

SYMPOSIUM: ÄSTHETIK VERSUS AUTHENTIZITÄT?

24. und 25. Mai 2011
Zürcher Hochschule der Künste

Of Bengal Tigers, Blind Men, and Other Matters:
Aesthetics/Authenticity/Disability/Performance

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The terms “aesthetics” and “authenticity” are often placed in opposition to each other, particularly in art works that engage issues of identity. On one end of the spectrum, some argue that only those individuals who occupy a particular identity position have the ethical “right” to perform an experience that emerges from that category; on the other hand, some critics, claim that such overt identification of performer and experience places a work outside the realm of aesthetics and art: the most notable example of the latter may be Arlene Croce’s now infamous piece, “Discussing the Undiscussable,” published in *The New Yorker* in 1994, where she asserted her refusal to review Bill T. Jones dancetheatre piece “Still/Here,” precisely on the basis of the identity of the performers as people living with terminal illnesses/disabilities.

This lecture will examine the tensions between concepts of “aesthetics” and “authenticity” (and the spectrum of theories surrounding these ideas) and argue that performance about disability (including both performances created by/featuring disabled performers and those by individuals who do not identify as disabled) provides a particularly useful site for contesting both a purely materialistic understanding of authenticity, defined by a narrow understanding and/or deployment of identity politics, and a depersonalized theory of art, such as that articulated by T.S. Eliot and others. Using myriad thinkers drawn from 20th and 21st century philosophy, criticism, and cultural studies, the lecture will consider how such seemingly disparate schools of thought as existential phenomenology, acting theory, disability aesthetics, and poststructuralist/deconstructionist methods may bridge what may seem to be a dialogic gap between a minority model approach to disability performance and one dissociated from corporeal, social, and psychological/spiritual modalities.

The lecture will engage the work of such thinkers as Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Appiah, Baudrillard, Stanislavsky, Derrida, as well as that of recent disability theorists such as Tobin Siebers, Alex Lubet, and Lennard Davis. Texts and performances discussed will include Rajiv Joseph’s recent play, *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*, Tom Stoppard’s *Arcadia*, two novels centering around experience of and perception through blindness (E.L. Doctorow’s *Homer* and Langley and Rana Dasgupta’s *Solo*), Lucy Grealy’s memoir *Autobiography of a Face*, as well as narrative performances drawn from everyday life.

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Of Bengal Tigers, Blind Men, and Other Matters: Aesthetics/Authenticity/Disability/Performance

Guten abend, bon soir, and good evening. When Immanuel contacted me about presenting this keynote lecture and told me that the theme of this conference was going to be the relationship between "aesthetics" and "authenticity," I grew excited because the often passionate discourse around these terms--and the often implicit assumption that they can be easily and singularly defined and that they must be in conflict with each other--has been and continues to be a source of an ongoing journey in my own life, as a performer, director, scholar, and, not least of all, teacher, which is my primary role professionally.

I would like to begin my remarks with two examples, one a story drawn from my life as a teacher and one from my experience as a reader of criticism and audience for performance. I think, taken together, they will demonstrate what it is at stake in the questions of "aesthetics" and "authenticity," and will suggest how "disability" and "performance" are important dimensions through which to explore questions of aesthetics and authenticity. I will begin with my classroom narrative.

I was in one of my first semesters of teaching a new course at my home institution, Ithaca College, in storytelling. We had not had a storytelling course in the curriculum, so this was new territory for me and for my students. Most of my students have no interest in becoming professional performers of any kind, so the storytelling course needs to be geared towards helping them develop a relationship between themselves, story itself, and the various kinds of audiences to whom they would tell stories throughout their lives--storytelling as a natural, everyday part of their lives. I decided that the best place to begin was by having students tell stories of important events or occasions from their own lives. After all, what could be more simple than to draw on the stuff of your own existence?

I could not, as you might well imagine, have been more wrong. I was careful, I thought, to prepare my students for the experience. I told them to be very careful about what story they chose to tell from their lives, as the performance would present them in a very public way and to recognize that telling such stories require as much art as any other kind of performance, that there must be an aesthetic dimension to the work. I told them that they needed to be prepared to be graded on this performance and above all they were NOT to identify the grade I gave them on the performance with my estimate of them as a person. I thought I had created a sufficient basis to make what we sometimes call a "safe space."

But one young man taught me otherwise. A day or so after I explained the assignment in class, he came up to me timidly and asked if he could talk to me about it. He was in recovery from substance abuse and he would like to tell his story of recovery. I responded that this sounded like something he cared deeply about and, as long as he understood what I had said about evaluation and the need to make his story performance something in the realm of art not therapy, he would have my full support. And off he went.

After he gave his performance in class, I found myself unsure as to how to proceed with the oral discussion. He had stood in front of the class audience, barely "there" in a presentational way, and recited the facts of his development of addiction and his ensuing and ongoing recovery process, a typical 12-step program in a monotone, with only the barest of listing of events arranged chronologically. He moved from a nominal beginning to a nominal ending in sentences that rarely elaborated the details of his experience nor gave us any sense of what it felt like to be inside his life. While, in the post-performance discussion, we all applauded his courage in facing his demons and asserted our hopes that his story would continue to move forward in the directions he was headed, there was mainly silence--there was so little to say about the performance as a performance, and we did not know him in any way outside the classroom. I decided to save my more detailed criticisms for the private written critique I gave each student the class period after the performance, along with their grade.

Ah yes, the grade--how to grade such a performance? If this were an improvisation class or a monologue class, and the student-performer had been given the assignment of creating a character who was giving testimony about his substance use and subsequent recovery, we might have either discussed whether the character of someone seemingly devoid of emotional or psychological attachment to the telling of the events served a theatrical purpose, or I might have worked with him in front of the class to flesh out the sensory life and memory of the character being performed, and not graded the work until it was farther along in its artistic development. But when the performer IS, at some level, trying to perform a story from his own life, how does one approach evaluation in a way that is true to art and also sensitive to the vulnerability of the human subject? He had not ventured into the realm of the aesthetic--he had remained in what appeared to be the documentary or perhaps the therapeutic and I was unprepared to address either. I tried to explain, in my written critique, what felt missing from the performance in terms of narrative interest and dramatic and poetic language and imagery, and, difficult as it was (and it remains the most difficult grade I have given), I gave the performance a "C"--in the United States, the grade represents what is supposed to be considered "average" (really, mediocre) work. I did my best to assure him, in my writing, that I admired and respected what he was trying to achieve in his personal life, but that, in the realm of storytelling as a performing art, it was "C" work.

As soon as he received the written critique, at the end of the following class, he came up to me indignantly, with more affective expression than there had been in the entire formal performance. "So you are saying my life is only worth a C?" he demanded of me? "No," I replied, "your life is worth much more than that, as I tried to say in my critique. But the performance was only a C level." He stomped away. I cannot at this remove recall whether he continued in the class or dropped it. I did know that, somehow, we both failed in that interaction.

But what I think I realize now is that when the student asked me if I really only thought his life was worth a "C" grade, he wasn't at all interested in aesthetic judgments--indeed, aesthetics, despite my best efforts, were the last considerations in his mind when he received my critique and grade. I think what so wounded him was that he interpreted my grade as an evaluation of his "authenticity," in the sense in which such existential phenomenologists as Heidegger and Sartre might use it--his performance as a way of being true to his self. The "C" I gave the student might very well have communicated to him that I held his life-as-told as an act of "bad faith," in which somehow I was passing

judgment on the decisions he had made and belittling the enormous work it took to go through recovery and simply to tell it to a group of relative strangers. Oddly enough, I think it is possible that he did not entirely misinterpret my grade,-- what I think I was, at least in part, communicating was that the performer gave the appearance of not having made any choices at all, other than to stand in front of us and relate in succession, the order of events as they happened. There was no sense of Being-in-the-performance, and, hence, neither aesthetic value nor the appearance of authentic commitment. I wish I could have had such a conversation with my student. I know I could not have named things this way then and I doubt he could have heard me and, given his own place in his life's journey, even if he had, it might only have inflamed him even more. I learned some painful things from that student that day, even if it has taken me this long to be able to theorize them.

A second conflict between "aesthetics" and "authenticity," this time drawn from the world of public/professional performers and critics--though the assumptions the word "professional" suggests are in a sense central to the conflict. The performance, with which many of you are no doubt familiar was created and produced by the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Company and premiered in 1994. It was titled "Still/Here," and was developed first through a series of what Jones, its choreographer, called "survival workshops," in which he traveled the country, working with small groups of individuals living with chronic, usually terminal illnesses. In these workshops, he had the participants, few if any of whom had any previous training as dancers, improvise and develop movements and verbal scripts that captured their experiences with illness and with living-with-illness. In a documentary produced by the United States journalist Bill Moyers, we see Jones in process with these groups of people, using movement, gesture, and spoken, improvised texts to explore their illness experiences. The goal of the workshops is not to transform these individuals into professional performers; rather, it seems to be reciprocally to provide a space and occasion for the individuals to express and to experience their illness in a lived and articulated way, as well as to help create texts that Jones will then incorporate into the dance/performance piece he will create with his own troupe of performers.

Jones summarizes his life and career in a series of statements and movements in the documentary, when Moyers challenges him to go through the same process he asked of his workshop participants: his life narrative has moved from one of "confusion, a sissy boy, racialized, fear of white people....then discovery of sex...what does it mean to be a man? The man tries to be normal, and everything stops" to his relationship with a "Jewish homosexual," after which he is "defined not as himself but as a member of a very famous avant-garde dance couple known as Bill and Arnie... he is not living his own life, he is following behind a man who is dying, following and learning." After Zane's death from HIV/AIDS, Jones "is no longer part of a famous interracial couple, he is a black man alone...he makes works that talk about these things....soon he is no longer even Bill...he is an HIV+ black male homosexual." He describes the people in his workshops, he says, as he moves his body through space in a deliberate, rhythmic, almost marching way, "people step truthfully, people step weakly, people step bravely." In this action, involving speech and body, he performs the bodily consciousness of disability itself, of those who, as Tobin Siebers put it in his critique of Freud's collusion of disability and narcissism, those of us with "tender organs"--the body itself a tender organ.

The actual performance uses Jones' dance company, all of whom identify as professional performers--and who live in bodies of different sizes, shapes, races, and ages--with video excerpts from the workshops, including spoken texts from the survivors, set against an instrumental and vocal score composed for the piece. Jones does not use the actual ill individuals as dancers in the performance, and there is no level at which the dancers in the piece themselves announce any status as disabled or ill. Jones himself does not dance in the piece.

What became the site of conflicted public critical discourse with "Still/Here" is the essay written for *The New Yorker*, during the run of "Still/Here" at the Brooklyn Academy by Arlene Croce, then one of the most highly visible and influential popular critics in the dance world, an essay she called "Discussing the Undiscussable. Here is a summary of Croce's column: she declines to attend a performance of Jones' piece, even though it would ordinarily fall within her purview as someone covering major dance performances in the city. Her reasons for this boil down to the following: she believes that Jones, by choosing to focus on what she calls "victim art," has placed his work outside the realm of art (aesthetics) and, hence, outside of what is worth considering in critical discourse.

There is much to unpack in her position, but what seems to me most important is that her refusal, as critic, to engage with a major performer because of his subject matter and because she deems it unsuitable for critical discourse is once again a kind of calling into question not only the piece's aesthetics, but its authenticity and what we might see as a kind of ethical a priori of ontology--whether such a piece has the "right to be," or at least to be as art. She has set up a straw man for her argument: no one has said she cannot write critically, even negatively about Jones' piece, and a worthwhile critical discourse can be had about the piece on many dimensions, aesthetic, philosophical, and ethical. It seems fair to ask about reciprocity in the gathering and composition of the piece: what do the survivors "get" from participating in the workshops, what do they give, and what kind of economy is operative? To what degree is Jones operating in "good faith" with the survivors? with his dancers? with his audience? Can the aesthetics of his choices, say, having trained live dancing bodies holding the stage with mediated, video excerpts from the survivors workshops, call into productive question which aspects of the piece feel more authentic than others, and why? And if Croce believes, as she seems to imply, that the piece by its very definition, defies aesthetic analysis and evaluation, on what basis?

In the interests of high art, she will not admit the personal to the aesthetic, and wishes to maintain a kind of detached formalism as the qualifying criterion for something to count (let alone matter) as art. Jones' work, she suggests, could not even attempt to do so, because of his blurring of lines between the professionally trained dancer and the person-moving-through-the world, and moving at times "weakly." Near the end of the interview with Moyers, the interviewer asks Jones what he hopes to get from the experience of working with the survivors, dancers, and other artists involved in the creation of the performance. He mentions a number of things, all of which seem relevant to this symposium: He states that by "engaging the world through your work, you're a full citizen, you're producing something." He speaks without making explicit reference to philosophers, but speaks alongside them, so to speak, saying "I want to find out what time in my life means...Who will receive me into death?" and wonders, "if the workshops could teach me how not to be afraid of loss of control," something anyone, but particularly those living with disabilities or illnesses, might have always in their sense of Being-in-the-

world. But, as he nears the end, he articulates an aesthetic that one might imagine could be reconciled with any number of more traditional aesthetics: "Just make a beautiful dance, an interesting, vital, challenging dance, and it will say everything I learned from survivors.

Blind Men: Blurring Aesthetics and Authenticity on the Page

In this section of my lecture, I will turn my attention to the figure of the blind man as theorized in philosophy, as remembered in a poet's memoir, and in a novel published a few years ago in the United States. It uses what Derrida might call the "memoir of the blind" as the central trope through which to explore the experiences of the protagonist. In the work that bears this title, Derrida, in his usual fashion, puns on the multiple meanings of "memoir" in French, both as an artistic text that endeavors to represent some portion of the life of the narrator and as a noun corresponding to the English word "memory," the mental faculty and corporeal resonance of what has been experienced in the past that continues to exist, however transformed, in the present and into the future.

One of the most famous philosophical texts from the Enlightenment period is Denis Diderot's "Letter about the blind for the use of those who see," and, like many Enlightenment texts is an essay disguised as a philosophical letter. In it Diderot contemplates the relationship between blindness and knowing, both scientific and aesthetic knowing. He, like Derrida two centuries later, finds a complex relationship between the ontology of the blind and their different (and, both might argue, in some respects, superior) cognition from "those who see." For example, Diderot asserts, "The only compensation [blind people have] is their having ideas of the beautiful, which, if less extensive, are more clear than those of many keened-sighted philosophers" (6, spelling modernized by me). In other words, by not having the distractions that the visual physical entail, the blind man may have a special relationship to the realm of the aesthetic, and a relationship that, at least here, Diderot does not view as deficient, but, in some ways, more authentic in its philosophical purity than others.

Diderot makes an interesting translation of one sensory category to another, arguing that we "must conclude sight to be a kind of touch" (7) and that the blind man "judges beauty by the touch of feeling of calling to mind the sensation of bodies, even when absent, and no longer acting upon us" (28). In other words, the blind have an ability to recall through inner vision an authenticity of memory that sighted people cannot possess because their access to sensation and, hence, knowledge, is optically centered. Whether there is either unassailable reasoning or, today, any kind of neurological support for this view of memory and knowledge is less the point than the position that blindness is here less a liability, from a philosophical position, than a way into a kind of authenticity Diderot valorizes as in some respects superior to that of the sighted.

The idea of sight as an extension of or form of touch and, perhaps, for the blind person, touch as a way of seeing-- remains a recurring trope in more recent philosophical treatises on blindness as phenomenology. Many are probably familiar with Merleau-Ponty's oft-cited description of the white cane of the blind person as not an external tool, but as an extension of body-consciousness and Being-in-the-world of the blind person

(152). Merleau-Ponty describes this melding of object with personhood as gradual and as part of an emerging consciousness: he is interested in the tool as a way of allowing the blind man to orient himself spatially as a Being-in-the-world. Similarly, the Heidegger who becomes more interested in technology can be seen as moving towards such prosthetic devices as becoming more constitutive of the authentic personhood of the disabled person than as an external object; wheelchair users have reported similar intentional relationships with their assistive devices.

Memoirs by blind people constitute a literary subgenre of their own. While time limits my ability to address such works in this forum, I would like to offer one paragraph as a small example of how a blind memoirist provides his readers/audience with the sense of uncovering of consciousness through listening--and then, reconstituting this lifeworld through writing-as-speech. In *Eavesdropping: A Life by Ear*, the poet and memoirist Stephen Kuusisto puts together what listening means to him as a visually impaired person. In a particularly memorable passage, he describes what the experience of hearing a teacher recite Milton's Puritan epic *Paradise Lost* (itself the product of a blind artist) did to expand his own sense of intentionality towards the aural world. It seems to me to signal a breakthrough from his blindness as pure liability to his blindness as a different way of being and knowing:

The world was cruel and driven by appetites. No one was fulfilled. Listening through walls or to the grooves of records, I was getting it--there were actions one couldn't take back. It was the difference between speaking and being. Milton's Eve didn't seem to know the difference. My classmates didn't get it either. People listened for confirmation rather than the harder things. The air outside was warm as a bath. I was alone with my ridiculous records. I could see Adam and Eve, white as bone. I played passages over again, lifting the heavy tone arm of the record machine and dropping it on the spinning record. I held my nearly disembodied head and sometimes I even held my breath. (57)

Note how, even in this brief passage, Kuusisto is able to describe a process of transformation from himself as someone defined by an absence into an agent of existence and action. We often think of listening as the passive counterpart to speaking; for Kuusisto, blindness and the ways in which it requires him to engage in what we might call "reading-by-listening" are the very stuff that will lead to his transformation into an artist--an artist of writing and an artist whose writing is by very definition a performance of the authenticity that his disability has pushed him to embrace and embody.

The novel is E.L. Doctorow's *Homer and Langley*, published in 2009. Doctorow, is an American novelist who often works with historical material, but almost always in ways that intentionally blur lines between documentation and invention. *Ragtime*, perhaps his most famous novel, contrasts the interweaving histories of White Anglo Saxon Protestants, black Americans, and Jewish immigrants around the turn of the 19th century; his is also known for *The Book of David*, which fictionalizes the Rosenberg case and its aftermath, and *The March*, which uses Sherman's March to the Sea, a climactic turn in the American Civil War as its bases.

Homer and Langley tells the story, with much rearrangement and what seems to be much deliberate invention (and/or reinvention) of the saga of Homer and Langley Collyer, two scions of a well-to-do family in New York City in the first half of the twentieth century, bachelor brothers who live together virtually all of their lives, ultimately dying in a kind of simultaneous celebrity and oblivion in their former grand mansion in Harlem, Langley what would today be called a "hoarder" of pathological dimensions, and Homer, blind and paralyzed. Franz Lidz has written a non-fictional book, *Ghostly Men*, a term Harlem residents used to describe the Collyer brothers; Lidz interweaves what is known historically and journalistically about the Collyers with his own family history of "ghostly men," uncles who lived with various forms of psychiatric illness, including the hoarding that characterized Langley. One thinks of Derrida's notion of "hauntology" here, a kind of meditation designed to restore different forms of presence even in the midst of the biological "absence" that death entails.

Doctorow's novel, not unlike Lidz's book, recovers the possibility of agency and identity for these two "ghostly men," though the novel as fictive form permits greater latitude to Doctorow to imagine what their authentic existences might be/have been/might be in the future in which readers continue to experience these men in the novel. He narrates the novel from the point of view of Homer, the blind brother, itself the first of many rupturing of expectations--choosing the "unsighted," but the more clearly "seeing" of the two brothers as the speaker, the witness, the one who controls the telling of the lives: Langely, who has physical sight, cannot see beyond his piles and piles of hoarded trash to what is valuable and authentic in life. Doctorow alters and invents a number of aspects of the lives of the brothers, thus signaling even more clearly than might otherwise be true in that hybrid genre we call "historical fiction," that he is less interested in narrativizing the Collyers per se, but in creating a kind of dialogue between the Collyers and his own ongoing novelizing of the history of the United States in the 20th century. Some critics might reasonably question his authority to write in the first person voice and experience of a blind man, a fair enough question to raise. Placing this novel in the context of Doctorow's oeuvre, I would argue that he is trying, through the offices of fiction, to reveal the often unstoried, unvoiced lives, what Foucault would call the subjugated knowledge of my country.

To begin with, I think Doctorow's choice to tell the story of the Collyer brothers from Homer's point of view, rather than Langley's, while, at first perhaps appearing to be a kind of co-opting of disability subjectivity by a writer who occupies hegemonic identity positions is in itself a potential way of putting into higher relief the unspoken and often enfreaked, to use Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's term, status of disabled subjects. This takes us back, in a sense, to Diderot's view of the blind person as a response to a mechanistic view of empiricism--Diderot might make the argument that Homer's very blindness (and the name Homer, while of course, the actual name of the narrating brother, also harkens back to the famously blind ur-narrator of Western spoken epic) might give him a kind of purer, less distracted and more reliable insight into the world--through the kinds of "touch" Diderot references as a kind of "sight." Optical vision, though it may seem the most reliable of the senses for the empiricist (since sight is traditionally considered the most dominant of the senses), is itself not proof of empirical truth--as Kuusisto's memoir of listening and Langley's psychiatric dissociation might suggest.

Homer, then, like his namesake, has a way of seeing that is unencumbered by the clutter and clatter of distraction. Throughout the novel, even as he is facing his last days, he remains mentally stable and intellectually whole, and his memory sharp and evocative. It is not unimportant to note that, like many other blind people, his loss of vision came over time and only produced what we think of full blindness in late adolescence. Granted, choosing Homer instead of Langley as narrator for the tandem life story privileges neurotypicality over sensory typicality, but in a world dependent on narrative coherence, this seems reasonable. In a sense, Homer's isolation (which is breached within the world of the novel on occasions) allows him greater authentic experience of his own reality--a freedom from the world that Sartre's Antoine in *Nausea* might very well have desired.

A more audacious move Doctorow makes as a novelist is to extend the lives of the Collyer brothers several decades beyond their biographical and historical ones. The two brothers were found dead in their home in 1947; Homer was found first, with no sign of Langley. A few weeks later, Langley's corpse was discovered, partially decomposed and partially consumed by rats. But Doctorow, in his quest to use the brothers, particularly Homer, as focalizers for 20th century American history and culture, does not chronicle their end at this moment, but, rather, imagines their lives through the 1950s and 1960s, including an episode when Langley invites a group of hippies to live with them in a kind of impromptu commune. To make such a narrative choice is clearly to signal to readers that the Homer and Langley of the title are as much inventions as historical realities--and in addition to extending their lives by decades, Doctorow reverses birth order, making Homer the younger of the two. They are not, however, simply symbols or figurines who can conveniently be deployed merely to witness the events of the mid-century. I would add nor is Homer's blindness, in my reading, simply an ironic attempt to appropriate a historical fact for rhetorical purposes. I think Doctorow is reaching for something more ambitious and, simultaneously, more specific.

The Collyer brothers, in their abject state, nonetheless remain filled with vitality and commitment to their beliefs, to their life choices, and to their sense of rootedness in their home in this neighborhood that has long since become economically impoverished and in the urban narratives not only of NYC but of the United States, a signifier of decay. Yet these two men, interdependent on each other, together remain a family and remain themselves. While today it is easy to dismiss Langley's collecting obsession as a pathology and to see Homer's blindness and later paralysis as categories of pity and/or stigma in Doctorow's novel, their lives have a fullness and, more important, meaningfulness that is authentic for them. Indeed, Homer's blindness does not become a source of pity or self-pity--it is simply how he comes to know the world and to know himself. And, in this sense, their disabilities are a source of their existential freedom rather than existential hells from which there is "no exit."

Homer narrates his and his brother's lives primarily from that typical first-person position where the implied listener is the generalized anyone who cares to attend to the tale. But he also adds, and make overt reference at times, to a fictive narratee, a French journalist, Jacqueline, creating a kind of doubled sense of audience. Homer's own narrated odyssey ends only with the disappearance of Langley from Homer's horizon of consciousness (presumably, as the final sentences suggest, with whatever accident caused Langley's death--it is believed that he was felled by one of the traps he designed

against intruders), which will lead, outside the diegesis of the novel, to Homer's death through starvation, as indeed, historically, was the cause of his death.

But the final sentences retain Homer's ontological status, with the following vocative call: "Jacqueline, for how many days have I been without food? There was a crash, the whole house shook. Where is Langley? Where is my brother?" (208) The Jacqueline to whom Homer calls is not physically present--but, as Diderot and Derrida would suggest, she remains authentically present for him, not in spite of his blindness, but thanks to his blindness--the imaginative memory carries with it the potential for a kind of unending intentionality towards this listener. Similarly, by ending the novel with these two questions--and notice, the first names the individual whose location he seeks, the second describes him in relational, categorical terms--there is a philosophical and narrative open-endedness that allows Homer to remain aesthetically alive beyond the frame of the novel.

The narrator who can ask these questions has not yet uttered the unutterable sentence, "I died." Perhaps asking these questions (to which, he presumably never hears a response) is the equivalent of signaling what Heidegger described as the "Being-unto-Death," the "I am dying" -- and, as we shall see in my next section "Being-unto-Death", as Heidegger argues, is the state of all people. And if indeed, we are all always "Being-unto-Death," it may be that the lives and consciousnesses of disabled people, such as Homer and Langley reach out to all of us, in powerfully intentional ways, to help us understand how disability is a more marked and aware way of living within that state. This is not to argue that disability inevitably leads to death and, hence, should be negatively associated with decay and decomposition; rather, it is to remind us that all life leads to dying and that disability, both because of the way it is viewed by the "they" outside ourselves. Michael Bury calls "biographical disruptions," those moments, events, life passages, when disability (or other phenomena) take us out of lack of consciousness and remind us of our own relationship to time. In this way, such subjects as Kuusisto and Doctorow's Homer provide us not with examples of stoppage and death, but with a heightened sense of the "ekstatic temporality" which we all may access as part of the journey towards the ends of our lives.

Tigers, Soldiers, and the Prosthetic Hand

The last text I will consider this evening is one written for theatrical performance. In fact, this play is currently running on Broadway: Rajiv Joseph's *Bengal Tiger in the Baghdad Zoo*. It is a fascinating theatrical text with which to end my lecture tonight for a few reasons. To begin with, it features the beloved clown (and conservatory trained actor) Robin Williams not only above the title, but as the title creature. Interestingly, Williams himself identifies as bipolar and the tabloids have followed his struggles with substance use as well: one could argue that these disabilities are the fuel, the very engines that produce his comic genius.

Joseph has based the frame of his play on an actual incident: the destruction of the Baghdad Zoo during the 2003 invasion, which allowed many animals to escape. An American soldier, in an incident that has never fully been documented, had his right arm chewed off by a Bengal tiger; another soldier shot the tiger, first wounding it and then, killing it in further fire. Tommy, one of the American soldiers, holds out a piece of meat, the tiger attacks and is shot dead by his fellow soldier Kev. Joseph moves beyond not

only the real incident, but beyond realism as a dramatic form, and the tiger becomes the commentator throughout the rest of the play, pondering his own existence and the meaning of violence and conflict. While, after the first scene, he is beyond physical life, he continues to quest after knowledge, and only understands what his life has meant (or not meant) once he has left his body behind. Williams' performance is an extraordinarily disciplined, text-centered one, closer to the kinds of claustrophobic musings of Beckett's characters, speaking at the limits of existence, the boundaries where truth might be found, in a street-wise style reminiscent of David Mamet's tricksters and losers

The play proceeds to follow the interweaving fates of three central characters: Tommy, the mauled soldier, Kev, the soldier who killed the tiger, and Musa, an Iraqi translator, caught between western military pressures and his home culture. Each character experiences and performs disability in shared and individual ways. My focus will be on the two American soldiers, as Joseph focuses his questions of disability and its complexities for authentic existence most directly on them.

After the first scene, the play creates and represents differing ontological planes--the tiger in some "Being-beyond-Death," Kev hurtling towards his own. By the end of the first act, Kev, haunted by the traumas of war, as well as by the spectre of the tiger, with whom he converses, attempts to amputate the hand that held the gun that shot the tiger in full view of the audience and dies: notice how there is a productive, if grimmer analogy between Kev's relationship to the hand that held the gun and Merleau-Ponty's figure of the blind man and his cane. During the first act and then into the second, the tiger begins to question all that has been the foundation of his self-understanding while alive--his explanations for his predatory behavior and actions, which he has explained simply by reference to the natural characteristics of his species.

But now, beyond the world of physical hunger and sensory instincts, he asks of himself: "What if my every meal has been an act of cruelty? What if my very nature is in direct conflict with the moral code of the universe? That would make me a fairly damned individual. After all, *lunch* usually consists of the weak, the small, the stupid, the young, the crippled. Because they're easier to kill" (187). He comes to the realization that he must atone for his murder of those in abject positions, whether by their weakness, crippledness, or place in the order of species. He comes to realize that he has viewed the disabilities of others as an opportunity for his own gain. And it is only when he himself has been taken beyond the borders of power, agency, and pride of place in the animal kingdom, that he can realize that he is a subject to the violence of the world as he is an agent of it.

Meanwhile, Kev's act of suicide is itself a misdirected, misunderstanding attempt to achieve agency and authenticity, hacking away at his own hand as an offering to make the tiger leave his consciousness. He asks of the tiger, "You want my hand? You want to eat my hand, just like you did Tommy? Here! Maybe then you'll leave me alone, just like you leave Tommy alone! (187) In the second of the two acts, Kev has also entered into the world of Derridean hauntology the tiger has been in since the end of the first scene.

Joseph makes a move that is complex in its implications for what he means disability to be, and one I continue to try to puzzle out. Kev, the dullard, immature kid, now, like our tiger, adopts a more contemplative, reflective, inquiring state of being, freed from the interference of the corporeal and the emotional. In the production I saw, the actor who played Kev, Brad Flesicher, gave the dead Kev a greater sense of physical

assurance and a speech pattern that bespoke a more intelligent person. It is as if death has removed Kev's mental disabilities, which were products of war and class disparities, and this has allowed a purer, more authentic Kev to emerge--authentic in the sense of potentialities, as life in the social world of the military and particularly of the war, has produced his disabilities. Ironically, Kev must be killed as a result of war in order to be ready to fight it mindfully. This is a dark cage in the zoo indeed.

Kev's other human companions remain, at least for much of the second act, caught in their own webs of existence, Tommy now in possession of, as he calls it, a "bionic hand." He has proven his inauthenticity, his bad faith, in a scene at the end of the first act, where he deserts Kev, who is hospitalized under suicide watch, and denying him his friendship in the hospital scene directly before Kev's subsequent suicide: he makes it clear that he never considered their friendship real, but simply an artifact of men in war.

For that, the play sentences Tommy to seek an authentic experience throughout the rest of the play--and it denies it to him. In one powerful scene, difficult to watch, we see Tommy force the Iraqi interpreter Mula at gunpoint to procure a local prostitute for him. But what Tommy seeks a prostitute for is not the usual sex acts one might expect. No, instead, he wants her to masturbate him, and for a very particular reason. Because his dominant hand was chewed off by our tiger, Tommy can no longer reproduce the "natural" sensations of self-pleasure: the prosthetic feels too foreign, too clearly not-human--the prostitute even comments that it smells like "milk." While it may perform many functions even better than his "natural" hand, in Tommy's psychosexuality, at least, it cannot provide him with the self-need that will bring him to release. While the prostitute is also not-him, she is at least human, and her touch, he hopes, will restore a sense of authentic sexual stimulation. But Kev, who watches the scene, from a kind of transcendent position of consciousness, haunting Tommy as the tiger haunted him, recognizes Tommy's plan as a useless one, saying "It's not about whacking off, Tommy. You're not confronting the issue here....You feel incomplete without your hand. You feel like you're never going to be *you* again. And so you think, 'Oh, okay, I'll come back to Iraq and find my gold, and then I'll be able to whack off again.' But things don't work out like that. Look at me. I thought I'd be in heaven by now, but I'm not. I don't know *where* I am. I'm just a reverberation of what I used to be" (213).

There remains an opportunity for reconciliation and salvation in the desert--through an awareness of an Other whose otherness has produced wisdom. Tommy has forced Musa to take him to the desert to retrieve the hidden gold stolen from the Hussein palace. Yet, as the sands blow over the traces of anything identifiable, the two men encounter a woman leper, part of a colony driven out of the city. The woman provides whatever material solace she can--water, a bandage, she has little for she is alone, the last left after a bomb hit this empty place.

After arguing with Tommy, Musa pulls out a gun and shoots him in the stomach, a desperate act, the only way he knows to be free of Tommy and all he stands for. He leaves Tommy in the desert, along with leper, who speaks in Arabic, but nonetheless offers Tommy a kind of testimony that Kev (who now understands and speaks Arabic) translates: she says, "My body has been decaying for my whole life...I am made of sand....When I was fourteen [my hands] fell off. They slowly fell off over time...Nothing...There is no God. No heaven, no hell. Death is nothing. It is peaceful" (233-35).

Though this is not the final scene of the play, it is its climax, what Joseph's drama of incompleteness, of rupture, of amputations has been reaching towards. While the leper is still "in-life," she is also, "Being-unto-death"--and has been in a more conscious way than most people, as she acquired leprosy when much younger. Her life experience of leprosy as disability has taken her deeply into an understanding of the authentic existence of the world and of herself as a consciousness and a body within it--and it is only because of the "decay" of her body that she has come to understand what her living is. That we have, here in the absent space that is the desert, an act of mediation, of translation, provides both an enactment of and a metaphor for the intersubjectivity we live and for which we long for, even if we are caught in its incompleteness in our inability ever to achieve it fully.

Kev, with his newfound knowledge tells the tiger, "...algebra comes the Arabic word *al jibr* which means 'a reunion of broken parts'" (214). I think Joseph's choice of translation is very important here--a reunion of broken parts acknowledges that the parts remain broken, but a reunion holds out the possibility of something new, a meeting, not as before, but in some different, perhaps even unexpected way, that is an advance on what was there before the break. At the end of the play, only the tiger remains onstage. As the titular figure, he has the last word, alone on stage, claiming that he will wait for "something to walk by so I can kill it and eat it" (impossible, of course, but habits die hard). He tells the audience, the "Rules of the hunt": "Don't fuckin move. Don't make a sound. Be conscious of the wind: where it's coming from. Be still. Watch. Listen" (242). Could this not be a credo for an aesthetics of authenticity, of Being?

Conclusion

I realize that, in my musings on the various texts, I may have said little about matters of the practical matters of aesthetics and authenticity in terms of who gets to perform disability and we should approach such performance in a way that both retains an aesthetic knowledge and a respect for authenticity of experience: in other words, how does the actor achieve intersubjectivity in performance about, with, for, disability? Carrie Sandahl argues that any performance of disability that does not use a disabled performer in a role is lacking, either aesthetically or, she might argue, ethically. I do not agree with her, but what I do believe if one is going to cast nondisabled performers in the roles of disabled characters, it is crucial to approach the process with awareness of and humility for what such actors need to learn and need to know, and to be conscious about such choices.

I would prefer to imagine a more utopian set of possibilities for disability and performance, an aesthetics closer to that articulated by Richard Schechner on a number of occasions: casting as a process of opening up possibilities so that performers/actors, directors, and audiences can understand and know and engage in all kinds of potentialities. Schechner does not base his argument in either a rejection of a kind of reductive version of Stanislavski "realism" (which has too often connected the work of the actor with the goal of requiring the audience identify actor and character in a seamless way) nor in the overtly political aims of Brecht's theory of alienation-based acting. I think Schechner is calling for something both more disciplined and more playful in this regard. I desire a place not where bodies don't matter, for bodies always matter, in some way. But I also do not want a theatre where ALL that matters is the literal identification of a body category with a character. I want a theatre where a nondisabled actor can play a

disabled character, but, in so doing, brings his or her able-bodiedness and its way of Being-in-the-world to the process and to the product, the performance itself. I equally want a theatre where disabled body (and an actor disabled in other ways, as well), cannot only can, but is encouraged to--perform nondisabled roles and bring his or her own particular phenomenology to the role, not as a metaphor, but as a method for knowing and becoming that character.

For a final example, we might think of one of the great disabled creations of modern theatre, imagined and given life by a Swiss playwright: Claire Zachanassian in Durrenmatt's *The Visit of the Old Lady*. Must a performer taking on the role be an actual amputee? I don't think so, though it would be fascinating to see what an actor who had an amputated leg might bring to the role. It would also, I would add, be fascinating to see what an actor who uses a wheelchair might bring to the role. Or a male actor, whose own gait is as much a performance as is the character's--how each actor finds this character's proprioception on stage and in the world. And, indeed, what the musical theatre star, Chita Rivera, who played the role in Kander and Ebb's musical adaptation, brought of her years as a top-notch dancer, but one who had a leg broken in a car accident and now is near eighty years old, brought to the role was, by all accounts, extraordinary. And, most important, whatever the corporeality of the actor, I think what is central is a reaching out to understand what it means to walk on one leg, and what it meant for that male playwright to write into being a play about this one-legged woman whose particularities of life make her unique and indelible whenever she walks in her very particular way. What I want is there to be more opportunities for all kinds of actors to play whatever roles call out to them and to which they have the capacity to bring some authentic part of themselves to the authentic creations imagined by writers and, in turn, audiences. When we have that, I think we will have a theatre of disability worth having. Thank you.

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