West African/British colonial encounter. Through the analysis of two literary devices, I argue that the text offers insight into two important points which have become central since the linguistic turn. The first half of the essay focuses on a shift in narrative voice from indigenous to colonialist that Achebe executes in the final chapter. The shift, I argue, gives Achebe's reader a sense, not only of the social nature of language, but the destruction that occurs when the meanings offered in particular languages are universalized. As a result, Achebe counters universalist claims that language corresponds to reality, an argument made all the more pertinent since colonialism found justification in universalist presumptions of social organization. The second half of the essay develops from the first. By reading the novel as a particular form of literary tragedy, the question of agency is explored with respect to structures of meaning upheld in language. I argue that in writing a novel with significant parallels to the classical Greek tragedy genre, Achebe refuses to absolve his *Igbo* protagonist of the violence he ultimately suffers from the social upheaval of colonialism. Although Achebe in no way diminishes the accountability of the colonialists, in treating his protagonist Okonkwo as a tragic hero, complete with a tragic flaw which implicates him as a participant in his own demise, Achebe indicates that we must try to understand a

non-essentialist agency in which culture matters and yet individuals are able to negotiate cultural change without submitting themselves to it.

The second chapter takes up this challenge. It begins with the assumption that agency requires, at least in part, critical reflexivity. However, the main argument of the chapter is that before any positive account of reflexivity can be advanced, the paradox of the individual who emerges through language, but who then is called upon to understand themselves as a product of that language, must be acknowledged. This chapter attempts to deal with this paradox through a reading of Kafka's "A Report to an Academy." In this short story, an ape named Red Peter learns the skill of academic erudition but loses the ability to speak about himself as an ape. "A Report to an Academy" serves as a literary example of the poststructuralist argument concerning the self-formation one embarks upon with respect to the social meanings of one's context, identifying how this self-formation can be thought of as a relationship between thoughts and words. The story serves as a critique of the humanist presumptions of the conscious individual who deliberately exceeds the social language that forms their subjectivities in order to reflect back upon this language. I close the chapter with some considerations for a positive account of reflexivity.

In the third chapter I explore how student writing responds to contextual demands in order to emphasize authorial knowledge at the expense of legitimate attempts to contribute to a discourse community. In this chapter I experiment with a different approach and take on a different tone than that taken in chapters one and two. Drawing on genre studies, I use samples of student writing to argue that, in response to their position in the academy and the evaluative function their

writing serves, students necessarily use language in a manner which betrays their position *as students*. I draw upon three master's theses introductions and compare them to three introductions of published texts from the same field in order to exemplify and provide preliminary justification to the argument advanced. What we see in the rhetorical devices employed are students who, like Red Peter, struggle to adopt the discourse practices, thoughts, and roles of a specific culture of which they have yet to become full members. However, we see their efforts hampered by the function their language must serve in a context which fundamentally differs from the context they aim to enter. They are students who are attempting to be full scholars but who are, nevertheless, compelled to speak and write as students. In this way, these students add an important corrective to the analysis of Red Peter taken in chapter 2: Red Peter's becoming must be seen against the individuals who evaluate its success.

Together these three chapters offer a preliminary theoretical examination of the relationship between language and subjectivity, focussing specifically on the subjective transitions involved in language acquisition and the restrictions to autonomy found in language. Each essay can be read as a standalone piece, but together I hope to demonstrate how language both constrains and enables, but is, in the end, essential in our attempts to be.

Chapter 1: The Order of Things in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity,* Richard Rorty (1989) argued that "where there are no sentences there is no truth, that sentences are elements of human languages, and that human languages are human creations" (p. 5). In those places where sentences circulate uncontested from one speaker to the next, truth establishes itself and utopian visions emerge, defining the right way of thinking and being in the world. Heterotopias on the other hand, as Michel Foucault (1966/2002) explained in the preface to *The Order of Things,* are those unsettling places and occasions where truth bearing sentences lose their regularity, become discordant and right ways of living are no longer simply articulated. As Foucault explained:

> Heterotopias are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this and that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy "syntax" in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things to "hold together." (p. xix)

In the brief, final chapter of *Things Fall Apart* (1958/1986, all page numbers refer to this edition) Chinua Achebe successfully evokes a heterotopia. A shift in the narrative tone renders the final pages of the novel an antithesis to the entirety of the text that preceded it. The voice of European imperialism is

introduced to the African story, disordering the sentences that came before and undermining the indigenous truths they carried. At this moment Achebe disturbingly tears us, his readers, from what Holland, Skinner, Lachiotte, and Cain (1998) might describe as the "culturally figured world" of his protagonist, Okonkwo, where he has exclusively kept us since the outset of the novel. The material and symbolic practices Okonkwo engages in, and the cultural narratives and imaginings he contributes to – those *things* which have so obviously constituted Okonkwo's "web of meaning" (Geertz, 1973) – have abruptly and callously been repudiated from the narrative. Instead, Achebe closes the story with the words and thoughts of his seemingly dispassionate colonial official, who, along with his fellow colonialists, is to ostensibly carry Africa into the prosperity of modernity. Achebe's heterotopia is significant because it serves as one of the few occasions where our dependency to cultural networks of meanings is made acutely evident. At the same time, as Achebe's story also suggests, if heterotopias mark those moments when social structures of meaning break down, then they also serve to indicate those moments where individuals themselves might break from social structure and exert agency over the meanings which circulate in culture. Through Achebe's *Things Fall Apart,* the following essay will examine both aspects of the relationship between the individual and the cultural syntax that holds together "words and things."

***Things Fall Apart* and**

In 1956, when *Things Fall Apart* was first published, high colonialism was beginning to wane in West Africa as it was globally. Nine years had passed since the partitioning of India. In 1957, Ghana would become the first sub-Saharan African country to gain independence. Nigeria, the home of *Igbo* people of whom Achebe wrote and is himself counted, would follow three years later. The story serves to mark an important, early milestone in the postcolonial tradition, and has, over half a century later, remained very much relevant to that tradition (see Whittaker and Mpalive-Hangson, 2007). Following Fanon (1952) and Césaire (1955), Achebe provided one of the first subaltern accounts of the lasting terrors of colonialism for a wider European and North American readership.

Although only those who have experienced colonialism can understand the full extent of its ravages, it speaks to the power of Achebe's writing that he was able to translate this experience, at least to some extent, to a wider audience. Colonialism, in both its past and present forms, has unequivocally demonstrated the destruction that follows when theories of human organization and human development are applied globally. It serves as one of the most telling reminders that the truths we hold are inextricably linked to our culture and our time and place. *Things Fall Apart* (1956/1986) is a vivid illustration that colonialism operates, at least in part, by undermining the symbolic resources and signifying practices in which local knowledge is held and circulated. To understand the full effect of colonialism, we need to understand the role these symbolic resources and signifying practices – the very *things* of culture – play in the everyday lives of individuals, in their attempts to make meaning and convey meaning. We also need

to understand this if we are to come to understand how individuals might assume autonomy from the signifying practices of their culture.

The first half of Achebe's novel provides a detailed account of traditional, pre-contact *Igbo* culture before going on, in the second half, to portray the devastation of its undoing through the dual forces of colonial administration and Christian missionary work. The story centers on the rise and fall of Okonkwo who emerged as one of the most successful and respected men of his village despite beginning his life in the "poverty and misfortune" (p. 19) left to him by an indolent father. The first half of the story tells of Okonkwo's ascent, a success achieved through his stringent commitment to the traditional practices and customs of his village, Umuofia. It is precisely because of this commitment that Okonkwo's fate is ominously foretold in the decline of traditional Umuofia and the rise of the Christianity and the colonial state that is described in the second half.

Okonkwo commits suicide before the heterotopia takes place, before the Commissioner's voice takes hold of the narrative. But it is the Commissioner's awkward, incongruous attempt to make sense of the event that allows Achebe's readers to understand, after the fact, what may have drove Okonkwo to commit one of the greatest "abominations" of traditional *Igbo* culture. This shift away from the *Igbo* perspective towards that of the European Imperialist is what allows Achebe to suddenly and skilfully affect a *heterotopia:* a mis-arrangement or disordering of the meaningful *things* that have, since the beginning of the story, given the narrative a sense of continuity against the colonial dismantling of traditional Umuofia. Through his heterotopia, Achebe disorientates the reader,

unsettles the comfort she or he had previously found in the tone and voice of the narrative. In doing so he demonstrates the centrality on cultural signifying practices.

If *Things Fall Apart* simply illustrated our dependency on symbolic resources and signifying practices and the attack colonialism levelled against them, the story would have endured as a powerful and telling piece of fiction. But Achebe did more than this. He also provided a strong argument that while cultural resources play a central role in our meaning-making endeavours, individuals are still responsible for negotiating these resources and the meanings they hold. Far from individuals being an *effect* of culture, Achebe suggested individuals must be granted the capacity to reflect and take action. In the second part of this essay I argue that Achebe advances this point by writing *Things Fall Apart* in the tragic genre. In writing a tragedy, I argue that Achebe provided a powerful statement concerning the capacity of individuals to emerge as agents despite, or perhaps because of, the loss of meaning that follows from periods of change.

Together, the two parts attempt to advance an important argument that emerges from Achebe's most influential work: the need to conceptually understand an individual's agency in cultural discourse without diminishing the foundational role cultural discourses play in meaning-making practices.

Part 1: The Social Emergence of Meaning.

In Part 1 of this essay, I draw upon theoretical and philosophical accounts of language as a means to further elaborate three points the narrative

shift serves to demonstrate: the operation of colonialism through the assumption of universal knowledge; the fallaciousness of essentialist approaches to language; and the necessity of cultural resources and signifying practices in our attempts to know and be. I end Part 1 by arguing that the narrative shift serves as a powerful and ominous close to the story because it offers a visceral sense of what Okonkwo lost in the colonial encounter.

Colonial knowledge and control.

The final chapter describes the Commissioner's arrival at Okonkwo's compound. He comes with the intention of arresting Okonkwo but is instead brought by the village *ndichie*[1] to the tree "from which [his] body was dangling" (p. 146). It is revealed to the Commissioner that it is against the customs of *Igbo* people for the clansmen of a man who has committed suicide to touch the body: "It is an abomination for a man to take his own life. It is an offence against the Earth.... His body is evil, and only strangers may touch it" (p. 147). The Commissioner is then asked to find "strangers" to do the job. Maximizing the power of the shift, Achebe turns the narrative towards the thoughts and desires of the District Commissioner to make meaning of this final, moving scene.

[1] Achebe translates *ndichie* for the English speaking world as elder. His choice to offer this translation, along with a host of other Igbo words, in an appendix and to continue to use the word *ndichie* throughout the text suggests that, for Achebe, *elder* cannot neatly contain the meaning *ndichie.* A reader in the Western world in present times has no choice but to carry on reading with only a partial grasp of what *ndichie* fully connotes.

Up until that point, Achebe had engaged in a meticulous effort to bring his reader into the customary *Igbo* practices and meanings prevalent in Okonkwo's time. From masqueraded juridical processes to customary peace negotiations, Achebe carries the reader through a series of symbolic practices which signify and circulate meaning among Okonkwo's people. The cutting down of Okonkwo's body serves as another instance. But no longer does the narrator translate the custom from an *Igbo* perspective. Instead the interpretation of the self-proclaimed "resolute administrator" and self-identified "student of primitive culture" (p. 147) is offered. The effect is to immediately alienate the reader from Okonkwo's world. As Begam (1997) commented, the *Igbo* culture abruptly becomes an "object of anthropological curiosity" (np). *Igbo* culture is infantilized and only understandable through European methods of inquiry. Thus, with the Commissioner's introduction, a de-centering of meaning and knowledge occurs despite, or perhaps because of, the effort Achebe had devoted to bringing the traditional *Igbo* world to his reader. Through expelling his reader from one set of meanings and into another, hostile set, Achebe makes glaringly evident the situated nature of meaning.

The focus on the District Commissioner's interpretation also serves to demonstrate the centrality of the power/knowledge conflation in colonial administration. In a 1990 essay, Achebe argued that "understanding [the native] and controlling him [or her] went hand in hand – understanding being a pre-condition for control and control constituting adequate proof of understanding" (p. 71). This argument is suggested in the very last paragraph of the story. Here the Commissioner indicates that his ability to govern the natives was predicated on

his ability to study and supposedly understand them. This comes across through the Commissioner's plans to write the histories and customs of those "primitive tribes" he had come across in his time as a colonial administrator. His wish is to preserve all he has come to know concerning the administration of the Empire and its natives, presumably for a British audience interested in further solidifying colonial administration. The final sentence of *Things Fall Apart* is a distressing observation of his soon to be written book: "He had already chosen the title of the book, after much thought: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger"* (p. 148). In the final passage, Achebe illustrates how authority on Okonkwo and his people is established, how correct colonial administration is pronounced, and how proper treatment and control of Africans is defined and maintained for future generations.

Clearly, Achebe includes the District Commissioner as an ironic device in order to demonstrate the folly of the colonialists' assumption that they may *know* their colonies. Yet, the final chapter is disconcerting precisely because the Commissioner's perspective carries the final word of the story. Attached to that final word is the *knowledge* that grants the authority to govern and the moral rightness to apply power with impunity. However, what the narrative shift serves to demonstrate is that it is not the ability to *know* the native that authorizes power, as the District Commissioner falsely assumes. The Commissioner does not know the *Igbo* people he presides over. What is important is the ability to *name* the native, and to *name* what constitutes primitiveness, what constitutes pacification, and what constitutes civilization.

If the authority of colonialism lies in the power to *name* rather than the power to *know,* then what lies in the names one uses to hold together words to things? What meaning do these names hold? How do meanings become established and entrenched? And how, in turn, do names acquire the force with which to control?

The limits and commitments of *civilization*.

Achebe presents the Commissioner's thoughts as he leaves Okonkwo's hanging body: "In the many years in which he had toiled to bring *civilization* [emphasis added] to different parts of Africa he had learned a number of things" (p. 147). In this quote, and throughout the final chapter, we see in the Commissioner what Edward Said (1993) had described as an unwavering commitment among many Europeans of the era to the imperial expansion of *civilization*, a commitment that "allowed decent men and women to accept the notion that distant territories and their native peoples *should* be subjugated, and ... [to] think of the *imperium* as a protracted, almost metaphysical obligation to rule subordinate, inferior, or less advanced peoples" (p. 10). What is interesting is how such a commitment to what is signified by *civilization* becomes celebrated from the perspective of the Commissioner, or nonsensical and tragically intolerable from that of Okonkwo. The quote above is the sole instance where the word civilization appears in the story. However, read in light of the Commissioner's thoughts and actions, and against the rest of the story more generally, it serves to identify how words are imbued with meaning. What is important in the

Commissioner's reflection is not what civilization *is*. Instead, what is important is what the Commissioner has *named* as civilization, and how civilization in turn allows the Commissioner to make meaning of other words, concepts, and events. In this section, I examine how words are attributed meaning by exploring the Achebe's use of irony as he described the Commissioner's erroneous approach to signs.

At its most basic level *civilization* is a noun, and like all nouns it refers, names, or represents. For the District Commissioner, *civilization* is an observable achievement – a thing – which by his own account, he has "toiled" (p. 147) in various parts of Africa to bring about. Its meaning and, thus, value are unproblematically reflected in the word itself. Presumably, it signals that which a fragment of humanity has achieved and which the rest should work towards bringing about. This logocentric approach to meaning making is what Wittgenstein had described in *Philosophical Investigations* (1953/2001) as the Augustinian picture of the essence of language: "Every word has a meaning. The meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands" (§1). For Wittgenstein, this picture of meaning making places the word's referent entirely in the individual mind of the language user, on the one hand, and the *non*-social world on the other (Stern, 2004). In doing so, Wittgenstein argued, the Augustinian approach to language falsely separates meaning from the social context where it is productive.

The Commissioner's attachment to this essentialist understanding of words and their meanings can be identified in two separate occasions in the final chapter. The first occurs in a dispute between the Commissioner and Obierika, a

village *ndichie.* In reaction to a request made by Obierika, which the Commissioner is unable to understand, he reflects: "One of the most infuriating habits of these people [the natives] was their love of superfluous words" (p. 146). For the Commissioner, superfluous words *hide* meaning and obscure reality, they are useless and confusing – they do not *add* meaning to statements. But is the only divide between the *ndichie* and the Commissioner conciseness? Here the Commissioner's belief in the simplistic, referential quality of words signals his "metaphysical" commitment to the imperial civilizing project: If words are to reference meaning directly, and if meaning, therefore, is both external to language and contained entirely in the individual mind and non-social world rather than the social occasion, then words function in a singular manner, as a medium between the language user/receiver and reality. In the Commissioner's reproach lies a presumption that there is a "fixed task for language to perform" (Rorty, 1989, p. 13). Any deviance from the fixed task to construct truthful statements is faulty, fallacious, or superfluous. Proper language-use is the conduit of absolute meaning, of truth which can then be stored in the individual mind.

On a second occasion, Achebe described the Commissioner's apprehension towards engaging in "undignified," "primitive customs" (p. 147). Despite the fact that these customs are normal and usual among the villagers he governs, attending to such "details," he stated, "would give the natives a poor opinion of him" (p. 147); or, for that matter, any other person of his position. The irony is telling: the Commissioner worries that the very individuals who recognize different meanings in these acts, who live in the social and cultural context in which these acts serve a function, would view his participation in them as a sign

that he was unfit to govern and undignified in his duties. Like words, these acts operate as signs. It appears that, for the Commissioner, they universally signify an absolute meaning devoid of context. The sign operates in a singular manner *regardless* of its interpreters. Any enactment of "primitive customs" by an administrator signifies universally, even to those he or she deems primitive, uncivilized governance.

In these two moments Achebe establishes the progression from essentialist beliefs in the universal meaning-making capacity of signs, to metaphysical beliefs about truths, and, finally, to unwavering commitments to certain practices and actions. For the District Commissioner, language finds within itself a capacity to not only represent reality but correspond to universal truths about the world. From this perspective, language, and signs more generally describe the intrinsic nature of the world. Wittgenstein extends this argument further. What follows from this perspective, he stated, is that language becomes a "preconceived idea to which reality *must* correspond" (§ 131). For the Commissioner, *civilization*, as noun, reveals a *thing,* a thing which circumscribes a truth about the world. Its stability allows him to make sense of other signs and experiences; it allows him to "learn many things." Surely there could be nothing more universally honourable than the Commissioner's tireless commitment to *civilization*. In fact, the Commissioner eventually records the honours of the civilizing mission is in the fictional pages of his book, *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger.* The book resurfaces, two generations later, in the third part of Achebe's colonial trilogy

Arrow of God (1967)[2]. Early in the story the protagonist, himself a colonial official, quotes a passage from the end of *Pacification*, here our Commissioner proclaims: "'it is our greatest pride that [our mothers] do – albeit tearfully – send us fearless and erect, to lead the backward races into line. 'Surely we are the people!'" (p. 39).

But we might ask the District Commissioner: What exactly is *civilization* to which the backward races must align? What does it signify and are you sure you are correct in its application? And, why are the British "the people" to bring it about? Achebe powerfully illustrated that colonialism functions through the assumption that these questions can be answered once and for all. What Achebe demands is a different approach to making meaning. To resituate meaning making from the universal to the cultural we might gain a glimpse of what was lost through the imposition of colonial meaning.

Making meaning, making culture.

Wittgenstien responds to Socrates' question "what is knowledge?" by stating that there is no one way which the word *knowledge*, in and of itself, can be said to have meaning. "If I was asked what knowledge is," Wittgenstein stated, "I would list items of knowledge [the practices the word knowledge refers to] and add 'such like'" (as quoted in Stern, 2004, p. 14). What we need to do, he argued, is "bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use" (§ 116). For

[2] *Things Fall Apart* is the first of the three books. *No Longer at Ease* (1960) is the sequel and follows Okonkwo's grandson. *Arrow of God* (1963) finishes the trilogy.

Wittgenstein, we would presume that there is no response to the question "What is civilization"? We cannot look to the word itself to find its meaning – words do not carry their own meaning, they cannot themselves be expected to correspond to an intrinsic nature of the world, or an intrinsic nature of truth. For Wittgenstein words hold meaning by indexing or initiating culturally distinctive social practices.

Stern (2004) elaborated this point. For Stern, Wittgenstein's theory of language and meaning revealed that "our use of language, our grasp of its meaning, depends on a background of common behaviour and shared practices" (p. 14). In Wittgenstein's own words: "It is what human beings *say* that is true and false; and they agree in the *language* they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in *form of life* [emphasis added]" (§241). Wittgenstein's approach suggests that humans do not simply agree on the true definition of a signifier like *civilization*. For signifiers to hold meaning, humans must agree on the purposes they serve in their everyday life. Words establish meaning in accordance to their functions within social contexts. For Wittgenstein, meaning holds together when the rules of particular forms of life establish consistent use. On the other hand, forms of life fall apart, as Achebe shows us, when the social criterion of the usefulness of certain meaningful words is trumped by imposed metaphysical truths.

The juxtaposition of meaning that Achebe presented through the narrative shift supports Wittgenstein's argument. The heterotopia forcibly impresses the importance and centrality of something other than "real-world" correspondence as the prime discord between the people of Umuofia and the District Commissioner.

Immersing the reader in the words of the Commissioner jars the reader precisely because it forces upon us a shift between two *incommensurable* meaning-making practices or two *incommensurable forms of life*. But in urging us to abandon correspondence language theories of truth in favour of situated meanings that emerge in forms of life, Wittgenstien does little to elucidate this oblique concept. Yet we might find answers in more contemporary approaches to language.

In their description of figured worlds, Holland *et al*. (1998) made a similar break from the correspondence theory of language. The connection they sketch out between culture and language helps clarify the incommensurability between the two narrative voices of Achebe's story. The authors argued that

> socially generated, culturally figured worlds ... are necessary for understanding the meaning of words. When talking and acting people assume that their words and behaviour will be interpreted according to a context of meaning – as indexing or pointing to a culturally figured world." (p. 52)

This argument develops Wittgenstein's "forms of life." Like the word *civilization*, all symbols carry shared meaning because individuals share figured worlds. Figured worlds are "collective imaginings" (p. 51) or "socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation" (p. 52) which assign meaning to symbols, to acts, and to actors. In turn, when symbols are deployed among those who share figured worlds, they allow people to achieve certain ends: affecting behaviour or initiating the meaningful actions which allow figured worlds to function.

This approach seems to suggest that figured worlds are separate or distinct from language. If symbolic practices change – if clansmen *do* cut down the bodies

of those from their clan who have taken their own life, if village elders decide to speak less superfluously – figured worlds do not necessarily change. Yet, from this perspective figured worlds emerge as an indeterminate, amorphous "culture" through which signs are given meaning, no more helpful than Wittgenstein's *forms of life*.

Holland *et al*. (1998) clarify. They explained that meaning is produced not simply by referencing figured worlds, but rather "through habitual use ... cultural tools [signifying practices] become resources available for personal use, mnemonics of the activities they facilitate, and finally constitutive of thought, emotion, and behavior" (p. 50). As Stuart Hall (1997) concisely put it, "representation [enters] into the very constitution of things" (p. 5). Therefore, we might think of figured worlds as nothing more than the collection of signifying practices through which meaning is shared. It is not an amorphous culture that imparts meaning. Rather, it is meaningful signifying practices that constitute culture.

Jay Lemke (1995) argued that in order for signs to be recognizable and rendered meaningful signs must operate within *systematically-organized social formations of use* (cf. Kress, 1985). This argument allows us to think of forms of life as the culturally meaningful, habitual, and value-laden social practices of figured worlds, as Wittgenstein suggested, yet which are only made intelligible and possible through reference to *social semiotic formations*. Social semiotic formations Lemke defines as the "regular and repeatable, recognizably meaningful, culturally and historically specific patterns of co-deployment of semiotic resources in a community" (Lemke, 1995, p. 102). It is social semiotic

formations that allow us to recognize and engage the meaningful *doings* of our communities.

What necessarily follows, as Lemke (1995) also explained, is that language, including all signifying practices, integrates us into a social and material reality. The words the Commissioner says as, for example, he gives orders to his messengers or makes demands of the village *ndichie,* along with his actions, intonations, gestures, and so on, generate socially productive meaning, not only about the world, but importantly with respect to himself. What he says and does identifies him as a certain type of person. Indeed, Achebe plays on this very point emphasizing the centrality yet particularity of figured worlds: comically, within the world the Commissioner *figures*, cutting down Okonkwo's body represents the "backwardness" and "primitiveness" of the village *ndichie* uncharacteristic of administrators despite the fact that the village *ndichie* themselves refused to cut the body down.

The cost of colonialism.

As previously mentioned, throughout *Things Fall Apart* Achebe painstakingly shares with his reader the regular and repeatable signifying practices and the meaningful doings of Okonkwo's culture. The manner in which compounds are constructed, traditional harvesting techniques, the rites to be respected and the consequences when they are not, are a few of the examples presented to the reader and integrated within the daily functioning of Umuofia. Insofar as any author can, Achebe brings his reader into Okonkwo's figured

world, fostering the reader's respect and sympathy for this world, only to suddenly expel her or him from it. The signifying practices and the meanings they hold not only cease to be relevant, but are devalued and demeaned through the meaning-making practices of the District Commissioner. The loss is upsetting because it intimates, if only momentarily and fractionally, what it was Okonkwo lost.

Achebe reveals that quite simply that what are at stake in the colonial encounter are the meaningful signifying practices that constitute figured worlds. As Fanon (1961/1968) put it, "native social forms [are destroyed] ... broken up without reserve [are] the systems of reference of the economy, the customs of dress and external life" (p. 40). The meaningful signifying practices of social semiotic formations provide the resources which give us meaning as member of social communities. They constitute us as social subjects, and they make possible our existence as social beings in a world of social doings (Butler, 1993). Gee (1990/2008) explained that we become a part of social processes that these semiotic formations perform: "to be a particular *who* and to pull off a particular *what* requires that we act, value, interact, and use language in sync with, in coordination with, others" (p. 158). Because social semiotic formations provide the resources for our attempts to know, we are also dependent on them to be and act. What is lost then is nothing less than what is true about the world and about oneself. In as much as colonialism is a battle over physical space and the material resources contained therein, it is a battle for truth that is played out over the territories of meaningful signifying practices.

If social semiotic formations are situated, it follows that they are not exhaustive. In this vein, Lemke (1995) explained the boundaries of culture:

> Since the pattern of meanings made is enacted by the pattern of actions enacted, this also means that in a given community many possible things are simply never done – not just because they are forbidden or wrong, but because they are literally "unthinkable", meaningless, invisible possibilities that never even occur to us. (p.167)

In allowing us to make meaning, social semiotic formations are inherently regulatory - they determine what things have meaning, what things should be valued, and what things should not. Literary critic Gayatri Spivak (1996) advances this argument in the following way: "If the lines of making sense of something are laid down in a certain way, then you are able to do only those things with that something which are possible within and by the arrangement of those lines" (p. 151). What follows is that not all possible things have been *articulated* and thus given meaning. Unarticulated *things,* in such cases, are unthinkable and unimaginable. In other cases, words (*ndichie)* and deeds (touching the bodies of those who have committed suicide) circulated within a foreign social semiotic formation are nonsense or incomprehensible. In both cases, meaning lies outside our figured worlds.

Achebe's story is not an uncritical glorification of traditional *Igbo* culture. Pre-contact *Igbo* culture, like any culture, is not perfect. Injustice and depravity exist. All cultures need to regenerate. It might be the very moment when meaning breaks down that progressive change can occur. In part two, I examine the

argument Achebe advanced regarding the role of the individual in participating in cultural change.

Part 2: Achebe, Meaning, and Tragedy

In a lecture Foucault delivered to the *Collège de France* in 1976, he stated: "In the end, we are judged, condemned, classified, determined in our undertakings, destined to a certain mode of living or dying, as a function of the true discourses which are bearers of the specific effects of power" (1980, p. 94). "Discourses" for Foucault, like social semiotic formations for Lemke and socially configured "lines of making sense" for Spivak, provide the resources by which we make meaning and meaning is made of us. Discourses, circulating as ultimate or true, inflict power upon us precisely because they inscribe rigid knowledge onto the world we recognize, and onto ourselves as recognizable individuals in that world. The glimpse Achebe gives us of traditional *Igbo* life bears witness to the power effects of discourses presumed to be true. Importantly, however, these manifestations of power are not easily explained simply as an inevitable consequence of imposed colonial discourses. Rather, as Achebe makes clear, Okonkwo's resoluteness and unwavering commitment to the *Igbo* patterns of making meaning is what ultimately results in his undoing.

In this part, I will first explore how Achebe revealed the structuring effects and valuing functions of social semiotic formations, and how Okonkwo was profoundly committed and dependent on these formations. However, in the

second section, I will go on to show how Achebe suggests that centrality of social semiotic formations, on the one hand, and complete dependency and commitment to these formations, on the other, need not necessarily go together.

Dependency and commitment to social semiotic formations.

Throughout the story, Achebe emphasized the importance of social semiotic formations in understanding the flow of symbolic and material power in *Igbo* society. The following passage, taken from a scene early in the story, provides an example. It describes Okonkwo's request for a loan from the successful village farmer, Nwakibie. It might be better understood, however, as a formal application:

> He took a pot of palm-wine and a cock to Nwakibie. Two elderly neighbours were sent for, and Nwakibie's two grown-up sons were also present in his *obi.* He presented a kola nut and an alligator pepper, which was passed round for all to see and then returned to him. He broke it, saying: "We shall all live. We pray for life, children, a good harvest and happiness. You will have what is good for you and I will have what is good for me. Let the kite perch and let the eagle perch too. If one says no to the other, let his wing break'.
>
> After the kola nut had been eaten Okonkwo brought his palm-wine from the corner of the hut where it had been placed and

> stood in the centre of the group. He addressed Nwakibie calling him ”Our father”.
>
> “*Nna ayi,*” he said. “I have brought you this little kola. As our people say, a man who pays respect to the great paves the way for his own greatness. I have come to pay you my respects and also to ask a favour. But let us drink the wine first.” (p. 14)

The scene is filled with meaningful signs which characterize Okonkwo’s community: the presence of Nwakibie’s sons and neighbours; the display and offering of kola nut, alligator pepper, cock, and palm wine; the proverb spoken; and the reverential style with which Okonkwo addresses Nwakibie. These signs cannot be thought of as “superfluous,” obscuring, for example, the relations of power inherent in the exchange. To do so would be to miss the glimpse Achebe afforded concerning the link between meaning, value, and action in traditional *Igbo* life. The offerings act as signs which *integrate* Okonkwo into the social semiotic formation that allows Umuofia to function. The gifts reinforce the superior position of Nwakibie as they increase Okonkwo’s dependency on him by further exhausting Okonkwo’s meagre resources. The signs Okonkwo deploys solidify his subordinate status. Yet, despite this subordinate status, his steadfast adherence to the customary uses of these signs constitutes him as a favoured “child” of the community, and they demonstrate his willingness to pay back the favours he has received.

However, it should be noted that his ability to deploy the required signs is not simply a function of some internal willingness to do so. Rather, his ability

follows from his previously established position in the community, itself a product successful signification. The meaningful signifiers he has previously deployed – by chance, by circumstance, by physical attributes – constitute this position: his recognisability as a wrestler, "as a young man of eighteen he had brought great honour to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat" (p. 1); as a warrior, "on great occasions such as the funeral of a village celebrity he drank palm wine from his first human head" (p. 8). Although it is Okonkwo who deploys signs, his signs operate in a context in which they are read, "fortunately, among these people a man was judged according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father" (p. 6). Thus, his prior position in Umuofia allows him to deploy the necessary signs in his application and also to be recognized as having properly done so, as Nwakibie does in response to Okonkwo's application: "I can trust you. I know it as I look at you. As our fathers said, you can tell a ripe corn by its *look* [emphasis added]" (p.16).

While Okonkwo's position as Umuofia's favoured "child" was possible despite "his father's contemptible life and shameful death" (p. 13), he could never free himself from what his father signified. Okonkwo's "whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness...It was the fear of himself, lest he should be found to *resemble* [emphasis added] his father" (p. 10). In turn nothing was more important for Okonkwo than to be recognized as a "man" as opposed to an "*agbala,*" as his father had been recognized:

> he remembered how he suffered as a child when a playmate had told him his father was an *agbala.* ... *agbala* was not only another

> name for a women, it could also mean a man who had taken no title. And so Okonkwo was ruled by one passion – to hate everything that his father Unoka had loved. (p. 10)[3]

It is the social consequences of being found to resemble his father – a failure and outcast among his people – that initiates Okonkwo's life-long commitment to the meaningful social practices of his village.

By committing suicide, Okonkwo has desecrated the land, offended the Earth, and depraved his body: "It is an abomination for a man to take his own life" (p. 147) and he can no longer be buried among the clan. Okonkwo's postmortem, self-inflicted exile repeats his father's shameful death – he "died of the swelling which was an abomination to the Earth goddess" and was left to "rot away above the earth" (p. 13). It is ironic then, as I argue in the next section, that Okonkwo's greatest fear was realized by his own stringent dedication and thus confinement to the social formations which he depended on to distinguish himself from his father.

The tragedy of making meaning.

Whether or not *Things Fall Apart* can be considered a tragedy has been widely debated among literary commentators, some indicating that Okonkwo

[3] For a discussion of gender in *Things Fall Apart* see Cobham's (1990) account of the hegemony of Western feminist readings of the novel and Jeyifo's (1993) argument that the "undertextualization" of women in the story along with the "intense gender politics" of the novel are representative of the "*natural"* sexual difference attendant in African nationalist, anti-colonial discourse.

exhibits the typical characteristics of a tragic hero (Rowell, 1990), others stating that *Thing Fall Apart* is better understood as a type of *Igbo* tragedy or as a cultural historical tragedy (cf. Begam, 1997). Acclaimed Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong'o and postcolonial academic Eunice Njeri Sahle (2004) have described Okonkwo as one of the "great tragic heroes in world literature, [in the class of] figures like Sophocles' Oedipus and Hardy's Henchard" (p. 66). Achebe, in an interview with Robert Serugama (1972), has himself explicitly referred to *Things Fall Apart* as a form of the classical tragic genre. In a later interview with Charles Rowell (1990), Achebe explained that while he was not, in fact, writing in that genre, Greek and West African artistic forms need not be artificially divided; there is a cultural continuity between the two civilizations. For Achebe, Okonkwo exhibits the virtuousness yet ultimately flawed character that typifies the Aristotelian tragic hero. The question is, therefore, how should the reader understand Okonkwo's tragic flaw?

One approach, as Beckham (1994) and Thiong'o and Sahle (2004) seem to have taken, is to view Okonkwo simply as a symbol of traditional *Igbo* culture. Okonkwo's fear of his own life replicating that of his father's – "failure and weakness," and "gentleness and ... indolence" (Achebe, 1986, p.10), everything that traditional *Igbo* culture is not – causes him to completely embody that which *Igbo* culture is. Thus, Okonkwo's fate is inextricably tied to the fate of *Igbo* culture, as the culture dies Okonkwo is doomed to die with it. His tragic flaw is not so much his own as it is the tragic inability for traditional *Igbo* culture to resist the ceaseless violence of imperial civilization. However, as I will argue, such a reading equates resistance to an anachronistic adherence to an a-historical,

unchanging culture. Rather than regarding Okonkwo as his figured world in person, he is better understood as locked within it. He died not because traditional *Igbo* culture died, but because he could not find a way outside of it.

If Okonkwo and his tragic flaw are to symbolize a pre-colonial *Igbo* culture and its unjust decline, as Beckham and Thiong'o and Sahle have done, it becomes impossible to fully account for the heterotopia Achebe conjures in the final moments of the novel. From this perspective, the novel necessarily ends with Okonkwo's suicide; the subsequent introduction of the District Commissioner serves no obvious purpose. Yet the final chapter following Okonkwo's suicide is crucial because it reveals the contingency of all meaning making practices. Achebe portrays the important connection between culture, knowledge, and existence not simply to satirize the District Commissioner. Rather, the connection allows his reader to see Okonkwo as a subject *within* a structured figured world as his reader comes to see the District Commissioner as a subject within an imperial Europe figured world. Okonkwo's tragic flaw, therefore, cannot simply be reduced to an essential fear of him *replicating* his father abject existence, of being anything but *Igbo* culture. His father' disfavour was as much a part of *Igbo* culture as Okonkwo's regard. Okonkwo's flaw, therefore, is his fear of *resembling* his father, the fear that his clansmen will confer upon him the same recognition they conferred upon his father. The result is Okonkwo's uncompromising commitment to valorized *Igbo* practices, to the dominant ways in which his community makes sense and values the world. Okonkwo was locked within the social semiotic formations that constitute his figured world, that provide the resources for his attempts to make meaning of the world and his capacity to be recognized within

this world. *Things Fall Apart,* therefore, is not simply a comment on the destruction of colonialism. Embedded in the narrative is a comment about authority and stasis within traditional *Igbo* culture.

In various interviews Achebe confirms the reading that Okonkwo's demise cannot simply be attributed to the imposition of colonialism. Indeed, Achebe has often stated his ambivalence towards colonialism, as Begam (1997) reports: "It is important to remember what Achebe has himself observed in interviews and essays: that while the passing away of *Igbo* culture involved a profound loss, it also held out the possibility of substantial gain" (np.). In the Serumaga (1972) interview, Achebe is posed the question of whether it was not simply the social forms of life in Umuofia that were falling apart. Rather, that which "fell apart ... was Okonkwo in his obstinacy; in his refusal to change at all it is Okonkwo who did completely break down". Achebe responded by stating: "Yes ... my sympathies were not entirely with Okonkwo.... Life has to go on and if you refuse to accept changes, then tragic as though it may seem you are swept aside" (p. 131). In an interview with Wole Soyinka and Lewis Nkosi (1997), Achebe further denied the simple connection between Okonkwo's suicide and the imposition of colonialism. Instead he emphasized the reciprocity between the individual and culture, suggesting that neither can the tragic flaw be understood as an essential aspect of Okonkwo's being: "The weakness of [Umuofia], I think, is a lack of adaptation, not being able to bend ... I think in [Okonkwo's] time the strong men were those who did not bend, and I think this was a fault *in the culture itself* [emphasis added]*"* (p. 11). Clearly Achebe intended neither to make Okonkwo emblematic of *Igbo* culture, nor treat him as independent of culture.

Okonkwo's position as both an individual in and a product of his culture is dramatically made in the events that prompted his suicide:

> [Okonkwo] sprang to his feet as soon as he saw who it was. He confronted the head messenger, trembling with hate, unable to utter a word. The man was fearless and stood his ground, his four men lined up behind him.
>
> In that brief moment the world seemed to stand still, waiting. There was utter silence. The men of Umuofia were merged into the mute backcloth of trees and giant creepers, waiting.
>
> The spell was broken by the head messenger. "Let me pass!" he ordered.
>
> "What do you want here?"
>
> "The white man whose power you know too well has ordered this meeting to stop."
>
> In a flash Okonkwo drew his machete. The messenger crouched to avoid the blow. It was useless. Okonkwo's machete descended twice and the man's head lay beside his uniformed body.
>
> The waiting backcloth jumped into tumultuous life and the meeting was stopped. Okonkwo stood looking at the dead man. He knew that Umuofia would not go to war. He knew because they had let the other messengers escape. They had broken into tumult instead of action. (p. 144)

As a call to action among his people, Okonkwo kills a messenger. The messengers of *Things Fall Apart* are themselves *Igbo* men who have accepted both the power and the *message* of their white colonialists. Through these messengers, Achebe symbolically drew into one both the power and message of colonialism. Okonkwo's act is significant. He meets the power of a message with physical power. He kills not only an *Igbo* man. He attempts to kill a message, the meaning the message contains, and therefore, by extension, the social semiotic formations that would confer this message meaning.

In lying outside Okonkwo's social semiotic formation the message, and the messenger who brought it, exceed Okonkwo's capacity to make meaning. There is no means of reasoning available to Okonkwo, no *conventional* response to the colonial message – Okonkwo is "unable to utter a word" (p. 144). Therefore he meets force with force, knowledge with physical violence. For Okonkwo, the colonial social semiotic formations he attempts to destroy cannot recognize what he had become: "one of the greatest men of his time" (p. 6), and, more importantly, that he had succeeded in *resembling* that which his father was not.

Yet, his people refused to follow his call: "He knew Umuofia would not go to war. He knew because they had let the other messengers escape. He discerned fright in that tumult. He heard voices asking: Why did he do it?" (p. 144). Okonkwo is, at the same moment, the defender of his culture yet immediately recognized outside of it. He did not, as the rest of his community had, allowed the messengers, their message, and the colonial social semiotic formation through which the message is given meaning, to impose itself.

At the beginning of the novel, after wide spread crop failure in Umuofia, Okonkwo is consoled by his dying father: "You have a manly and a proud heart. A proud heart can survive a general failure because such a failure does not prick its pride. It is more difficult and more bitter when a man fails *alone"* (p. 18). Okonkwo's failure to "root out the evil" (p. 144) of colonialism is, in the end, a failure Okonkwo suffered alone. Okonkwo's killing of the messenger separates him from his clan who had decided at this moment to succumb to the colonial message, and therefore to submit to the colonialist's terms of intelligibility.

Achebe conveyed the effect. In the District Commissioner's book, which will come to define the *Igbo* people by solidifying a colonial discourse among those who wield power, Okonkwo's life is preserved:

> The story of [the] man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate. There was so much else to include, and one must be firm in cutting out the details. (p. 148)

Okonkwo's fame – a fame that had "grown like a bush fire in the harmattan," that was "well known through the nine villages and beyond" (p. 1) – is reduced to a "reasonable paragraph." Okonkwo's life, as the representation of what his father was not, cannot be captured in the colonialist's language and meaning-making practices. Yet, as a result of his clan's failure to rally against the messengers, he had also fallen outside of his own clan's altered processes of meaning making. For Okonkwo, there are no terms, not even the terms his own people now accept,

which could confer upon him the recognition that had been the prime motivator of his life, that he was neither weak, nor gentle, nor indolent – that he did not resemble his father.

Judith Butler (1997) stated that "language sustains the body not by bringing it into being or feeding it in a literal way; rather, it is by being interpellated within the terms of language that a certain social existence of the body first becomes possible" (p. 5). In murdering the messenger, and thereby surpassing the altered boundaries of his own community – the boundaries which had constituted his being but which had faltered and given way at the critical moment when the colonialist message was applied – he had lost the resources to command the social existence which had been the prime goal of his life. Soon after, Okonkwo ended his physical life as well; committing what he previously would have regarded as one of the greatest abominations of *Igbo* culture.

Conclusion: The Question of Agency

In part 1 of this essay I argued for the importance of culture, or, more specifically, social semiotic formations in making meaning of the world. Through a reading of *Things Fall Apart,* borrowing from Wittgenstein, Holland *et al*., and Lemke, I argued that our understanding of the world, and our actions upon it, are ultimately tied to *social semiotic formations:* those regular, repeatable semiotic practices which render the world intelligible for a particular constituency of people. In part 2, I offered a reading of *Things Fall Apart* as a peculiar kind of tragedy: one that preserves the notion of individual agency, while, at the same

time, emphasizes the extent to which any individual is beholden to social semiotic formations. My preoccupation in this chapter is with processes of meaning making, how they rely on signifying practices, and how, as such, they are dependent on forms of life, or systematically-organized social formations of language-use. As is evident in the rise and fall of Okonkwo, our dependence on social semiotic formations exerts power on our being in the world at the same time as we necessarily need them to be in the world.

While Achebe was an ardent supporter of change, in my reading of *Things Fall Apart* he provides his reader little positive account of how it might come about. The bleak picture Achebe paints for us is that social change occurs through an antagonistic struggle at the level of social semiotic formations. That such a struggle is more aptly understood metaphorically as a war (Foucault, 1980; Kress,1985/1989) between formations in which the victor's cultural practices of meaning-making breaks down the *things* and *subjects* of the defeated.

How might Achebe have described a different fate for Okonkwo? How might one account for social change as something other than the colonization of one set of social practices of meaning making with another? And how could Okonkwo have contributed to social change, become an agent of change? Furthermore, if Okonkwo is to envision a different, dynamic future for Umuofia, what social semiotic formations would he draw upon to do so? And if he had been successful, which interlocutor, from what figured world, would be able to recognize and make meaning of his vision, to act upon it and bring about new socially intelligible terms which could index new social practices and behaviour? What are the prospects for conceptualizing social change at the level of the individual's

utterance without dismissing theories that recognize the essentiality of social structure and social practices for socially intelligible thought, being, and acting? What we need to attempt to do, I believe, is to understand Okonkwo as an agent, as Achebe surely intended, but in a way that refuses to accept a humanist position that would assume Okonkwo has access to some extra-social resources that would have arrested his downfall. Recognizing that meaning and cultural intelligibility are elements of human languages (Rorty, 1989), or social semiotic formations, what we need to find is the prospect for individual agency in the speaking and acting subject.

Chapter 2: Accounting for oneself in Kafka's "A Report to an Academy"

> And yet there is no "I" that can fully stand apart from the social conditions of its emergence, no "I" that is not implicated in a set of conditioning moral norms which, as norms, have a social character that exceed a purely personal or idiosyncratic meaning.... When the "I" seeks to give an account of itself, it can start with itself, but it will find that this self is already implicated in a social temporality that exceeds its own capacities for narration.
>
> Judith Butler, 2002, p. 12

> The human self is created by the use of a vocabulary rather than being adequately or inadequately expressed in a vocabulary.
>
> Richard Rorty, 1989, p. 6-7

In the last chapter, I drew on Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* to explore the relationship between language, meaning-making and recognition, and the tension between agency and signifying practices. Over the course of the novel, Achebe advanced two important points that together, I believe, raise a troubling conceptual impasse he ultimately left unresolved.

First, the cultural dissonance Achebe affected at the close of the story, I argued, clearly demonstrates that the meanings we make of both ourselves and our world need to be understood as social products, emerging linguistically (or symbolically, more generally) within communities and cultures. Achebe showed

that in order to understand the full extent of the colonial violence, cultural symbols need to be understood not simply as a *medium* of representation, potentially substitutable and perfectible, but the very means by which oneself and one's community *has* meaning. Okonkwo sought recognition and was conferred recognition only insofar as that recognisability was given within a network of social meanings. It is precisely the indigenous network of social meanings, one which Okonkwo was unwilling to part with, that comes under assault in any imperial encounter.

Second, while the novel identified the social nature of making meaning, *Things Fall Apart* also reads as a type of Aristotelian tragedy. Despite the tendency towards determinism implied in such social constructivist approaches to meaning-making, Okonkwo was, nevertheless, a tragic hero. His tragic flaw was his own. His demise does not inevitably follow the demise of traditional *Igbo* culture; nor is it a necessary consequence of the alien social meanings imposed upon his community through imperial force. In writing a tragedy, Achebe preserved the possibility of Okonkwo as an agentic subject rather than simply an effect of his culture. He is *implicated in*, but not completely *determined by,* the social terms which give him meaning. In this way, Achebe leaves open the door for Okonkwo to author his own future and to initiate an *Igbo* cultural renewal in response to the violence of Western colonialism.

However, Achebe fails to help us understand how the distinction between implication and determinism should be understood. If Okonkwo emerged through *Igbo* culture – if he could only know himself, and thus *be* himself, through the network of terms which circulate meaning in his community – how could

Okonkwo's undoing not be inextricably coupled with the crumbling social meanings of traditional *Igbo* culture? How does Achebe expect an agentic Okonkwo to break with this culture to escape its fate? Achebe provides no insight. Change and newness seem only to follow a hegemonic re-territorialisation of the terms that govern recognisability; agency seems equated with a perseverance realized only in the capacity and willingness to undergo a transformation into foreign set of names.

This chapter attempts to take an initial first step towards addressing the challenge Achebe left us. Agency is neither an unyielding allegiance to one set of social meanings, nor a complete acquiescence to another. Yet, Achebe also reminds us the presumption that subjects are autonomously capable of critique, evaluation, and action leads to destructive, universalistic assumptions. The colonial experience indicates that this approach no longer serves as an adequate starting point for a theory of agency. Instead, it seems that if the idea of agency is to be preserved, then the agentic subject must first come to know themselves as formed within culture; subjects must reflect on the very cultural conditions which allow one the capacity to *be*. Only until one sees oneself within the bounds of social meanings, until one achieves a state of critical self-reflexivity, can one expect to act with agency, to call these bounds into question and provoke change. Understanding reflexivity is critical to understanding agency.

It is along this line of reasoning that the following chapter explores the prospects of critical reflexivity. However, I make no attempt to outline a procedure. Nor do I wish to deflect the humanistic presumption, which in the end bolstered the colonial project, from autonomous agency towards autonomous

reflexivity. Instead, this chapter attempts only to identify some necessary considerations concerning what it is we might do when we engage in the practice. Without diminishing its importance, I hope to trouble some of the theoretical assumptions that have at times un-problematically assumed that reflexivity can lead to individual deliberation. The following exploration centers on a paradox which I introduce below through Judith Butler.

Problem Statement: The Paradox of Accounting for Oneself

In her Spinoza lectures entitled *Giving an Account of Oneself,* Butler (2003) addressed the centrality of critical self-reflexivity:

> If the "I" is not at one with the moral norms it negotiates, if it does not find them as the *a priori* of existence, this means only that the subject must deliberate upon these norms, and that part of deliberation will entail a critical understanding of their social genesis and meaning. (p. 13)

She went on, however, to identify the primary difficulty with such a task: "For a subject produced by morality must nevertheless find his or her way with morality, and there is no willing away this paradoxical condition for moral deliberation and for the task of giving an account of oneself" (p. 14). Butler here is commenting on moral accountability within a poststructuralist framework, but we might appropriate these thoughts for our own purposes: Okonkwo, whose own subjectivity emerges through a system of cultural meanings, must nevertheless find his way through these meanings, to account for himself within these

meanings, if he is to have agency over them and persist beyond them. This act of reflection is precisely what Okonkwo was tragically unable to do. The question becomes, therefore, what are the conditions that would initiate such a reflection, one that might allow those engaged to call themselves and their world into question?

Clarifying this paradox does not appear to be a simple task. There are two separate, yet related issues which need further inquiry: First, if one is produced through a set of social meanings, is one not at once in harmony with them? In other words, who is this "I" who emerges through a set of social meanings, yet who can no longer recognize themselves within these meanings, for whom these meanings no longer suffice? Second, how does one come to see him or herself within a network of social meanings if the terms one has to draw upon are the very terms which establish and circulate these meanings? It may be, as Butler indicated, that only when social meanings cease to be adequate is reflection required. But why should these social meanings become insufficient? And how would we come to see their limitations?

Reading Kafka's "A Report to an Academy"

> Honored members of the Academy!
>
> You have done me the honor of inviting me to give your Academy an account of the life I formerly led as an ape.

> I regret that I cannot comply with your request to the extent you desire. It is now five years since I was an ape. (Kafka, 1946, p. 245, all page numbers refer to this edition)

And so, Red Peter opens his address. In its entirety, Kafka's short story "A Report to an Academy" is a transcription of a "report" Red Peter delivered to a fictional European Academic community. Through Red Peter's amanuensis Kafka, we receive a first-hand account of the experience of a one-time ape *that* (or rather *who* – indeed, conventional relative pronoun usage seem to fail us here) has been wounded, captured, and caged by European hunters; he has been taken from his habitat, his ape "troop", and his ape life; brought to Europe, given the name Red Peter, and compelled to perform on "all the great variety stages of the civilized world" (p. 246). While *Things Fall Apart* is a story about colonialism, born at the inception of the postcolonial era, and thus intimately tied to that tradition, "A Report" was written in the heart of the Central Powers at the height of the First World War. As such, it precedes the linguistic or cultural turn that was to take hold of European academic thought from the 1970s onward, a turn that has greatly influenced Butler's thought. Yet, in my reading, the short story anticipates the move towards culture and language, revealing some of its most important insights about representation and recognition in symbolic worlds. Although the story has long been argued as a fictional rendition of his own experience as a Jewish artist performing for an anti-Semitic Europe (Rubinstein, 1952), it is in this way that the story can also be read as clearly treating the Butlerian paradox described above. Although "A Report" unfolds in the fantastical and hypothetical,

it illuminates the limitations, constraints, and contradictions associated with *becoming* recognizable and making ourselves known to others.

Like Achebe had accomplished with Okonkwo, through Red Peter Kafka explored the social conditions for individual survival. The interpretation that is offered in this essay turns on the apparent request Kafka's Academy has made of Red Peter's lecture. Although once an ape, Red Peter has, nevertheless, assumed or appropriated the conventions of European culture and academic exposition. Because of this, the Academy had hoped Red Peter's transformation would permit, in the human genre of an academic lecture, a humanly intelligible account of the essence of his ape life – an essence that, in lying beyond humans' capacity to experience, necessarily lies beyond the reach of human inquiry. However for Red Peter, the account requested of him is one that "with the best will in the world I cannot communicate" (p. 246). Instead, he explains, all he has to offer is "the line an erstwhile ape has had to follow in entering and establishing himself in the world of men [and, presumably, woman]" (p. 246).

What emerges in Kafka's story relevant to the question of reflexivity is precisely the difficulties inherent in accounting for oneself in a social realm. Kafka indicated that such an account cannot presume a sense of self dispossessed from the social norms through which this self, as Butler suggested, has emerged. The story, therefore, is rich for our discussion as it treats the difficulties of theoretically conceptualizing the process of coming to know oneself within perspective where neither language nor one's very ontology can be disassociated from the social realm in which they exist.

In his report, Red Peter identifies two main reasons why he is unable to meet the request of the Academy. The first reason involves the impossibility of narrating a self which has emerged in one particular social context in another. The second reason builds upon the first, it involves our reliance on social language (in the broad sense of the term, including all meaningful signifying practices beyond words in the strict sense, that which social semiotic formation signified in chapter one) to make oneself recognizable in social worlds. As I will try to make evident each reason above aligns, respectively, with the two paradoxical conditions in the task of critical self-reflection introduced in the previous section: of finding ourselves insufficiently accounted for within a set of social meanings; and of finding the intelligible terms to describe the difference. In the two parts of this essay, I will discuss each of these two reasons in turn.

As a preface to the subsequent argument advanced, I should note that when I read "A Report" I follow JM Coetzee's (2004) eponymous protagonist Elizabeth Costello's lead and take it, as she had, that Kafka is recounting first and foremost a one-time *ape* reporting to an Academic community engaged in Academic truth-seeking endeavours. In this way I read Kafka as Adorno (1967/1981) recommended: "as hard, defined and distinct as possible" (p. 246). For Adorno, it is not the symbolic which is significant in Kafka, but the literal which signifies. It is in this vein that I interpret the text literally (or as literally as one can read a story of speaking, quondam apes) focussing on an *ape's* emergence as a socially recognizable being within a structure of social norms, drawing from the narrative the insights offered important for the questions at hand. In this case, then, what is to be understood literally, and thus as significant, is not the magical

situation of a speaking animal. Rather what is hard, defined and distinct is the operation of the signifier *ape* in the context of the story, the value attached to the label and the manner in which it might be contested. What should be understood literally in this story is the process through which those with the power to do so grant *human* status.

By focusing on Kafka's story in this way I hope to identify what problems Kafka poses with respect to how reflexivity should be thought about, and to outline what considerations must be taken in the abundant contemporary assertions of the value and importance of critical-reflexivity.

Part 1: Effort and Exclusion

Part one of this chapter examines Kafka's rejection of presumptuous approaches to freedom. His reasoning is explored through his description of the personal investment and effort required to become in social worlds. I go on to elaborate on these two points by briefly drawing on Stuart Hall's notion of articulation and Michel Foucault's theory of the practices of the self. Finally I use these two points Kafka offers to problematize assumptions regarding critical self reflexivity.

Escaping pain and the illusion of freedom.

The most poignant statement Kafka delivered concerns the possibility of freedom. On the voyage to Europe from West Africa, Red Peter was imprisoned

in a cage, he describes, “too low for me to stand up in and too narrow to sit down in. So I had to squat with my knees bent and trembling all the time ... the bars cut into my flesh” (p. 247). In response to the pain and humiliation of his confinement, understandably Red Peter feels that he “had to find a way out or die” (p. 250). However, he is careful to distinguish between his desire for *a way out* and a desire for *freedom*: “All too often,” he claims, “men are betrayed by the word freedom” (p. 249), and later, “had I been devoted to the aforementioned idea of freedom, I should have certainly preferred the sea to the way out that suggested itself in the heavy faces of these men” (p. 251). In emphasizing the dissimilarity between “a way out” and “freedom,” “A Report” reads as a refusal of the supposed emancipatory possibilities of an illusionary freedom and, instead, a testament to how one’s self is always implicated in a social realm in any attempt to escape pain.

This important distinction between “freedom” and “a way out” is perhaps best elaborated by contrasting Red Peter’s position to that of feminist theorist Monique Wittig. In her groundbreaking essay “One is Not Born a Woman” (1981), Wittig articulated a defence against oppression which approximates what we might understand as orientating and sustaining Red Peter’s immutable will to transform. For Wittig, “what we take as the cause or origin of oppression is in fact only the *mark* imposed by the oppressor” (p. 11). As a mark (the mark of women or the mark of ape), it follows that the cause of social oppression is neither intrinsically given nor natural. Both Red Peter and Wittig see this as enabling, but in significantly different ways. For Red Peter, a “lofty goal faintly dawned before me” (p. 251), which he reveals as follows: “No one promised me that if *I became*

like them [emphasis added] the bars of my cage would be taken away" (p. 251). Herein lies the point of divergence between Wittig and Kafka. For Wittig, to escape oppression one must stop being a woman, one must "destroy the categories of sex" (p. 20). Similarly, for Red Peter, if torturous captivity is the condition of apes amongst humans, then escaping meant "I had to stop being an ape" (p. 248). From Wittig's self proclaimed materialist feminist approach, however, the mark which engenders oppression can be refuted and transcended,

> we must recognize the need to reach subjectivity in the abandonment by many of us to the myth "woman".... This real necessity for everyone to exist as an individual, as well as a member of a class, is perhaps the first condition for the accomplishment of a revolution, without which there can be no real fight or transformation. (p. 19)

Red Peter states that such an escape into the freedom of a mythical individuality is not possible, indeed he chastises such presumptions: "as freedom is counted among the most sublime feelings, so the corresponding disillusionment can be also sublime" (p. 249). For Red Peter, the mark is to be erased, but such an erasure cannot be achieved through transcendence, it is achieved only through an act or process of *re-marking,* of re-becoming.

But at what cost? If something alike to Wittig's free individual is mere disillusionment, what are we to make of our attempts to escape social pain and humiliation?

Exclusiveness and hybridity.

For Red Peter, the necessity to mark oneself anew cannot be undertaken without a corresponding erasure. The erasure is, in fact, a consequence of the re-marking. This is his most passionately reasoned argument regarding his inability to describe intrinsic ape nature. Adopting the conventions and cultures of Europeans, which describing his various first attempts is the main concern of his report, is not concurrent with a continued ape being. He explains:

> I could never have achieved what I have done had I been stubbornly set on clinging to my origins, to the remembrance of my youth. In fact, to give up being stubborn was the supreme commandment I laid upon myself.... I submitted myself to that yoke. In revenge, however, my memory of the past has closed the door against me more and more. (p. 245)

Here Red Peter seems to suggest that inherent in any attempt to make oneself socially recognizable – to have oneself marked in one manner or another – involves a struggle with social norms neither commensurable nor mutually inclusive. To appropriate or embody particular norms, "to imitate these people" (p. 251) as Red Peter puts it, involves, much as it seemed to have for Achebe, a transformation in which one's prior self is annihilated in the process. It requires an active self-formation that precludes not only a continuous temporal self but also its narration: not only does Red Peter undergo a transformation; he also loses his ability to relate his prior self within his new social context, and indeed to know his prior self.

Perhaps Red Peter's denial of one's ability to negotiate between these norms, to play one set off against another, is unwarranted. It might be an overstatement to suggest that any investment in one social world is necessarily predicated on a corresponding disinvestment from another. We could suggest, instead, that such a confluence of disparate, social norms presents an opportunity for both Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* and Red Peter in "A Report to an Academy" to critically reflect upon the marks these norms impose upon them – to emerge, not through a transformation or metamorphosis, but through hybridization. Is it not possible for Kafka to "talk of *negotiation* rather than *negation,* to convey a temporality that makes it possible to conceive of the articulation of antagonistic or contradictory elements," (p. 25) as Bhabha (1994) claimed to do? Indeed, if not quite "an articulation of the antagonism" between ape and human life, it seems to have been the wish of Kafka's Academy that at least the elements of ape life would be presented: Red Peter has been asked to give an account, to reflect upon, if not his current life as an ape (since this, he claims, does not exist), than the one he formerly led. The account has been asked of him because he has learned how to do give it. But for Red Peter, *it is precisely because he has acquired the ability that he is prevented from meeting their demand*: to meet the Academy's request would be to return back through the door of his past, a journey that would "scrape the very skin from my body to crawl through" (p.246). For Red Peter the *negotiation* inherent in hybridity, of which Bhabha asks, is itself a type of transcendence that neglects the social realm in which the professed negotiation *must* take place. This strong thesis, which ultimately follows from Kafka's denial of "freedom", raises an obvious question

that seemed for Red Peter self-evident: why does achieving recognition in one social realm mean abandoning one's place, indeed one's own self-recognizability in another?

Effort and practices of the self.

In his 1996 paper "Who needs 'identity'", Hall (1996) argued one's identity (a concept relevant insofar as that concept pertains, as he claims, to "the question of subjectivity" (p. 1), and insofar as it clarifies Red Peter's struggle of becoming *identifiable*) follows from what he figuratively calls an "articulation." Hall described articulation as the joining of an individual to the social structures of meaning, a double-sided process involving a "suturing of the subject to a subject-position" (p. 6). Subject positions are not simply unproblematically filled, an articulation is successful only, Hall argued, as a result of the subject's investment in the position. In advancing this argument, Hall attempted to establish some safe ground for the perilous position of the thinking and acting subject in social constructivist theories of subjectivity. In the passage quoted at the beginning of the above section, Kafka clearly suggested that such an investment in cultural norms and practices is involved in social emergence and subjectivity formation. In this respect, Kafka's story is very much a working out Hall's articulation from the side of the individual, focussing on the individual investment required in subjectivity formation.

While investment provides a good starting point, it does not fully capture what Kafka deemed necessary in the process of social emergence. What comes

across most clearly in Red Peter's lecture is that an *effort* is necessary to make oneself recognizable; to emerge as a social self. Indeed, Red Peter takes great pains to explain the closure of his ape self and his emergence in the world of humans in terms of personal achievement. Although undoubtedly his transformation was provoked by his torturous confinement, he explains that *only through his own* desperate will, "more or less accompanied by excellent mentors, good advice, applause, and orchestral music, and yet essentially alone" (p. 245), did he successfully adopt the language, mannerisms, and social habits of Europe. As he puts it: "With an effort which up until now has never been repeated I managed to reach the cultural level of an average European" (p. 254). This notion that a struggle is involved in the process of becoming is an important addition to Hall's point that what is required in social theory is not "an unmediated and transparent notion of the subject ... as the centered author of social practice" nor "an abandonment or abolition of 'the subject' but a reconceptualization – thinking it in its new, displaced or decentred position" (p. 2). While we may be marked socially, by forces that are, to a certain extent, beyond us, the individual nonetheless commits an effort to appropriate those markings, lest he or she slip into an unintelligibility analogous to torturous captivity. This point that pain and suffering is the volition behind such an effort is one that I will return to.

One might argue that a theoretical emphasis on individual effort in the process of self emergence signals an overly-optimistic intentionality and free will, and, in doing so, prematurely solves the question of agency by presuming a capacity for autonomous critical self-reflection. However, it does not necessarily follow that because some kind of activity is required on the part of an individual

that a deliberate, conscious, and reflective appraisal of subjectivity inducing cultural norms follows. By Red Peter's account, it is precisely because an effort is expended that one must to some extent abandon their ability to see beyond these norms. Indeed, Red Peter's struggle for recognition seems to deny the possibility of mutual ape/human accommodation in favour of a bleaker picture of ape/human transformation. In exerting an effort, one both commits to the present norms and forecloses the possibility that they may account for a self that existed beyond these norms; as Red Peter puts it "my memory of the past has closed the door against me more and more" (p. 245).

In his later writings, Foucault would take up the question of what is involved in self-formation well over half a century after Kafka wrote "A Report." The similarities are striking and they help us to make sense of Red Peter's rigorous effort to reconstitute himself within the cultural codes of his captors. Kafka's emphasis on individual effort foretells what Foucault (1984/1990) would variously label in *The Use of Pleasure* as the "forms of subjectivation," "the forms of relations to oneself," or, more concisely, the "practices of the self." He describes these practices as "the exercises by which [one] makes [oneself] an object to be known, and ... the practices that enable [one] to transform [their] own mode of being" (p. 30); it requires, he also explains, one "to act upon oneself, to monitor, test, improve, and transform [oneself]" (p. 28). It is neither a process of enlarging one's scope, nor increasing one's points of reference. Indeed, Red Peter puts it best: in the practice of making oneself an object to be known, in the practice of transforming one's mode of being, "One stands over oneself with a whip; one flays oneself at the slightest opposition" (p. 253). Through his practices

of the self, by relating to himself only through the human terms and practices of early 20th century Europe, Red Peter has found a way out of the physical bondage within which Europeans seem predisposed to place apes. Yet, clearly the result is not freedom, agency, or simplistic accounts of self-reflection. Rather, it seems as though one gives way to the set of cultural norms in which they hope to become recognizable. For Foucault, this relation one takes to oneself constitutes a *self-formation* with respect to a particular societal code by which men and women "*transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being* [emphasis added]" (p. 10). The process of self-formation requires both an effort and commitment that necessarily circumscribes the field of subjectivity.

Self-formation and reflection.

While Red Peter's story is a story of transformation, it is equally a story of emergence. As such, Red Peter's transformation is applicable, I believe, to the more general process of individual becoming within social worlds – of all of our attempts to appropriate, re-deploy, and reflect upon the norms of our first, native culture, and, as a consequence, the difficulties associated with self-reflection.Indeed, Red Peter cleverly implicates his European audience in his argument, "your life as apes, gentlemen, insofar as something of that kind lies behind you, cannot be farther removed from you than mine is from me" (p. 246).

In this way, the request the Academy has made of him parallels the request that Achebe had made of Okonkwo, and the request Butler has made of us: why should we (and how might we) recognize ourselves (either presently or

previously) as not in harmony with the cultural norms through which we now make sense of ourselves and through which we now make ourselves known to the world? Red Peter has been asked to account for a former self in which the cultural norms that presently allow him to be known – to both himself and the Academy – were irrelevant. He has quite literally been asked to account for a self that existed beyond the cultural norms through which the account is possible. For Red Peter, this self beyond can no longer be said to exist, and can certainly no longer be accounted for to either oneself or to an Academy. This self has given way in the effort of self-formation.

The irony of the Academy's request is replicated in the one that besets the agentic subject whose self-reflection might initiate cultural criticism and action. Butler writes in the passage quoted early in this essay that norms might be deliberated on the moment when the "I" does not find itself in harmony with them. Drawing from Foucault she argued that "the regime of truth comes into question because 'I' cannot recognize myself, or will not recognize myself within the terms by which subjectiviation takes place" (p. 20). Yet, it would seem that this deliberating self-reflection is predicated on an "I" which exists outside the norms of its emergence. As Kafka shows, there is no such "I." In his focus on "a way out" and his emphasis on effort, Kafka seems to deny the possibility that the "I" who has emerged through a set of norms may simplistically occupy the position beyond these norms that would be required for critical self-reflection. By its very effort to invoke them, the "I" which makes itself available for self-reflection is itself caught up in the norms it deliberates upon. While Butler states it, Red Peter demonstrates that "*when the 'I' seeks to give an account of itself, [it*

is] an account which must include the conditions of its own emergence ... the 'I' has no story of its own that is not at once the story of a relation – or set of relations to – a set of norms" (p. 12). Not only is the account a story of relations, any account that we might give is itself implicated in these relations.

The argument advanced in this first part seems to lead to the unhappy outcome that there are no possibilities for critical self-reflection. The rejection of an autonomous freedom, and the effort required to relate to others, as to oneself, through the means available in one's social context leaves little room for thoughtful critical deliberation. To get beyond this impasse it is necessary to further elaborate on the means through which this self-formation occurs. Why does it take such an effort? What form does the relationship between the effort to make oneself recognizable, on the one hand, and the processes of subjectification on the other take on?

Part 2: Learning to Speak and Practices of the Self

Up until now, we have been using the terms cultural norms and social meanings to describe those social qualities that condition the subject, yet at the same time constitute the conditions through which the subject might know and be. In Part 2, I will draw on contemporary theories of language to elaborate on the processes of subjectivity formation. In doing so, I hope to add concreteness to these abstract ideas, and further explore these questions central to the practice of critical reflexivity. First, I describe Red Peter's understanding of the join between ideas and language. The second section examines a necessary corollary of the

argument advanced in the first, the role of language in our own subjectivity development. The third section situates this role in the process of language learning. Finally, the fourth section examines the implication of language in the act of reflection.

Truth in language.

In an attempt to render the desperation he felt while caged on his voyage to Europe, Red Peter concedes: "what I felt then as an ape I can represent now only in human terms, and therefore I misrepresent it ... I cannot reach back to the truth of the old ape life" (p. 248). Although Red Peter offers this second, less radical, and more pragmatic explanation regarding his inability to relate ape life only in passing, it is an important observation that illuminates some of the more general remarks concerning self-formation explored above. Certainly, it seems reasonable to suggest that one becomes known only through the terms that are available and comprehensible to those she or he addresses. And, therefore, it is plausible that the linguistic resources which Red Peter now shares with his audience insufficiently convey the experiences of apes, or more generally, the quality of being an ape. However, if this was the sole reason Red Peter offered regarding his inability to meet the Academy's request, it would not exclude precisely what Red Peter claims must: that the ideas which the Academy has asked him to share are not out there, existing somewhere in his mind distinct from language. This is an important point: a focus on language can help elaborate processes of self-formation, but depending on how language is understood, it can

also prematurely foreclose interpretations giving culture a more formative role in subjectivity formation. The nuances of this point might be more fully described by returning to Achebe's Okonkwo.

If we *limit* ourselves to the premise that new ideas necessarily lack adequate vocabularies, a different (though less satisfactory) reading of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* might be constructed. From this position, a new, alien experience (colonialism) has been thrust upon Okonkwo's community. Because it is alien, the traditional *Igbo* culture necessarily lacks a vocabulary to represent and circulate its meaning, but importantly *the truth of the experience still exists*. This experience-before-words reading is a reversal of that undertaken in chapter one where it was suggested that available semiotic resources mediate how one experiences and subsequently makes sense of an event. The experience-before-words reading suggests that who one *is* (the truth of Okonkwo's core self, for example) must also stand apart from the cultural vocabulary; thus a separation of mind from things, thoughts from words, results. This reading comes apart, however, in the interpretation of Okonkwo. Clearly, regardless of the reading one takes of Achebe's story, Okonkwo cannot be dissociated from the very things of his culture. That this new Cartesian reading would presume this as possible is inadequate to the simultaneous coming apart of subject and culture that Achebe affects.

Yet Achebe's story is more complex and nuanced than this experience-before-words reading would allow. He clearly demonstrates that colonialism is not simply destruction which a culture must *overcome*, colonialism *is* cultural destruction. While it is certainly carried out through material violence, Achebe

shows that colonialism is also realized through displacing what counts as meaningful, what counts as truthful, and the ways in which one becomes a subject to be known. More specifically, colonialism displaces, marginalizes and destroys language through which *ideas emerge*, not simply the language *that represents*. If Achebe's story has anything to teach us, it is that there is an intimate and inextricable relationship between socially meaningful language and the truth about ourselves and our world.

Returning now to "A Report", if it was simply a lack of words to represent the experience of being an ape, the task for Red Peter would conceivably be doable. He would simply need to establish a mutually understandable vocabulary that would represent the experience that the Academy desires to be conveyed. Presumably, Red Peter could carry out a truth bearing pedagogy that achieves this mutual vocabulary: tracing similarities in shared language, identifying mutual points of reference, etc. Again, as in the Cartesian reading of *Things Fall Apart*, experience *precedes* language and knowing. However, it is one thing to say that Red Peter and Kafka's Academy lack a shared vocabulary through which his insight about being an ape might be conveyed, and quite another to say, as Red Peter does, that he can no longer grant the request because he no longer *is* an ape and therefore no longer *knows* about intrinsic ape nature. In fact, in bringing together his idiomatic dysphemism, "a way out," with the process of learning signifying practices, Red Peter is the clear on this point: "Ah, one learns when one has to; one learns when one needs a way out; one learns at all costs" (p. 253). It is not simply that there is a lack of language which might reveal truth. Kafka's story demands a reversal of the commonly held relationship between being and

knowing, and a rethinking of what it is we do when we learn to use language. Kafka seems to demand that we do not come to know who we are but rather we are what we know.

Emerging symbolically.

Red Peter's struggle to become within the world of humans is a struggle to communicate, and thus a struggle to emerge from a painful state of non-recognition. This is not simply a struggle to adopt the words of the culture he was compelled to join, but in doing so he is struggling to adopt social meanings that make these words useful. Indeed, we can read the majority of Red Peter's lecture as an account of his efforts to use the signs and signifying practices that held meaning for his captors, and that would come to give himself meaning. The following passage captures two important points with respect to signifying practices as it tells of the fleeting first moments of his emergence and recognition within the human world:

> ... like a professional drinker, with rolling eyes and full throat, actually and truly drank it empty; then threw the bottle away, not this time in despair but as an artistic *performer* [emphasis added]; forgot, indeed, to rub my belly; but instead of that, because I could not help it, because my sense were reeling, called a brief and unmistakable "Hallo!" breaking into human speech, and with this outburst broke into the human community, and felt its *echo* [emphasis added]:

> "Listen, he's talking!" like a caress over the whole of my sweat-drenched body. (p. 253)

First, invoking the simile between the echo and bodily caress, Kafka, if only figuratively, does away with the mind-body distinction. Second, the performative nature of the interaction demonstrates Red Peter's integration, both mind and body, into the cultural norms of his European captors. As a result, Kafka illustrates that cultural integration is realized symbolically, through a social language and vocabulary. It is with his "Hallo!" and its response that Red Peter breaks into human existence. He is interpellated ("like a professional drinker ... 'Listen he's talking' ") into, *and* invests ("my sweat-drenched body") himself within, a symbolic structure of recognition.

The quoted passage above foreshadows Althusser's (1971) seminal treatise on ideological recognition:

> when we recognize somebody of our (previous) acquaintance ((*re*)-*connaissnace*) in the street, we show him that we have recognized him (and have recognized that he has recognized us) by saying to him 'Hello, my friend', and shaking his hand (a material ritual practice of ideological recognition in everyday life ...). (p. 161)

Althusser employs the above passage to demonstrate the daily and inconspicuous practices that integrate individuals into the structures that produce subjectivities. "Hallo!", "Hello, my friend," "shaking his hand," all are symbolic, ritualistic exchanges that rely upon and re-invoke conventions existing prior to and after the exchange takes place. Their meaning, therefore, emerges through conventions separate from the act itself; as Althusser argued, symbols are meaningful insofar

as they are “inscribed in the actions of practices governed by rituals” (p. 159). Because conventions are maintained in actions and practices they are, therefore, productive, and, for Althusser, ideological. Whereas in this essay we have purposefully been using the terminology cultural norms and subsequently social languages as the social structure which index and circulate meanings – which apply Wittig’s “mark” – Althusser employs *ideology* as the imaginary, specular structure whereby individuals “represent their real conditions of existence to themselves in an imaginary form" (p. 153). It is “in ideology, that,” for Althusser, “we ‘live, move and have our being’” (p. 161). As such, Althusser would undoubtedly agree with what Kafka’s ape knew from the outset, Red Peter has not broken into a type of emancipation which frees him from the bars of his cage, but into an “*ideology that has the function (which defines it) of ‘constituting’ concrete individuals as subjects*” (p. 160).

In maintaining a notion of freedom, Althusser’s account, however, lacks an important aspect of subjectivity formation central to Kafka’s “A Report.” For Althusser, it is the authority of ideology that automatically constitutes the subject. However, for Kafka this constitution is not automatic but requires an active effort on the part of the individual. This effort underscores, not the oppressiveness of social structure, but its necessity for social emergence. The unidirectionality of Althusser’s approach seems to ignore what occurs when the subject responds to the hail. Because of the subject’s passivity, it is a small step to propose, as Althusser did and as Wittig suggested , that ideology might be transcended through a kind of “*scientific* knowledge” that would ostensibly elucidate “the

reality which is necessarily *ignored (méconnue)* in the very forms of [ideological] recognition (ideology = misrecognition/ignorance)" (p. 170).

To invoke the concept social meanings, communicated through social vocabularies, in favour of ideology, as is done in this essay, is to state that there is nothing exterior to the structure of recognition through which one becomes. Althusser's scientism clearly returns the distinction between mind and things that through Red Peter, Kafka does much to deny. Instead, to emphasize *both* Red Peter's "Hallo!" and "its echo," is to emphasize not simply one's capture within an illusory ideology, but rather ones emergence within a circulated social language. Social languages are, like ideology, ritualistic and conventional, but they do not presume an emancipatory freedom. In Red Peter we do not find an example of Althusser's ideological subject, but rather a demonstration of what Lacan (1977) had regarded as the inception of the subject in language: "the imperative of the Word as the law that has formed [and transformed] him [*sic*] in its image ... it is by the gift of language that all reality has come to man [or women, or ape]" (p. 106).

Social languages grant the very possibility of meaning. They neither distort nor provide the universal truth about the world or ourselves. Red Peter is a literary demonstration of the argument Butler advanced in *Excitable Speech* (1997): "the subject who speaks is also constituted by the language that she or he speaks ... language is the condition of possibility for the speaking subject, and not merely its instrument of expression" (p. 28). Language is both the medium and the manifestation of meaning, intelligibility and recognisability. This does not mean, however, that we fail to be recognizable subjects until language is appropriated by

the individual. Rather, because the life of meaningful terms both exceeds and precedes the life of the individual (we are recognized, at the very moment we are but a "glimmer in our parents' eyes"), we are, as Althusser claimed, always, already in a relationship with structures of recognition. Although we begin our lives as interpellated beings the very moment we biologically make our presence known, we nevertheless assume this intepellation as we become actively able to use language to further integrate ourselves within it, an integration that involves learning.

Learning language.

Writing expert and composition pedagogue Janet Giltrow (2002) advanced a similar argument to the one above. She argued that the words we use and the ways we use them do not simply respond to social contexts, but by delimiting what it is that can be said also "produce certain kinds of knowledge of the world" (p.9). As an educationalist she further argued that language learning ought to be understood as "socio-cognitive action" (p. 10). Learning a language integrates us within a social environment, its use is socially meaningful insofar as it is productive, as it accomplishes something in that environment. Reversing the language/thought relationship raises a challenge to the act of critical self-reflection: if we are going to make an attempt to learn and use a socially productive language to what extent may we do so apart from adopting the productive kinds of thinking which it engenders?

It follows from the arguments presented here (as it did for Red Peter) that we cannot. Wittgenstein (1953/2001) stated: "When I think in language, there aren't meanings going through my mind in addition to the verbal expressions; the language is itself the vehicle of thought" (§ 329). We can neither disassociate socially productive signs from the thoughts they bring into existence, nor can we separate signs from selves, even as we deploy them on ourselves in attempts to self-reflect. If language codifies and realizes cultural norms, and if cultural norms constitute the individual as a socially recognizable subject, not only to others, but also to ourselves, then any act of reflection seems from the outset bound up in a conventional language. Lemke (1995) argued, "We 'think' in the same words and in a register of the same language in which we talk. There is no autonomous semantics of thought, no separate *lingua mentis,* apart from that of social meaning generally" (p. 90). Rorty (1989) advanced a similar point: "we have no prelinguistic consciousness to which language needs to be adequate" (p. 21). In fact he goes so far as to posit that "it is [by] changing the way we talk, [that we change] what we want to do and what we think we are" (p. 20). This move towards symbolic consciousness as opposed to intrinsic consciousness (cf. Halton, 1992) appears to be the very argument Red Peter attempts to make. It is not simply that he lacks the vocabulary to convey the experiences of being an ape, it is that by changing his vocabulary, he changes what he knows to the truth – the truth about himself and the truth about the world. The effort involved in self-formation – in the forms of relation one takes to oneself – can now be thought of as the effort involved in learning a new social vocabulary, and rethinking oneself within its terms.

In defending his notion of investment, a concept re-thought as effort in Part 1 of this chapter, Hall (1996) compellingly argued that constructivist theories like Althusser's must account for the "subjective self-constitution" (p. 13) whereby individuals attach themselves to cultural or social formations. To account for how the self participates in its own constitution is essential, Hall argued, if we are to begin to understand "what might in any way interrupt, prevent or disturb the smooth insertion of individuals into the subject positions constructed by these discourses" (p. 11). It is equally essential to understanding critical reflexivity. However, Hall suggested that to account for self constitution it might be necessary to draw on psychoanalytic claims of interiority to fully comprehend the two sided process of subjectivity formation. By incorporating Giltrow's insight, the argument advanced here suggests that subjectivity formation is a continuous effort-laden process of social recognition only possible through the appropriation – learning – of social and cultural languages and the meanings they produce. Rather than hypothesizing "psychic mechanisms or interior processes" (p. 12) as triggering self-constitution, Kafka demonstrates that the effort involved in self-constitution is predicated on and propelled by the constant threat of the social and material pain and humiliation of non-recognition[4]. This avoids both psychic claims of interiority that risk determinism, and humanistic claims that risk a transcendental intentionality. Indeed, Lemke (1995) argued the threat of pain and its actual infliction is the "primary mode of social control" (p. 133) and is often

[4] This argument seems to suggest that we might find ourselves beyond recognition, or in an unrecognizable state. This is however impossible. If social meanings precede the individual, we are always, already recognized. Yet the premise that one is always, already recognized does not necessarily obviate the *threat* of non-recognition, of finding oneself in a state beyond recognition.

inflicted those instances when "someone may behave differently, outside the expected [and intelligible] patterns" (p. 132). In this respect, Kafka's torturous cage is one of the few symbols of his story with high allegorical value, symbolizing the condition of existing outside the limits of cultural and social intelligibility. This is why, as Red Peter shows us, "we sometimes cling to the terms that pain us because at a minimum, they offer us some form of social and discursive existence" (Butler, 1997, p. 26). For, "the question of being able to speak," she also states, "is once again a condition of the subject's survival" (p. 135).

Critical reflexivity through language.

The issue, it seems, is that we are dependent on language, to which we ourselves owe our thoughts, for the means to engage in the process of coming to know ourselves, to fully account for ourselves. We are, therefore, implicated in a social realm even in our attempts to think about ourselves. Critical reflexivity cannot simply be thought of as an attempt to see oneself as one really is, nor can it be thought of as determining once and for all one's relationship to social codes. Such a premise betrays a lingering belief in a transcendence largely rejected in the very theories that call for reflexivity.

Any act of reflection necessarily requires one to occupy a new position at a distance from the old position one wishes to reflect upon, just as any definition requires new words to describe the one being defined. Therefore, it is a mistake to presume that through thoughtfulness alone one is able to both find oneself in a

position of reflection and find within oneself a capacity to engage in the act. To presume such thoughtfulness is to presume that one has transcended social meaning and broken away from a social context in which the reflection must necessarily take place. Instead, critical reflexivity needs to be situated within a social context and a social landscape of meaning, but in doing so we necessarily re-characterize what is in fact accomplished when one reflects.

What follows from the arguments presented in this chapter is that the process of reflection requires us to find new socially meaningful language to describe the old that had, up until that point, conferred us recognisability. We cannot escape a social realm even in our very attempts to think of ourselves within one. Furthermore, as we see in Red Peter, any attempt to learn a new language is a socio-cognitive act that necessarily results in transformation, and to transform is, to some extent, to foreclose the possibility that an unmediated description of the previous self can be given. In this way, reflection is more a process of thinking oneself anew, of drawing upon new and different terms to describe oneself, than a process of coming to terms with oneself. In short, in reflection one transforms and recreates oneself within a new social language – as Rorty (1989) claimed, "self-knowledge is self-creation" (p. 27).

Discussion

In Part 1, we explored the question: under what conditions do we find ourselves in need of critical reflection? We found that it is not at all obvious that these conditions are always simply present. As a result of the effort required to

emerge as a socially recognizable subject, it was argued that it cannot be unproblematically assumed that subjects will find themselves in a disaccord with the social norms of their particular contexts. As a result it cannot be unproblematically assumed that subjects are in a position outside the social norms through which they have been constituted to critically reflect back upon them. We left off with the argument that any self-reflection is implicated in the network of social norms through which any reflection must necessarily take place. Part 2 elaborated on this argument by examining the role of language, or symbolic communication more generally, and learning in subjectivity formation. At the close of Part 2 it was suggested that since reflection requires us to look back upon ourselves, we must venture into new territory, draw upon new language, and therefore become to a certain extent new people. There is no reflection without transformation.

The divided approach to reflexivity.

The difficulty in many accounts of reflexivity is that the very act of reflection is split between two uncomplimentary requirements. First, the initiative to reflect is often predicated upon a need to account for a subjectivity that has been socially constructed. However, for this reflection to take place, an enduring extra-social self, ready and waiting to do the accounting, with the resources to get the job done, is already assumed. In attempting to sketch out the implications and requirements of the act of giving an account of oneself, in this essay I have attempted to show why such an approach to reflexivity is inadequate.

For example, Rorty (1989), who has, nevertheless, largely influenced this chapter, appears himself to move between the notion that our subjectivities are grounded in languages that are social products, and, drawing from Freud, the notion that we possess some consistent (if not intrinsic) self outside of language. While, on the one hand, Rorty seems to suggest that what we think and who we are follows from the vocabulary we use: we should "not think of our 'intuitions' as more than platitudes, more that the habitual use of a certain repertoire of terms" (p. 22), on the other hand, he claimed that there is in fact a consistent individuality, though this is given by chance – a "blind impress all one's be behavings bear" (p. 29). For Rorty, describing this unique individuality produced through chance is what compels the strong individual (or strong poet, in Rorty's words) to reflect. While, in this way Rorty deviated from critical, but overly-optimistic, approaches to reflexivity that identify the purpose of reflection as an attempt to account for the role of socialization on our ways of thinking (e.g., Lather, 1991) his approach still serves as an important example of the difficulties involved in conceptualizing self-reflection.

Rorty relies on chance and contingency to produce an extra-social idiosyncratic individual inherently incongruous with the already existing social vocabulary at his or her disposal. As a result, reflection results in a need to create a new language that describes an idiosyncratic self: "any *literal* description of one's individuality, which is to say any use of an inherited language-game for this purpose, will necessarily fail" (Rorty, p. 27). Incorporating chance as the creator of idiosyncrasy allows Rorty to establish an *a prior* motivation for reflection. The difficulty arises in the importance for Rorty to do away with universal truth

claims, to argue instead that it is new language that leads (albeit blindly) to new truth and ultimately cultural change. In order to advance this argument, Rorty suggests that there is no being outside social vocabularies, that we create truth through language, and, in doing so, create ourselves. This is accomplished by imagining new words to describe what, nevertheless, appears to be a self that pre-existed the word that creates it. While Rorty appeared to argue that consciousness follows from social language and is, therefore, a social product "the length of one's mind [is] set by the language other human beings have left behind" (p. 27), he preserves a notion of a intrinsic individuality (a product of chance) in order to define the reason why one would attempt to reflect, to "trace home one's own distinctiveness" (p. 24).

Pointing towards a positive account of reflexivity.

What is needed is a careful account of reflexivity, one which severs neither the impetus for, nor the act of reflection from the social realm in which it must necessarily take place. Although a positive account of reflexivity is beyond the objectives of this essay, Kafka's depiction of the relationship between culture, language, and reflection provides a possible approach. Three main points emerge from the reading of "A Report" offered in this chapter. First, as a result of the effort required in self-formation, we have entered into not only a commitment to, but a dependency on cultural norms not easily broken. It is only through these norms that we have, as Butler put it, the means for our social survival; we are not likely to do away with them. Therefore, it is not possible to simplistically presume

that at any possible moment we can find ourselves insufficiently accounted within these norms. Second, it is possible to understand one's relationship with cultural norms as a relationship with language. We are restricted to culturally meaningful terms in our attempts to account for ourselves. Insofar as these accounts are intelligible, they are so because they are parasitic on social forms of language. Social forms of language allow us to know ourselves, they implicate us within a social setting by allowing us to become recognizable and to be recognized within this setting. This is why Red Peter's claim that "what I felt then as an ape I can represent now only in human terms, and therefore I misrepresent it" is consistent with his belief that "it is now five years since I was an ape" (p. 245). Finally, if one is to account for oneself as emerging within a social language, one must draw upon new and different language. In this way, Rorty's account is useful because it identifies that any careful account cannot falsely distinguish reflection from transformation.

Together, these three points argue that we are at our foundations linguistic beings. In advancing this argument I have denied the possibility of accounting for the volition to reflect as an attempt to account for some intrinsic individuality, but, instead, that any volition must be understood as culturally induced. Furthermore, by suggesting that the language that constitutes us is exclusive and context specific, I have also, to some extent, denied the simple suggestion that all that is necessary to initiate reflection and agency is one's intrinsic need to work out incongruous selves which arise in different contexts (e.g., Rose, 1998). This suggestion presumes an asocial realm (with an asocial language) in which the working out might take place. We are, therefore, still left with the difficult

question of how to account for the compulsion to reflect, yet two considerations might follow from the discussion in this chapter.

First, a positive account of reflexivity might begin by acknowledging the pain of non-recognition. The social languages that afford us the possibility to be are languages that must, nevertheless, be learnt. I argued above that the continuous process of learning and integrating oneself within a social language, even if the language is to our detriment, is compelled by the perpetual threat of the pain and humiliation associated with non-recognition. However, reflexivity also risks non-recognition. If our attempt to know ourselves requires us to exceed ourselves and our social conventions, then this act itself risks jeopardizing our intelligibility to others. As Butler states "to question the norms of recognition which govern what I might be, to ask what they leave out, what they might be compelled to accommodate is, in relation to the present regime, to risk unrecognizability as a subject" (p. 19). In this way, Okonkwo's failure to look beyond the cultural norms of *Igbo* culture in order to see how he is constrained by these norms is understandable: to do so is to risk unrecognizability and, as a result, to risk pain and humiliation. Reflection is a courageous act. If the volition behind reflection is going to be accounted for as a response to socially inflicted pain, then this pain must be assessed against the threat associated with reflection.

Second, while this essay has been an attempt to make sense of the relationship of an individual to a social language, actual recognition occurs in relation to an actual living person. Red Peter, no matter how secure he is in his transformation, no matter how "comfortable [he] is in the world of men" (p. 245), does not look like a human. There will always be an imperfect relationship of

recognition between who Red Peter thinks he is and how his audience recognizes and are drawn to him (which is precisely why his "position on all the great variety stages of the civilized world had ... become quite unassailable," p. 246). It is possible to suggest, therefore, that occasions for self-reflection arise from the everyday breakdown of recognition between two individuals, not between an individual and a social language. It also follows that a successful venture into the uncertainties of reflection, newness, and transformation, is also dependent on a relation to another who is willing, along with the one reflecting, to exceed the social norms that offer social intelligibility.

Indeed, in a diary entry towards the end of his life, Kafka seems to suggest that linguistic breakdowns in recognition occur, and that these breakdowns are painful, but that the cause of the breakdown might also be the very resources for agency:

> More and more fearful as I write. It is understandable. Every word, twisted in the hands of the spirits – this twist of the hand is their characteristic gesture – becomes a spear turned against the speaker. Most especially a remark like this. And so ad infinitum. The only consolation would be: it happens whether you like or no. And what you like is of infinitesimally little help. More than consolation is: You too have weapons." (p. 268)

In this entry Kafka likens words to weapons. These words assume force, they have the ability to inflict pain when they are misrecognized, yet also have force in their deployment. Insofar as we are dependent on an uncertain relationship with

socially intelligible words, reflexivity, cultural newness and individual agency might also emerge from the very words we use.

Chapter 3: Assuming or asserting expertise? Exploring the effects of evaluation on master's theses writing in the philosophy of education

> We are struggling with language.
>
> We are engaged in a struggle with language.
>
> Ludwig Wittgenstein, 1980, p. 11

At the end of chapter two, it was suggested that, among other things, our efforts to become within a social set of meanings must be understood as inter-subjectively realized. While the argument regarding the effort and transformation involved in one's attempt to emerge as recognizable still, I believe, holds, one is, nevertheless, required to emerge within the subject positions made available to them. Therefore, while Red Peter struggled to speak within the European world, he was only ever heard as an *ape speaking*. Despite Red Peter's pretences otherwise, his effort was towards emerging as a speaking *ape*, not as a full human (however that was understood in First World War Europe). In the following chapter, I will further explore this point. Our efforts at appropriating a language, and thus transitioning into a new social semiotic formation, always must be seen in light of the interlocutors who ultimately confer the recognition. This is true of ape's learning to speak the cultural languages of Europe, or students attempting to appropriate and deploy academic discourse. To examine the relationship between speakers and listeners, in this chapter I turn my focus away from literature to explore the written productions of graduate students.

Along with the ever increasing number of master's and doctoral level graduate students, there has been a growing academic interest in the particular discourse characteristics of master's and PhD theses. For L2 students, this research has aimed to better understand the learning, writing, and supervisory difficulties that arise in second language learners (e.g., Dong, 1996; Hewings & Hewings, 2002; Hyland & Tse, 2005; Petric, 2007; Tardy, 2005). With respect to L1 students, much of the scholarly work has been an attempt to identify the linguistic or structural features of these texts (e.g., Basturkmen, 2009; Kwan, 2006; Thompson, 2005; Swales, 1990) and/or identify their variation across disciplines (e.g., Bunton, 2002; Bunton, 2005; Charles, 2003; Samraj, 2008). Whether the research has limited its focus to a single corpus of student-produced texts or has engaged in a comparison between student and professional texts (e.g., Baskerman, 2009), the main objective of this body of research has generally been to improve EAP pedagogy and, in turn, improve student writing. With this objective, research tends to treat the identified linguistic or structural features as crucial aspects of successful writing. Ultimately, this research often argues to make explicit certain identified linguistic or structural features that have largely remained implicit in advanced writing programs (e.g., Charles, 2003; Kwan, 2006). However, there have been few attempts to understand how linguistic features unique to student writing might address context-specific exigencies imposed upon master's or PhD students, exigencies particular to student life and therefore different from those of their disciplines. This omission coincides with a general dearth of theoretical framing that would situate these linguistic features as rhetorical moves that operate in social contexts.

While some research linking context to linguistic patterns in student writing has identified how the time constraints imposed upon their authors manifest in theses discussion sections (Basturkmen, 2009; Hopkins & Dudley-Evans, 1988), what has largely been ignored is the unique *social functions* that master's and PhD theses serve. On the one hand, theses are often students' first attempts to take on an expert role and contribute knowledge to a disciplinary community. On the other hand, theses must also represent master's and PhD students' scholarly knowledge and academic expertise to a set of examiners who, ultimately, assess their continued "admission to the academy" (Paltridge, 2002, p. 132; Paré, Starke-Meyerring, & McAlpine, 2009). Paré, et. al., (2009) described the thesis "as a genre on the border between overlapping, sequential activities" (p. 179), and have suggested that such multiple objectives of a thesis may account for the difficulties in writing it. Despite the differences between the two functions noted above, and the possibility that these functions are not inherently self-complementary, there appears to be an enduring belief that the successful completion of theses serves to indicate a preparedness to participate in professional scholarly communities (Lovitts, 2005). This assumption, however, has long been criticised (Duke & Beck, 1999; Monaghan, 1994). It is now being argued that students' publishing productivity is a key indicator for future scholarly success (Lee & Kamler, 2008; Aitchison, Kamler, & Lee, 2010), and research is currently underway to explore how doctoral and master's programs might be restructured in response to this finding (Badley, 2009; Kamler, 2008; Maisch, 2003).

The move towards publishing suggests that traditional theses might be limited in their role of preparing students for professional academic careers. As Samraj (2008) has argued, "Student-produced texts, especially those produced by 'quasi' members at the end of a master's program, do not completely embody the discursive practices of the disciplines" (p. 65). The emphasis on student publishing along with Samraj's observation raises a series of questions with respect to thesis writing: What are the linguistic differences between student-produced theses and professional scholarly texts and how are they to be accounted for? Might these differences emerge as a result of the audience for which these texts are written? And, importantly, do the linguistic differences potentially undermine the supposed causal relationship between successful theses and successful professional scholarly careers?

The Study and Relevant Background Information

In a particularly relevant study of PhD theses, Thompson (2005) noted the need for students to "be able to convey a tone of authority, to persuade the examiners of their expertise and knowledge of the subject" (p. 312). He examined how, what he described as, "contexts of situation and culture" (p. 308) might influence science PhD students' use of citations. What Thompson found was that students, in their attempt to be found "worthy of a doctorate" (p. 318), built a specific persona through a distinctive use of citations in their concluding chapter. His study suggests that students assume a somewhat ambiguous expertise status as they attempt to both *display* their knowledge to their evaluative committee and

contribute knowledge to their disciplinary community. Student-authors, it would seem, have the task of addressing an evaluative readership that expects scholarly expertise as opposed to a disciplinary readership which could actually acknowledge it.

However, apart from Thompson, little research has investigated how such an ambiguous expertise status plays out in theses students' rhetorical choices. The research on expertise that has been conducted has largely focused on undergraduate or L2 writing (e.g., Barton, 1993; Hyland, 2002). Within this research, authorial expertise has been found to emerge through such stylistic features as stance and tone. It has been argued that these qualities emerge, in part, through the use of the first-person pronoun (Hyland, 2002) and, as Thompson (2005) has shown, through the incorporation of inter-textuality. Hyland (2002) argues that the use of "I" allow authors to assume a position of credibility and establish a relationship with their readers: "First person pronoun ... is a powerful means by which writers express an identity by asserting their claim to speak as an authority" (p. 1094). Thompson (2005) states that inter-texutality reveals how authors build their texts "on the texts of others" (p. 312) and in doing so they build an "appropriate persona" in relation to these texts.

Building upon this prior work, particularly as it concerns the first-person pronoun and inter-textuality, the present study is a preliminary examination into how master's students employ rhetorical practices in their writing to represent themselves as experts as they negotiate the multiple contexts they address. By reading master's theses against journal articles produced in the same discipline, an attempt will be made here to explore how the evaluative function of theses *within*

a student centered university community distorts the potential contributions these texts might make in a *disciplinary community*: Do the effects of evaluation undermine the usefulness of theses and dissertations as a scholarly contribution within a disciplinary field? If so, in what ways do the pressures of evaluation frustrate the potential academic contributions of student-produced texts? This concern with the formative dimensions of evaluation on student thesis writing is an initial attempt to refocus the discussion in rhetorical analyses of student writing. While much can be taken from these studies as a means of improving EAP pedagogy, any study of student writing, as with any kind of writing, must pay heed of the contextual demands to which they respond. As students prepare to enter into a disciplinary/discourse community, accounting for the formative qualities of these demands should leave both students and teachers better positioned to critically reflect on current summative assessment practices in post-graduate education.

As a theoretical argument and an exploratory study, this essay's main goal is to make an argument in favour of a wide theoretical lens in the study of writing. It draws on a small set of texts and integrates them into socio-cultural theory to exemplify the fruitfulness and potential insights available when a broader, rhetorical approach to the study of language and language difference is taken in student-writing research. In this way, the data set acts as an example of the importance of this approach, while providing preliminary justification for further critical explorations which demonstrate not how students *should write* to conform to the discourse practices of their disciplinary community, but how students *do write* in response to the exigencies of student life.

Theoretical Framework

In his seminal treatise, "The Problem of Speech Genres," Bakhtin (1986) wrote,

> from the very beginning, the utterance is constructed while taking into account possible responsive reactions, for whose sake, in essence, it is actually created. ... Both the composition and, particularly, the style of the utterance depend on those to whom the utterance is addressed, how the speaker (or writer) senses and imagines his addressees, and the force of their effect on the utterance. (p. 94-95)

All instances of speaking and writing – or for Bakhtin, all utterances, bounded on either side by a change in the speaking or writing subject – address one or several audiences; indeed it is the dialogic possibility of an utterance that is the very catalyst of its emergence. Theses operate in (at least) two contexts, they address (at least) two types of readers: those tasked with evaluating the worth of an utterance, and those academic readers who will adopt a stance on the knowledge conveyed. It is the state of advanced student writing that while student-authors may have done a considerable amount of work within a discipline, setting themselves apart from others in their field, universities determine the manner in which the knowledge will be presented while conferring a great amount of responsibility on supervisors to pass ultimate judgement on their product. For

Bakhtin, it is precisely "these considerations [which] determine my choice of a genre for my utterance, my choice of compositional devices, and, finally, my choice of language vehicles, that is, the *style* of my utterance" (p. 96). Responding to an audience tasked with assessment might undermine from the start a student's efforts to *address* readers within their disciplinary community.

When students learn to write in student settings, they learn student genres. Recent theoretical approaches to genre from a rhetorical perspective have built upon Bakhtin's work and argued that writing practices and the texts they produce are best understood and categorized based on the social action they undertake. Miller (1994) described such a rhetorically grounded notion of genre as a "typification of rhetorical action; as action, it acquires meaning from situation and from the social context in which that situation arose" (p. 37). This approach to genre suggests that writing, whether student or professional, ought to be explored in terms of its institutional and rhetorical functions (Petraglia, 1995). As Dias (2000) explained, "context enters into the act of writing in ways that define the goals and direction of writing, the very character, process, and constitution of writing" (p. 15). Genres, as social actions, follow from social motives. Theses, as the ultimate student-genre, are motivated by exigencies particular to student life, they fulfill a social action unique to student life. What action student-writing serves must be considered in student writing analysis. As genre theory suggests, writing is a social practice, different contexts influence the constitution of master's theses and their professional counterparts.

While rhetorical genre theory provides an argument for researching linguistic features as context orientated action, activity theory might provide a

method for actually carrying out such a task. Activity theory allows researchers to consider how social motives orientate and influence social activity. It builds from Vygotskian psychology, and has been significantly expanded upon by his student Leont'ev. For Leont'ev (1981), the relationship between context and a human activity, such as writing, occurs at three levels. Activities occupy the highest level and are orientated towards some superseding motive or object, they "answer a specific need of the active agent" (Leont'ev, p. 59). In this analysis, the distinct activities of concern are either *student learning* or *professional knowledge production*. With respect to the former, perhaps the non-existent verb "studenting" – a combination of learning and doing university – most accurately (albeit less gracefully) describes the tension between the activities students are engaged in and those of academics. Indeed, the thesis serves as an ultimate example of this tension: While providing an opportunity for students to learn (to participate in a learning activity), theses also serve as an artefact to assess learning, to assess if one has successfully "done university." For Leont'ev, "it is precisely an activity's object that gives it a specific direction" (p. 59), and, it is this particular object of successfully doing university, that distinguishes the activity of *student learning* from the learning, teaching, and writing that occurs elsewhere in academic contexts.

Actions, the second level of analysis, are specific tasks that realize the overall activity. Actions are goal-orientated (completing an assessment, publishing a scholarly article); in carrying them out, subjects participate in larger activities. Finally, operations constitute the third level of analysis. They include

the particular sub tasks that lie below the level of consciousness and through which an *action* is accomplished.

It is important to note that while subjects participate in activity systems, the socio-cultural context in large part determines how that participation will take place. For example, how one carries out the actions and operations involved in realizing an activity is mediated by the means made available to subjects in particular contexts (i.e. funding, writing support, technology). Furthermore, what specific goals and actions realize an activity, and what objects motivate an activity, are all dependent on the social and cultural circumstance in which the activity happens (Dias, 2000; Roth & Lee, 2007). It follows then that students do not have complete freedom orientating how their learning will take place, rather as a part of the university system, students necessarily enter into an on-going, context specific activity.

Within an activity theory framework, writing a research article and master's level theses are both actions. As actions - goal driven tasks - these texts are quite similar. Both constitute a scholarly work with the goal of transmitting knowledge, and they are both mediated by many of the same means: word processors, libraries, previous scholarship. What differentiate one from the other are the activities towards which these actions are directed. *Student learning* is not the same activity as *professional knowledge production*. Each is driven by a different motive. This raises the question of whether actions are necessarily affected by the activity systems they realize. Indeed, Leont'ev (1981) wrote that since actions and activities are distinct, "one and the same action may be instrumental in realizing different activities" (p. 61). However, recent scholarship

has suggested that the relationship between activity and action is mutually constitutive, "actions constitute activities, but activities motivate particular action sequences" (Roth & Lee, 2007, p. 201). Or, as Dias explained, a "specific action is inevitably, and most often unconsciously, defined by the larger encompassing activity within which it occurs" (2000, p. 18). As actions, master's theses at best participate in (and realize) two activity systems: *student learning* and *professional knowledge production*. Writing journal articles, on the other hand, simply participate in the latter. The goals of master's theses and journal articles are orientated towards different motives; the functions they serve differ because they participate in different (combinations of) activity systems: Is the writing motivated by a need to produce or share knowledge, to demonstrate knowledge, or both? How does the activity of *student learning* define the action of master's theses writing? If, as Dias suggests, this definition is largely unconscious, the distinctiveness of master's theses will be most evident in the operations student writers deploy. While operations might include search term queries, for example, they also include rhetorical tools (described in the following section) that writers deploy in order for their text to serve its function.

Methods

The data consist, in part, of the introductory sections of three educational philosophy master's theses – Davis, 1998; Humphries, 2002; Luffman, 2008 – written in major Canadian universities. Philosophy of education introductory sections were chosen due to the disciplinary reliance on the construction and

presentation of arguments as opposed to the presentation and discussion of empirical data. In philosophy papers, the author's position as "expert" is significant in validating the worthiness of a problem under investigation and the philosophical methods which will be used to find its resolution (Geisler, 1994). To ensure consistency between the texts, theses were chosen if they followed a particular methodology of comparative analysis and synthesis, an approach commonly used in the field of educational philosophy (Holma, 2009). Scholars who use such an approach normally investigate the thought of two to four highly influential philosophers as it relates to a particular educational issue of their concern.

In order to reveal rhetorical devices characteristic of student-writing, master's theses were compared with the introductory sections of three journal articles written by professional academics. The Bingham (2007), Peters (2007), and Stables and Scott (2001) were chosen because the authors approach knowledge production using the comparative analysis and synthesis methodology employed in the master's theses. They identify similar issues, draw upon similar philosophers, and desire to influence educational practice in similar ways. The two sets of texts presumably contribute to the same disciplinary communities. Consistency within and between the theses and journal articles was sought as an attempt to control for the rhetorical practices characteristic to philosophy of education texts. The assumption therefore is that the rhetorical differences which emerged between these two sets of texts are not fully explained as the product of varying levels of academic proficiency or student development.

The analysis focused on three specific parts of philosophy introductions, each corresponding to an introductory rhetorical move scholarly authors make when establishing the validity of their topic. This structure followed Samraj's (2008) modification of Swale's (1990) "Create-A-Research-Space" (CARS) model. "CARS" outlines, in general, how scholarly researchers introduce and develop their problem or purpose of investigation. Samraj's own approach – adapted specifically for the philosophical essay – identifies three major moves authors make to "create their own research space": the first move introduces a general topic and attempts to locate the topic's importance within scholarly literature or real life experience; the second move attempts to carve out a niche for their argument/analysis with respect to a particular philosophical question; the third and final move introduces the principal goal or main argument of the paper and the methodological approach that will be followed, which, in philosophical genres normally constitutes foreshadowing the organization of the text (Samraj, 2008). The CARS framework allows for greater comparability between the two sets of texts.

Samraj's modified CARS provided a framework to explore how authors positioned themselves in terms of expertise *vis-à-vis* the philosophers they utilize in their texts and the reader to whom they speak. Since inter-textuality and the use of the first person pronoun have been previously found to indicate authorial presence, the six papers were read with attention paid to these linguistic features. Four rhetorical devices emerged as themes relevant from the data: a) the personal I (whether this is deployed as a marker of opinion or incorporated into an embedded narrative); b) the discursive I; c) inter-textuality and knowledge

summaries; and, d) references to the work of the main philosophers upon whom the authors draw.

Results and Discussion

The following discussion will present an analysis of each move in turn. The four rhetorical devices outlined above provide a means by which to explore how authors either asserted expertise, or simply contributed to an already established scholarly conversation, thereby deflecting expertise towards this existing conversation. The rhetorical force of each of these devices is discussed depending on the "CARS" introductory move where they have been deployed and the particular function they serve in the text.

Move 1: Centrality claims and/or landscape identification.

The initial move of philosophy papers introduces a general topic and establishes its importance in either the material world or in scholarly literature. Samraj (2008) explained that "this is accomplished by providing centrality claims, generalizations key to the area of interest or a literature review relevant to the topic" (p. 58). In this section, the rhetorical moves the student-authors used in fulfilling this task will be explored and subsequently compared with those of the professional-authors.

Notably, two of the three student-authors invoke a personal narrative and/or personal "I" (Luffman, Davis) in order to introduce their topic and

establish its general importance in the world. For example Davis offers his readers the following statement:

1. My sense of the current situation in the university is that over the last few decades the status of "knowledge" has been a heated and contested terrain. (p. 1)

And Luffman, describing an experience she had delivering a conference paper states:

2. I concluded to an agreeable audience that international education, particularly transnational mobility programs, including study abroad and exchange, is a pancea for these challenges. (p. 1)

Personal narratives are often praised as mechanisms which temper the authoritative voice of the author (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) and situate this voice in the data analysis (Ellis, 2004). However, their deployment in Move 1 acts to divert the reader's attention towards the author him or herself; they create the appearance that the particular author is necessary in order to inform the reader of the centrality of the topic at hand. This is true because the rhetorical function of Move 1 is to affirm the importance and centrality of the topic advanced. As such, the personal "I" or personal narrative in each of these cases confers expertise onto the author rather than limiting the generalizability of the claim, as might be suggested of personal narratives in general. Invoking the personal "I"

demonstrates the author's capacity for having fulfilled this task. By simultaneously focusing attention on the importance of the topic and themselves, the student-authors make a bid for the recognition of having *initiated* a discussion on a particular topic. They have, therefore, accomplished an integral aspect of being both a philosopher and a successful master's student. This contrasts with how the first move is carried out in professional texts.

None of the professional authors relied upon a personal experience to establish the centrality of the topic they go on to discuss. Peters, for example, opens with a direct centrality claim:

3. There is no more central issue to education than thinking (p. 350)

and then proceeds to account for this claim by summarizing its prevalence in educational research. The reader's focus is directed towards the claim and the discourse around the claim. Similarly, Stables and Scott open with a direct centrality claim:

4. Environmental education is a response to a perceived ecological crisis (p. 269)

And, even before the sentence is ended, the authors move directly onto the next introductory move. Even though the word "crisis" signals urgency and thus importance, they make no attempt to identify through either personal experience or inter-textuality how this importance has been established. Stables and Scott

seem to assume that the reader has already identified the real life importance of the topic under discussion. The reader's attention is on the topic and their own judgement or opinion about whether or not the present condition constitutes an environmental crisis. Finally, the third professional-author, Bingham, makes no attempt to claim the importance of his topic, memory. Bingham simply introduces the topic by immediately referencing the work of the philosophers he goes on to discuss:

5. In this essay, I will explore what Michel de Montaigne and Friedrich Nietzsche have to offer contemporary education on the subject of memory (p. 168).

Bingham briefly mentions the contributions his main philosophers have made before moving on to the second move. Presumably the topic is important because Nietzsche and Montaigne have previously discussed it. The reader's attention is diverted to the topic and immediately to the thought of his two primary philosophers.

Although each of the professional-authors fulfills the first move in different ways, none assumed the responsibility for having identified the importance of the topic or for initiating its discussion. It was either already being discussed (Peters), already widely understood (Stables and Scott), or outright unnecessary (Bingham). In each instance the author simply joins a conversation already in progress.

Move 2: State philosophical problem/establish niche.

The second move locates a particular niche to which the paper will contribute. This often involves stating a philosophical problem and providing "positive justification" by either indicating its relevancy or identifying a gap in previous academic work (Samraj, 2008). However, as Samraj stated, philosophical texts rarely identify a knowledge gap in order to provide positive justification because the problem may be approached and reworked in a number of ways. Indeed, none of the authors – student or professional – attempted to identify a gap in research, and they drew upon other rhetorical devices to serve this function. In particular, four of the six – all of the student-authors and Peters – construct their niche and provide positive justification following, what Geisler (1994) described as, a faulty path/main path structure, each drawing upon varying amounts of inter-textuality in order to do so. Indeed, Geisler argued the successful implementation of faulty path/main path structure characterizes philosophical "expert" discourse and distinguishes it from common everyday Western discourse practices. This section will first explore how Peters employs this strategy. His use of inter-textuality will then be contrasted with its use among the three student-authors in their attempts to deploy a faulty path/main path structure. This section will subsequently examine how all three professional-authors (including Peters) rely upon their respective philosophers to establish their niche.

Directly after summarizing the historical importance of his topic of inquiry – thought within the "rationalist and cognitive deep structure of the Western educational tradition" (p. 350) – Peters leads his reader through the faulty

path/main path approach. He gives an extensive account of his topic's development through three successive "revolutions," each revolution less faulty than its predecessor, before bringing his reader back along the main path that coincides with his particular approach. Following the faulty/main path approach, Peters culminates his second move with the following passage:

> 6. Against this trend and against the scientific spirit of the age this paper presents a historical and philosophical picture of thinking. By contrast with dominant cognitive and logical models, the paper emphasizes *kinds of thinking* and *styles of reasoning.* (p. 351)

His use of previous scholarship acts as a means to typify the general tendencies of the intermittent periods between revolutions. He examines how each period drew upon and surpassed the previous period before aligning his present discussion with the most recent trends. Previous scholarship serves to not only demarcate the successive development of his topic, but also describe its transitions.

Although to different extents, all of the master's theses similarly deploy a faulty path/main path structure in an attempt to identify their niche and provide positive justification for their philosophical problem. Whereas Peters attributes the identification of faulty paths to previous academic literature on the topic, as well as to the essentialism of the "scientific spirit", two of the three master's students – again Davis and Luffman – draw upon previous literature strictly to identify particular paths. To identify the faultiness of a particular path, the authors

utilize the personal and discursive "I". For example Davis, in reference to a suggestion that a scholar must choose between competing discourses, stated:

7. While I find the themes "choice" and "consequence" attractive since they highlight an epistemological responsibility, I am not sure that we have to "ultimately" decide or that the process of making a "choice" is all that transparent or simple. Could not ambiguity and uncertainty be part of a "choice"? (p. 3)

8. There are three points that stand out for me here. First Cixous believes that questions ... . (p. 4)

9. I want to respond to these questions by looking at how "conversation" can frame ethical possibilities. (p. 6)

Luffman, bringing us closer to the main path and her own position on the potential colonial implications of international education, explained:

10. As a professional in the field of international education and someone who has spent years living abroad, I take these charges seriously and [argue that] these charges must challenge the manner in which we engage in international programming. (p. 2)

As with the first move, the first person pronoun draws the readers' attention simultaneously to the faultiness (or trustworthiness) of a particular line of reasoning as well as themselves. The act of identifying a faulty path becomes the duty of thesis author. Both Davis and Luffman have taken on this responsibility even though, in Luffman's case, the "charges" of Western misappropriation of the non-Western world, and in Davis's case, the potential for "communication" to transcend epistemological boundaries, have both been well argued in academic literature. Peters, on the other hand, makes no attempt to attribute the identification of faulty paths himself; for him, and for his readers, this identification has already been done, and the academic conversation has subsequently moved on.

The third master's student, Humphries, like Peters, makes no personal reference when identifying faulty paths. Interestingly, he uses sexuality education as an extended example to identify the possible approaches one might take with respect to his particular topic: cultural narratives and student agency. After presenting a discussion on the narratives of sexuality education, Humphries wrote:

> 11. In this scenario [an unsuccessful democratic approach] a dominant narrative of abstinence inhibits the development of a safe sex narrative (this analysis is not limited to sexuality education – it applies equally to almost every other aspect of education). The consequences of this remain unclear – is an authentic self denied fruition as a result of this inhibition?

The example allows Humphries to explore how these approaches deviate and are inferior to his own preferred approach, an approach that has been partially articulated by one of his main philosophers. Using an example has the effect of focusing his readers' attention on the faulty paths and on his own line of reasoning. Skilfully, Humphries has taken on the responsibility of identifying faulty paths (implicitly through reasoning) while joining his voice to others in his domain of inquiry.

While Humphries introduces Richard Rorty in his second move, Davis and Luffman, make no mention of their main philosophers. On the other hand, all of the professional-authors introduce each of their main philosophers in this move of their introductions. Stables and Scott explain that their:

> 12. paper was inspired by, and is in part a critique of ... C. A. Bowers' [own critique of] Richard Rorty for his failure to tackle the ecological crisis in his espousal of pragmatic, ironic individualism. (p. 269)

Peters, immediately after stating his own particular approach (example 6 in this text), explained:

> 13. The paper grows out of interests primarily in the work of Nietzsche ..., Heidegger..., and Wittgenstein... . (p. 351)

And Bingham, who has withheld any claims to centrality, stated:

> 14. Nietzsche and Montaigne show us not how remembering should be valued or de-valued, but how it might be understood more thoroughly and deployed with more finesse. Such deployments ... I will argue here, have great relevance for enhancing the agency of students. (p. 168)

In these excerpts it is made clear that the author's particular niche could not have been established without the prior work of the philosophers they draw upon. In each of these cases the niche itself is attributed to the authors' respective philosophers – it emerges from *their* thought. That the main philosophers drawn upon in these texts have engaged in the problem is itself justification for continued scholarship. While their unique angle is undoubtedly their own, they make no attempt to overtly differentiate it from that of the philosophers. The work of these professional authors, it would seem, is in the explication not the application. This rhetorical move emphasizes the philosopher's expertise over and above the expertise of the professional-author's. This contrasts with each of the student-author's rhetorical relationship with their respective philosopher, which is made most evident in the third and final move.

Move 3: Goal statement and methodology.

The final move in philosophy introductions, as Samraj (2008) indicated, involves stating the main goal and the methodological approach. As previously stated, in most cases the methodology is simply a forecast and summary of the

argument's organization in the text that follows. This is true of each of the three student-authored texts who overtly forecasted their argument, but, interestingly, professional authors forecasted subtly, and indirectly, if at all. This section will begin by briefly introducing how the third move is made by the professional authors, focussing on how the main philosophers employed are referenced. Subsequently, a close analysis will be taken of the referencing techniques the student-authors used in order to forecast their argument, and the rhetorical function these techniques serve in establishing expertise will be discussed.

While all the professional-authors make an explicit goal statement, as do the three student-authors, none of the professional texts offers a forecast how and/or what they will extract from their respective philosophers to construct their argument. This is perhaps indicative of the general reluctance of philosophers to explicate a philosophical method to their brand of producing knowledge (Ruitenberg, 2009). Nevertheless, both Stables and Scott and Peters prepare the reader what is to be expected in their text, yet it is done indirectly. While not explicitly foreshadowing the sequencing of their main argument, Stables and Scott do preview their commentary on a debate that has already been initiated between Rorty and Bowers. This preview directly precedes their goal statement and prepares their reader for how, exactly, they will weave their voice into those of Rorty and Bowers. Peters, on the other hand, offers only the slightest indication of how he will go about making his argument when he states that his paper will:

> 15. argue for the recognition of different *kinds of thinking,* which are explored by reference to Heidegger, and also the significance of *styles*

> *of reasoning,* which are explored by reference to Wittgenstein and Ian Hacking. (p. 351)

In this passage, Peters states, however tacitly, his methodological approach. Peters' indication that he will reference Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Hacking in order to explore his goal signals that he understands these philosophers as *acting upon the argument* he makes. Like in previous moves, this rhetorical technique serves to shift the expert status onto the philosophers he is drawing upon. This differs with the approach taken by all of the student authors.

In each of their attempts to forecast their arguments in their third move, all three student-authors make use of the discursive "I". Interestingly, however, it is Humphries – who up until now has paralleled the professional-authors – who employs the discursive "I" most distinctively. As we see in the following example, Humphries offers his readers the following series of discursive I phrases:

> 16. Thus I speak of Rorty's pragmatic sublime, Taylor's transcendent sublime, Kegan's relational sublime.... In Chapter 2 I discuss Richard Rorty's ideal of .... In Chapter 3 I explore the debate between Richard Rorty and Charles Taylor.... In the final chapter ... I critique [Rorty's post-relativistic position]. (p. 10 – 11)

In each of these discursive I phrases, the author, as the subject of the verb, *acts upon* his respective philosophers or on the thought these philosophers have

contributed. In these phrases the philosophers, in turn, become the object of the verb. Thus, the text *acts on the philosophers* drawn upon.

In her approach, Luffman often tempers this strategy by placing the philosopher's argument in the subject position of the discursive I phrase.

17. In particular, [Nietzsche's] method of perspectivism, I argue, provides [the author] fruitful insight into the challenges.... Nietzsche's affirmative position offers [the author] a unique model ... .(p.6)

While this example differs from that of example 16, it can be easily rearticulated to follow the same general pattern: "I will use Nietzsche's method of perspectivism to provide fruitful insight into the challenges ...." Or "I will use Nietzsche's affirmative position to offer a unique mode." The ease with which this can be done is due to the author assuming the role of object of the transitive verb phrase. However, rather than being objectified (as is the philosophers' condition in example 16), as the object of the transitive verb, the author assumes the position in which he or she can then *act* on the knowledge provided. Thus Luffman is able to put forward the following claim directly following the statements quoted in example 17:

18. This analysis of Nietzsche underscores the characteristics and criteria for the foundation of an ethical model (p. 6).

The act of objectifying the philosophers one draws upon focuses the reader on the actions the author takes to the expense of the previously established academic conversation. What the author is doing, and how they are doing it, becomes the emphasis of the move. The author assumes responsibility for taking these actions. What has already been discussed in the scholarly community is shifted to the background. Rarely, if at all, do the professional authors engage in the same rhetorical referencing practices.

Conclusion

This study attempts to establish how and indicate why the rhetorical practices between master's theses and those of their disciplinary community differ by exploring how these texts function with respect to their audience and the activities they serve. The particular rhetorical techniques that the student-authors' deploy seem no less sophisticated, no more rudimentary than the ones used by the professional authors. This observation suggests that researchers interested in student writing at the post graduate level need to explore student writing as social action, functional within the activities student writing realizes.

Employing an activity theory framework in order to conduct this analysis, the main argument put forward in this paper is that while theses *may* participate in the same activities that professionally produced journal articles do, they *do* participate in the activity of *student learning* which journal articles need not. If the actions are inevitably influenced by the activities within which they occur, as

argued by Dias (2000), then theses cannot escape the specific demands these texts serve in qualifying individuals for future scholarly study. As a result, theses must *do* different things than professional journal articles. By focussing on expertise, this study suggested that student-authors represented themselves and their actions on knowledge in ways which distinguished themselves from their professional counterparts. Student-authors identify the centrality of the problem under investigation, and student-authors identify the particular niche to which their text will contribute, whereas professional authors tended to contribute to a scholarly discussion already underway. It was also found that the student-authors foreshadow their theses by describing how *they* will act on previously published knowledge in ways unnecessary in professionally produced texts.

Far from indicating scholarly inexperience, the rhetorical techniques the student-authors employ to represent their own place in the task of knowledge production seem particularly attuned to the demands and concerns of their primary audience – those who will evaluate their work. They take particular stands, they assume particular responsibilities, they demonstrate themselves as experts in ways that professional-authors need not. Unlike the student-authors, the professional-authors rhetorical moves divert the attention of the reader to the scholarly discussion already underway. The fact that they have the expertise to contribute to this discussion is assumed – a result, perhaps, of the publication itself, or their position as professionals in the field. The student-authors, on the other hand, seem saddled with the responsibility of initiating the discussion. In each introductory move, the student-author distinguishes his or her own voice from those that have come before, identifying themselves as having completed

certain requirements, successfully fulfilling all the requirements of a scholarly discussion.

This study raises the question of whether or not, from a pedagogical standpoint, the style of writing that responds to the inherent evaluative function student activity systems is potentially detrimental. In her advanced writing text, Giltrow (2002) claims that the styles which we invoke, or the styles which we are compelled to take on, shape our "practices and perspectives for interpreting the world ... constitute a position in the world, and shared methods for thinking about it" (p.10). If this is the case, there might very well be a need for concern. As new scholars emerge from the ambiguous demands of student life, they need to take on new perspectives, assume new positions – the style of writing that they will use will need to build upon their student writing practices while realizing their new positions as professional scholars. Activity theory helps to identify some of the inherent contradictions in such a transition. Within an activity theory framework, the rhetorical devices authors use in order to fulfill certain functions, to realize certain activities, are either actions, if consciously deployed, or operations, if their deployment occurs subconsciously. Dias (2000) explained that for long-term participants in specific activity systems, such as student learning, rhetorical practices that might initially take a conscious effort to incorporate in novice student writing become operations as one continues to participate in the activity system over time. However, as Dias (2000) also explained, "the flow between *actions* and *operations* goes forward and backward" (p. 19). Moving between a student activity system to a strictly knowledge producing activity system will involve unlearning those rhetorical practices which have become operational for

students and which are useful in student contexts but inappropriate outside of this context. Furthermore, as novice scholars utilize the rhetorical practices necessary in professional writing, they will initially be deployed as actions until these practices, routinely used, become operations. Quite a bit of learning still needs to take place, not simply as students become professionals, but *because* professionals once were students.

Conclusion: Revisiting Agency

> Si Dieu le Père a créé les choses en les nommant, c'est en leur ôtant leur nom, ou en leur donnant un autre que l'artiste les recréé.
>
> Marcel Proust, 1948, p. 186

In the introduction, I stated that writing this thesis is an engagement with a language not entirely my own. Instead, like Red Peter's report, this thesis has been an attempt to appropriate the discourse habits of an academic community. At the same time, like the master's theses interpreted in chapter three, this thesis also responds to the evaluative demands particular to student life. It is a way of using language that confers recognition and brings about viewpoints and beliefs productive within certain communities. As much as it is an attempt to contribute knowledge, it is an attempt to transition into a particular way of thinking and speaking about the world. Wittgenstein (1977/1980) put it this way: "Working in philosophy [or with theory, I would add] ... is really more working on oneself. On one's own interpretation. On one's way of seeing things. (And what one expects of them)" (p. 16).

Kafka's Red Peter illustrates how working on oneself can commit one to a particular community along with the particular ways of thinking about the world that reside in that community. Achebe's protagonist Okonkwo's obstinate refusal to work on himself, on the other hand, illustrates how resisting change is painful and irresponsive to cultural dynamics. These two pieces of literature point

towards the importance of understanding how individuals might work in discourse (and therefore work on themselves) to do something other than whole-heartedly embracing the particular meanings held in a community or culture, or utterly refusing them for the meanings held in another. Understanding the role individual subjects have in breaking with discourse as they use language is crucial to an account of social change and individual agency; remembering all the while, as the third chapter argued, that any use of language exists in relation to those it is directed towards. To conclude this thesis, I would like to review the main arguments advanced in the three chapters above by applying them to an exploration of the subject's participation in social change.

The Subject and Social Change

In *Textual Politics*, Lemke (1995) argued that social semiotic theories, like those drawn upon in this thesis, must incorporate social change: "The social theory we need must show us a *dynamic* community; it must show us how and why social relations are always changing, and also how they can seem, for certain periods, to remain relatively fixed" (p. 20). While this may be true, understanding the role an individual has in influencing the dynamic quality of communities is not a straight forward task.

Foucault commented on the difficulty of the task. Responding to potential criticism of his own social semiotic theory, at the close of *Archaeology of Knowledge,* Foucault (1972/2002) wrote "I have not denied – far from it – the possibility of changing discourse, I have deprived the sovereignty of the subject

the exclusive and instantaneous right to it" (p. 230). One of the consequences of centering social discourse in the practice of meaning-making is a necessary de-centering of the autonomous subject's participation in social change. But, if not the exclusive right, does the subject have *any* right to changing discourse?

Lemke (1995) stated the predicament of the speaking subject in the following manner: When using language, we must draw upon discourse formations. Discourse formations are "the persistent habits of speaking and acting, characteristic of some social group, through which it constructs its worldview: its beliefs, opinions and values. It is through discourse formations that we construct the very objects of our reality" (p. 24). He then goes on to add what Red Peter essentially demonstrated: when we speak,

> we do this *not* as individuals alone, but as members of communities.... We speak with the voices of our communities, and to the extent that we have individual voices, we fashion these out of the social voices already available to us, appropriating the words of others to speak a word of our own. (Lemke, 1995, p. 24)

Building from this observation, the question of what right the subject has to changing discourse can be re-phrased as: how might someone say something new with those voices already available to us? How might someone act with agency in discourse? In his 1975 essay, *The Pleasure of the Text,* Roland Barthes posed the question in this way:

> How can a text, which consists of language be outside languages? How *exteriorize* the world's jargons without taking refuge in an

> ultimate jargon wherein the others would simply be reported, recited? As soon as I name, I am named: caught in the rivalry of names. How can the text "get itself out" of the war of fictions, of sociolects? (p. 30)

It is precisely this "rivalry of names" that Okonkwo could not find a way out of.

The difficulty of offering a conceptual resolution to the paradox of the speaking, agentic subject is part of the reason why poststructuralist theory has been criticized for a tendency towards relativism and an apparent deficit in conceptualizing resistance (Zipin, 1998). Nevertheless, Achebe's tragedy indicates that it is crucial to find a place for the subject in cultural change while refusing, all the while, to abandon the notion that the voices of our communities are constitutive of how we think about ourselves and how we think about the world.

Transitioning through Language, Becoming New through Words

If we are to escape simply reciting pre-existing voices, then agency begins when the words we use affect an *intelligible* break with the discourse formations out of which these words operate. Or, to state it another way, while structures of meaning might slip in everyday interactions, agency resides in those successful individual attempts to take hold of these slippages and put them to use. To speak or write in this way is to offer new perspectives, new values and new truths.

None of the fictional or non-fictional characters examined in this thesis managed this feat. None were successful in intentionally breaking with the linguistic practices of their intended or actual communities. Okonkwo with his loan request, Red Peter with his "Hallo!", or the rhetorical moves of the master's students all demonstrate that even the skilful deployment of signs within a discourse formation does not free the speaker of the truths that discourse formation holds. Although all used language competently, together they showed that, ultimately, agency in language is something other than deploying the meaningful and recognizable terms that function in communities, even if these deployments offer status or material gain. Instead, if anything can be taken from the failure represented by Okonkwo's suicide, or the distinction between Red Peter's "a way out" and freedom, is that agency must be understood as realized in the attempt to transcend sedimented linguistic practices, to challenge the subjectivities they produce, and ultimately supplant the truths they circulate.

How, then, does one speak with agency? The written pieces analyzed or criticized in this thesis do not offer an answer. What they do offer is an indication of how individuals are constrained through or beholden to the already-existing signifying practices of their community. Together the texts demonstrate the difficulties involved in breaking with language.

To understand the difficulty involved in breaking with language is to first understand the power of language. The power of language follows from its intimate relationship to culture. What makes Achebe's story so compelling is that it persuasively demonstrates the coming apart of culture and community when the symbolic practices of a social group no longer hold. Conversely, Kafka showed

the fundamental necessity to adopt and appropriate the symbolic practices of a culture in order to be integrated within that culture and be afforded some sort of social existence. If culture can be acutely understood as the practices of "giving and taking of meaning," as Stuart Hall claimed (1997, p. 2), then these two important works of fiction identify that culture manifests in particular patterns of language use. Language (including all the signifying practices of a community) is important, not simply because language *carries* meanings, but because language *produces* the meanings that tie individuals together in cultures.

If we take this as true, then, as Kafka so clearly depicted, adopting or appropriating the linguistic practices of a culture cannot be disassociated from the subjective transitions that necessarily result. Achebe, Kafka, and the master's theses students demonstrate how what one utters integrates them within a particular context, transitioning them into the productive ways of thinking embedded in that context. Our efforts to appropriate the signifying practices of a culture always come, to some extent, at the expense of prior ways of seeing and thinking about the world and ourselves.

This either/or scenario underpins both Kafka and Achebe's story. With this point Kafka radically challenges the notion that cultural difference itself can bring about cultural hybridity enabling a critical negotiation of disparate meanings. Kakfa showed that cultural negotiation does not occur independent of the signifying practices of a culture, but through the signifying practices of one culture or another. For Achebe, the either/or aspect of the colonial encounter reveals both the personal and social tragedy of colonialism. Okonkwo foresaw that to engage with the colonialists, to go on living in a changed figured world,

would require him to let go of the meanings that secured, for him, the recognition that he was not the same type of man as his father. His tragic flaw was his inability to let go of these meanings.

To be sure, both stories present a fixed, rigid view of cultural meaning, but in doing so I do not believe they deny social dynamics and the subject's active role in change. Instead, the importance they hold for contemporary scholarship is that they forcefully demonstrate that the challenge at hand is not to simply *claim* that progressive change in meaning requires thinking outside of the structured either/or binary, but to confront the difficulties in getting oneself outside of the binary, without diminishing the power language holds.

At least a part of the difficulty in breaking with language lies in the high stakes of critical reflexivity. To act with agency requires one to first reflect upon the terms that constitute them. The error of Kafka's academy was their failure to understand that critical reflection is not simply accomplished by appropriating the signifying practices of a culture. To do so is to appropriate a culture's meanings, and to seek security in that culture. Instead critical reflection requires one to occupy a position beyond already-established signifying practices in order to look back upon them. In doing so, one risks the security of these signifying practices and the meanings they hold.

This might not be such a risky endeavour if the agentic subject could be sure of what was gained as a result. But the break associated with agency charts out new and therefore uncertain meanings. Agency, and the self-reflection on which it is predicated, destabilizes meaning. Not simply those meanings held to be true about the world, but also the meanings we make of ourselves and the

meanings we draw upon to make ourselves known to others. Red Peter demonstrated that we work hard to form ourselves in relation to these meanings. We do so because non-recognition is constraining and painful, "imprisoning someone in a false, distorted and reduced mode of being," as Charles Taylor (1997, p. 98) put it. This explains why we are more likely to hold on to those established meanings circulated in the contexts in which we find ourselves, even if these meanings pain us, than to detach ourselves from them. To exchange certainty for uncertainty is the risk involved when acting with agency.

A second difficulty involved with escaping the either/or binary arises from the fact that speaking and writing is realized in the actual relationship between the speaker and her or his hearers. The master's theses demonstrated that one's freedom in language is always constrained by the pragmatic need to direct language to specific audiences, and respond to their expectations. Like Red Peter, the master's students are attempting to enter into a new discourse community, with new ways of thinking and seeing the world. Their texts, therefore, are not attempts to speak from an unaffiliated position. Nevertheless, they demonstrate that the subjective transitions inherent in language are always mediated by the recognition sought and offered by their audience. This is why educators need to be aware of how the evaluative function of student writing constructs a student culture, and how responding to evaluation effectively transitions student writers into this student culture as opposed to the culture of their intended discourse community.

What language succeeds in doing is, in part, a product of how the writer perceives his or her reader responding to the texts, and, in part, a product of the

creative act of the reader who struggles to recognize what the text means, what it does not mean, and how it exceeds meaning. Breaking with cultural meaning, acting with agency, is not an individual act. It emerges in the individual relationships of recognition between the speaker and hearer.

Poeticizing Agency, "Something Else Besides"

My position towards agency is summed up nicely in the following statement by Homi Bhabha (1994) taken from his book *The Location of Culture*: "The transformational value of change lies in the rearticulation, or translation, of elements that are *neither the One ... nor the Other ... but something else besides,* which contests the terms and territories of both" (p. 41). For Rorty (1989), to speak something else besides is to speak "poetically." It has been the great poets of history – Hegel, Freud, Proust, among others – who have succeeded in "mak[ing] things new" (p. 13), in initiating transformative change. The poetic is "*neither the One ... nor the Other",* because "in the 'poetic'," as Terry Eagleton (1983/1996) explained, "the sign is dislocated from its object: the usual relation between sign and referent is disturbed, which allows the sign a certain independence as an object of value in itself" (p. 85). This brings us back to the question posed earlier in this conclusion. If agency begins when the words we use affect an *intelligible* break with the discourse formations out of which these words operate, then to speak with agency is to speak poetically, to disturb the usual relation between sign and referent in ways that maintain a meaning making capacity.

These occasions might initiate changes in our theoretical approaches to understanding the world, breaking with established discourse and consequently opening new avenues for theoretical description. (For example, what Foucault [1995] found in Nietzsche's form: his writing "Nietzsche has all the roughness, the rusticity, of the outsider .... [His writing with] a sort of uncomprehending burst of laughter ... shatters. Yes ... it shatters rather than understands" [p. 7]; or what Bhabha [1994] found in Fanon's enjambment: "His voice is most clearly heard in the subversive turn of a familiar term, in the silence of sudden rupture: *'The Negro is not. Any more than the white man.'* The awkward division ... keeps alive the dramatic and enigmatic sense of change" [p. 40]). Poetic breaks might be the very points of cultural change and semantic agency.

There is, of course, still much conceptual work needed to bridge the suggestion that agency begins with the disruption of the usual relation between sign and referent, and the suggestion that through agency transformative change is initiated. To write *poetry* is to use language "for doing something which could not have been envisaged prior to the development of a particular set of descriptions, those which it itself helps to provide" (Rorty, 1989, p. 13); and to read *poetry* is to experience a bliss which "cause the letter – and all possible speech – to collapse in the absolute degree of the annihilation he [or she] is celebrating" (Barthes, 1975, p. 21). So bridging the gap between poetry and change must account for the uncertainty inherent in *something else besides*. However, we might begin by recognizing that while agency in language might free the agentic subject from the destructing rivalry and re-territorialisation of social linguistic practices, agency

equally destroys the meanings we rely on, jeopardizing the meanings we make of ourselves. It is not independently achieved, but realized in relationships.

Perhaps articulating agency is a task one can never quite accomplish. To circumscribe it in words is to already restrict and deny the freedom it represents. This does not mean, however, that we should abandon the attempt, only to try and achieve some perspective.

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