

**Transactional Consciousness:**  
**A Framework for Reading Genocide in the English Classroom**

BY

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THESIS

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## SUMMARY

This dissertation seeks to expand English teacher conversations about how to teach reading and literature in this era of education reform. Since the 1980s, there has been a steady increase in anxiety over reading test scores in America's public schools evidenced by reform movements such as *A Nation at Risk*, No Child Left Behind, and the Common Cores State Standards. While the body of literature surrounding reading achievement is wide, the focus has been on closing achievement gaps with accountability measures (e.g., data collection, school regulations, standards-based assessments, teacher evaluation rubrics, and penalties for not making progress). The latest effort to reform education began this school year (2014-5) with the Common Core State Standards. Because schools are only now figuring out what this shift in standards will mean for curriculum and instruction, I suggest now is the time for English teachers to reflect on the impact of No Child Left Behind's (NCLB) accountability mechanisms on reading practices and ask if a focus on achievement is preparing our students to read in ways that prepare them live and make a difference in our globalized world.

A personal inquiry, this dissertation begins with my experiences as a middle school English teacher during the NCLB era. I claim that concerns about meeting Adequate Yearly Progress created a culture of reading focused on quantifiable outcomes, which excluded students' aesthetic responses, limited interpretation, characterized literature as a conduits of information, and narrowed students' understanding of how texts shape perceptions of the world and our place in it.

This inquiry makes a case for a shift in pedagogy. I develop bridges among and across transactional reading theory, rhetoric, witnessing, and the aesthetic of fiction in novels to offer an ethical approach to reading that I call transactional consciousness. I demonstrate this theory through the reading of genocide of literature because such literature asks for responsible listeners, and genocide is an extreme example of what happens when the state excludes humanity in the name of progress. Included are stories from my own classroom and travels. I invite English teachers to take up this ethical endeavor as they respond to this new era of education reform.

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 had ambitious goals to have every student “proficient” by 2014. The deadline has arrived, and as states could not achieve that standard, more and more states have asked for waivers (to be exempted from federal guidelines and, thus, penalties). To get a waiver, states must propose and develop rigorous and comprehensive plans to improve education outcomes for all students, close achievement gaps, increase equity, and improve the quality of instruction. This means states can adopt the Common Core State Standards or develop their own standards, but the language of “accountability” and “college and career readiness” is required. In addition, the waiver proposals must include a plan for evaluating teachers and principals using standardized test scores. Education can be seen as something potentially expansive and complex, yet when considering it as an apparatus of the state, education becomes a mechanism of measurement that excludes the humanity of those it serves.

Many students, after a decade of NCLB, perform and even see learning as data. They and their families have slowly seen their child’s educational experience defined and controlled by test scores. One computerized test, the MAP, developed by the Northwest Evaluation Association, is a web-based test that provides numerical data for reading, language arts, and math; it takes five weeks to administer three times a year. The data is used to place some students in intervention classes, often at the cost of art or music. The MAP test is just one of several high-stake tests that students take each year.

Here is the point: there is paradox in education reform. While positing reform for the sake of progress, reform, in fact, enacts an antiquated and even violent logic in its exclusionary systems. Only one type of knowledge is typically measured in school, and it is the kind that the state can quantify. This is not to say that the only learning that happens in schools is quantifiable,

but what is lost in this ordering is the beauty of disorder and the innovation that comes from spaces of complexity and discovery which are valuable and necessary to public life, a public life that is increasingly transnational (Hesford). (I use “trans”-nationalism here to highlight the way our world’s economic, environmental, political, and social systems are all interconnected. For example, one nation’s economic crisis or use of fossil fuels cannot be contained within its borders; the implications move across borders to impact other economies and global climate change.) By attempting to quantify learning, the accountability measures function to de-personalize its subjects for the sake of development and competition; students are labeled (ELL, IEP), numbered (test scores), tracked (honors, remedial), and targeted (discussed in chapter two). Similarly, teachers are monitored, compared, and evaluated. The state is “writing on” the students and teachers, attempting to control the outcomes, but such controls have ethical implications (Cintron).

In the classroom, it is such a common sense understanding that teachers will “write on” students the ideas or knowledge of the state that it seems outside of our consciousness. And it is common sense to say that discourses of measurement lead to dependence on such forms of control and anxiety about success and failure. In other words, over time teachers and students come to expect forms to fill out, rules to follow, and tests to take. In my view, the measurement focus is a force that is leading school reform, a force that is not only antithetical to democratic ideals of inclusivity, participation, and critical engagement, but a force that will ultimately fail to prepare students to consciously participate in a transnational world.

#### **A. The Purpose of the Study**

It seems to me that today’s school, like the school of the past decade at least, is interested in the standardization of learning and efficiency in the name of progress, development, and

global competition. The new Common Core State Standards explicitly state that the purpose of these changes is to prepare students to “participate in the global economy.” The schools are preparing students for a life compatible with the state’s values, which may be unethical (e.g., from depleting natural resources to committing genocide). James Scott, in *Seeing Like a State*, uses the phrase “high modernism” to describe ideology that causes us (citizens, teachers, students) to see like a state. The discourses of measurement used within state institutions present progress as easily assessed and controlled. Scott writes, “High modernism tended to see rational order in remarkably aesthetic terms. For them [high modernists], an efficient, rationally organized city, village, or farm was a city that *looked* regimented and orderly in a geometrical sense” (Scott’s emphasis 4). Once such plans failed, the state would resort to what Scott calls “miniaturization: the creation of more easily controlled micro-order” (4). Systems of measurement and order, then, construct a narrative of progress for the public: a story of what the world *looks* like, what *seems* to matter, and how people *should* behave in a “rationally organized” society. The state narrative is this: setting standards, measuring progress, and comparing data across the country helps us to participate in, if not control, the transnational economy. It is clear, however, that many people fail to measure up, in which case they are excluded from the state’s vision. The assumption that standards secure our place in transnational projects overlooks the possibility that non-standards are alive and working toward another imagined future and that those who fail to meet those standards are, in fact, valuable.

In my view, we are witnessing in schools an epistemic war, a war over what constitutes knowledge and what is worth knowing and experiencing. Teachers are stuck in the middle of this epistemic war.



After over a decade of attempting to bring order to education through the No Child Left Behind Act, schools have “failed” to make every student “proficient.” With the new Common Core State Standards being implemented across the United States, I think now is the time to think about what happens when the state sets the agenda for learning, when the state decides what is worth learning and experiencing in the classroom.

As English teachers, then, we might ask: What should the modern English teacher be doing? Should we be using data from standardized tests to drive our instruction and curriculum? Should we resist high-stakes testing and demand more humane measures of learning? Or might there be another option, one that invites inquiry into state practices and situates the state’s attempts to constrain our reading practices alongside methods and experiences that defy standardization and efficiency? I argue here for the latter, *an approach that explores how human beings and the institutions to which we belong use texts to shape our understanding of and knowledge about the world and our place in it.*

Drawing on my experiences as an Illinois middle school English teacher during the No Child Left Behind era, I offer my personal inquiry into the ethical implications of education reform on reading practices. I present a specific example of trying to teach about genocide within a culture focused on meeting Adequate Year Progress (AYP). Having little knowledge or training about how to teach about genocide, I primarily focused on knowledge accumulation and measurable outcomes. After a few years of teaching this unit, I became concerned with the ethics of teaching genocide in this way (see chapter two). The anxiety and challenges I faced while developing and implementing curriculum to meet this mandate alerted me to some unethical reading practices. I realized that data-driven instruction and the threat of penalties for not meeting AYP had an effect on how I taught reading. When reading genocide literature, I noticed

that study guides and objective tests were limiting students' understanding of how language was being used to represent genocide. I found that in reading genocide literature with students and in talking about reading genocide literature with teachers, I was able to illuminate the ethical implications of teaching students that "good" reading is merely "right" reading (e.g., filling in the right bubble on a test, identifying the right answer, recalling facts correctly). Such orderly ways of reading were teaching students a rather narrow view of complex issues impacting humanity, and I became concerned that we were preparing students to go out into the world with this limited ability to read the word and the world (Freire). Thus, I began to rethink not only my approach to teaching genocide but my approach to teaching reading.

My dissertation develops an approach to explore the ethics of reading and how texts shape our understanding of the world by exploring and seeking answers to these questions: How *ought* we to teach English in this modern, globalized era? How can genocide literature illuminate the ethics of reading and help us rethink the purpose of education? And how can ethical reading prepare students to read, think, and act in the world more ethically?

This inquiry has resulted in a theoretical framework for ethical reading based on several fields within English studies: transactional reading theory, rhetoric, witnessing, and studies in the novel. I name it transactional consciousness. While I suggest ways to develop transactional consciousness specific to genocide literature, I hope teachers will consider how transactional consciousness can be expanded to other genres and, more broadly, a way of being in the world

## **B. Questions and Representative Research**

The purpose of this section is to provide a brief overview of the representative research that has informed and guided my inquiry.

*How ought English teachers in middle school and high school teach reading?* This question is in the realm of curriculum and pedagogy and is relevant to a long-standing debate regarding what students should learn (Bellack and Kliebard, 1977; Beyer and Liston, 1996; Kliebard, 1982). Curriculum theorists ask: What purposes should curriculum serve? How should knowledge be selected? How should learning of that knowledge be measured? And further, who should decide what is learned and how it is evaluated? On one hand, the Common Core State Standards creators mandate that students should learn the reading skills necessary to be “college and career ready,” which will be measured on the PARCC test (see chapter two). On the other hand, multicultural education scholars (Banks, 1996; Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994) and critical pedagogy theorists (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1992; Shor, 1980) contend that school should reading for social improvement.

Multicultural scholars suggest that a reading curriculum should include materials and lessons from different cultures to extend knowledge about the histories, cultures, and contributions of diverse groups in the United States. They have worked hard to move the state towards requiring units of instruction about African Americans, Latinos, and women’s rights, for example. Multicultural literature scholars see reading as way of obtaining knowledge that will potentially reform society with regard to equal opportunities for diverse students (i.e., social, cultural, and linguistic student groups).

Similarly, critical pedagogues assert that a reading curriculum should help students develop consciousness of freedom, recognizing the power of the state and connecting knowledge to the power and ability to take action. In *Empowering Education*, Shor writes:

Habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beneath surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional clichés, received wisdom, and mere opinions, to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social contexts,

ideology, and personal consequences of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media, or discourse. (129)

In other words, reading with critical pedagogy is about learning as much as unlearning and reflecting on how schooling has disenfranchised particular students, students the multicultural scholars also want to support.

While I support reading to promote equality and freedom, my experience teaching English in middle school for the past decade has led me to be skeptical of adopting any one stance in teaching reading. Multicultural literature can be taught in ways that broaden perspectives but also in ways that perpetuate stereotypes. In critical pedagogy, the goal is for students to be conscious of the culture which has made them into manipulable objects, into subjects re-entering society armed against domination. Shor explains that the person responsible for providing such “an entry” is the teacher: “By identifying, abstracting, and problematizing the most important themes of student experience, the teacher detaches students from their reality and then presents the material for their systematic scrutiny” (100). “Entry,” “detaches,” and “systematic” are all words that feel to me as iterations of state mechanisms, as though students *can* separate or detach and as though they can ever leave and re-enter the public. Freire, Giroux, and Shor inspired my initial teaching philosophy, and I still want to trouble authoritarian schooling. Nevertheless, I do not want to switch out one pedagogical stance for another nor one reading practice for another. Instead, or in addition, I think the English classroom can be a place where we illuminate the ways the state is trying to constrain reading practices and the sort of knowledge the state values *and* ways of reading in less legible ways, ways that encourage students to recognize how literature moves them to feel and act toward others and the sort of knowledge that defies measurement.

I think that asking the question about how we *ought* to read prompts a discussion about the ethics of reading practices, and I think that what is ethical is to treat students with dignity and as autonomous human beings rather than as subjects that the state or the teacher via the state should train. While critical pedagogy does emphasize student experience in reading, it minimizes (as does the state) the aesthetic or emotional experience of reading literature. Literature nurtures an aesthetic enlightenment as it draws us, teachers and students, into sympathetic involvement with the characters and individuals, perhaps imagining what it might be like to be or be with these imaginary individuals in their worlds. Literature, beyond preparing us to be “college or career ready” or to “re-enter” society, recognizes that human beings are sufficiently complex and that we are informed and motivated by much more than factual information. For this reason, Rosenblatt’s transactional reading theory is central to this project (1938/1983, 1978); her work can broaden the state’s framework of reading to encourage a free exchange of ideas.

Understanding is a complex personal process of linking the word to what it points to in the human world. Transactional reading focuses on the student’s own sense of the text and her desire to clarify and refine her perception of it. Students are free to grapple with the text and focus on what the work evokes during the reading event not just on what is required after. For Rosenblatt, meaning is not located in the text nor in the reader but rather in the transaction between the reader and the text, both having social origins and social effects. Now, I do see limits to Rosenblatt’s theory (see chapter three), but it is the foundation of this dissertation because of the way it values the reader and emphasizes transactions.

Even though this dissertation suggests a framework for reading, I am not asking for English teachers to comply with a new theory or do a sort of resistant reading of the Common Core State Standards. To argue for one theory or another is a matter of rhetoric and would be

seen as exclusionary. Burke writes, “The basic function of rhetoric is the use of words by human agents to form attitudes or induce actions in other humans” (41). Thus, whether we teach reading for some right answer on a high-stakes test or as the process of refining our perception of a text, we are positioning readers and texts in order to induce some specific action. Rhetoric, as the study of language in action, illuminates the transactions that induce action, attitudes, and ways of being in the world, and this also includes inaction, alternate attitudes, and opposing ways of being in the world. If we teach reading as limited to what the state decides is the right answer or even to a student’s own sense of the text, we are acting like a state, hiding the rhetorical nature of the text and limiting meaning-making. Thus, I suggest we *ought* to read in ways that illuminate all the transactions that shape meaning.

And this brings me to my second inquiry question: *What role can genocide literature play in an English curriculum that must prepare students to be “college and career ready”?* To begin, I do not see the purpose of English or of education as strictly to prepare students for careers or college. I do, however, see English as essential in building a capacity to understand the self in relation to others in an incredibly diverse and connected world. I see the value of literature in developing a complex understanding of society which can then be applied to current and future situations. For our students who are thinking about who they want to be in the world, literature can cultivate a capacity for acting in more humane and ethical ways, and perhaps they will be more “ready” for whatever career or college they choose. However, I think students *ought* to know how language can be used to move us toward ethical and unethical ways of being.

Genocide literature illuminates the most extreme state practices and their consequences. Many Holocaust scholars have written about the importance of teaching about the Holocaust (Farnham, 1993; Lindquist, 2006; Springer, 2006; Totten, 2004) and the ethical issues of

representing the Holocaust in artistic forms (Adorno, 2003; Baer, 2000; Clendinnen, 1999; Felman and Laub, 1991; Gilbert, 2010; Jordan, 2004. Kaplan, 2007; Kertzer, 2008; Kidd, 2005; Lang, 2000; Landsberg, 2004; Langer, 1975; Weissman, 2004; Wiesel, 1977). There is less research about genocide, so I turned to Holocaust studies for most of my research. The very existence of genocide literature represents the power of humanity to survive and bear witness to that which, by definition, should not have had survivors. Reading genocide literature with our students illuminates the problem of narrow reading practices (i.e., seeing texts as conduits of information, positioning students as subjects to “meet” standards) because to read for some quantifiable outcome defies the complexity of genocide and trauma of its survivors.

In reading genocide with students for the past decade, I have been rethinking the reading process, how I teach English, and how reading in our classrooms is an ethical project. How we teach our students to read with us, how we teach students to read texts in our classroom, how we teach students to talk about texts with their classmates – all of that goes with our students beyond the classroom, influencing the ways they read and exist with others in the world. This dissertation is my personal inquiry into how we can nurture in students a way of reading in the classroom that extends to an ethical way of being in the world.

The final question I ask in this study is this: *How can ethical reading prepare our students to read, think, and act in the world more ethically?* If you ask English teachers why they wanted to become a teacher, they will give you any number of responses from their love of literature, to their love of children, to their wish to make a difference in this world. When we think about making a difference in the world, I think we mean to make a difference in the lives of our students who will go into the world and, perhaps, do what we cannot, what we cannot yet imagine needs to be done. It is clear that there is much work to be done in the world to stop

climate change, to find renewable energy resources that are environmentally friendly, to bring clean water to everyone on the planet, and to find peaceful methods for resolving international conflicts (to name only a few). Education in middle school and high school is about so much more than training students to “meet” on a high-stakes test in order to be “college and career ready.” Education is about nurturing in our students a capacity to imagine how the world *ought* to be so that they can move us all toward its realization.

### C. **Methods**

As I made progress in writing this dissertation, I would reread my writing in journals, blogs, notes, and seminar papers and realize that I gained further understanding about the modern English classroom from this inquiry process. The competing discourses in my own narratives moved me to choose a combination of discourses for my dissertation methodology, a hybrid of sorts. Some of my approach comes from experience, a study of my own classroom and school, and some of it comes from theory. Primarily, this is personal inquiry of the impact of education policies in my English classroom, so the following chapters include some brief stories of my classroom experiences. By focusing on my classroom, I hope to bring readers to an understanding of this complex ethical issue of interpreting and implementing state policies in the English classroom, specifically a mandate to teach about genocide, in a real-life setting. Critics of personal inquiries might say that such a limited study can offer no grounds for generalizing experiences or findings, suggesting that it is useful only as an exploratory tool. While I do not intend to make broad generalizations based on one classroom or one person’s experiences, mine, I will say that the inquiry I present here has led me to make significant changes to my practice and is intended to invite other practitioners to reflect on their practices.



The few narrative pieces you will find are stories from my reading experiences, my classroom, and my travels. David Schaafsma and Ruth Vinz describe dissertations of this type as a process of “narratizing.” I have chosen to be present in the narrating of events because I want to call attention to this as a personal inquiry. While I do not think this dissertation is a narrative inquiry, I do think that I am attempting to convince readers, as Schaafsma and Vinz suggest, of my “reliability, sincerity, commitment to fairness, and honesty” (106). Perhaps more importantly and paradoxically, the juxtaposition of theory and personal reflections encapsulates the tension teachers and students may experience when they negotiate what it means to be a “good” teacher and reader of literature.

We see real teachers struggling to raise issues of consequence for them and their students, narrating with some intensity their *not knowing* and not striving for easy answers. They don’t have the answers, but they are willing to let the narratives provoke them into looking, and (re) searching again as they continue to struggle with how to teach. (Schaafsma et al. 12)

Like the first decade of my teaching career, this dissertation reflects a struggle to raise “issues of consequence” for teachers and students. It has been messy and not at all a linear process, but the theoretical aspects of this dissertation describe issues I have raised, and continue to raise, in the fields of English and Education. Thus, I tell stories here to illuminate both concerns and discoveries that moved me to do this sustained inquiry while I continued to teach middle school English.

In narrative inquiry, the reader is “trusted to do some of the work with the narrator/researcher as guide,” and because I see teaching in a similar way (i.e., students should be trusted to do the work alongside the teacher), I trust that the narratives will ask readers to recognize their role and consider my experiences and discoveries in light of their own.

The text representing my voice as well as the voices of the students is drawn from notes and handouts I used in class as well as from my memory of discussions with students in class. The class stories, then, are reconstructions of class experiences or several related class experiences rather than a transcription of any single one. All names, including the name of my school, are pseudonyms.

The other half of this hybrid methodology is theoretical analysis, a selection and discussion of theoretical material and a comparison of theories in terms of their applicability to the issues that have emerged in teaching about genocide for the last ten years. I developed a theoretical framework that blends four important elements to arrive at an ethical approach to reading: transactional reader response (Rosenblatt, 1938/1983, 1978), rhetoricality (Burke, 1952; Hesford, 2011; Bender and Wellbery, 1990), witnessing (Felman and Laub, 1991), and the conscious imagination (Gallagher, 2006; Nussbaum, 1995). I name this theory transactional consciousness. This dissertation is my attempt to link a complex set of arguments as a unified theory with practical merit. I offer below brief discussions of the key concepts followed by the chapter summaries to help readers navigate the theory and the multitude of transactions that I negotiate here and alongside my eighth grade students every day.

#### **D. Key Concepts**

**Transactional.** The “trans” of transactional consciousness indicates an occurrence across, beyond, through, and changing thoroughly. The motion of this prefix offers the space for a combination of elements to be moving in different directions and with a degree of continuity. The “al” of the suffix indicates that this is an act or process of doing what is in the verbal stem, “act.” As discussed above, Rosenblatt developed transactional reading theory in *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work*. She contends that the act of

reading literature involves transactions between the reader and the text. She adds that the reader's response is a unique and essential transaction because the reader brings their individual experiences and knowledge to the reading event. The text acts upon the reader, but the reader acts upon the text, too. I *extend* Rosenblatt's theory to consider transactions beyond the reading event suggesting meaning of any text is not necessarily in the reader's interaction with the text but in the transactions that essentially made that text available to the reader and the implications of that reading event. I position "transactional" syntactically with consciousness to qualify the noun thus emphasizing consciousness in this naming (i.e., the process of becoming aware of all the transactions that impact meaning-making).

**Consciousness.** Consciousness is an awareness or perception of something, but beyond that it is the fact of awareness of the self and the self among others in the world. Therefore, this theory is named as such because I want to call attention to the multitude of beings transacting all over the world and changing because of the combinations of experiences, contexts, actions, and, of course, understanding of all those transactions. Consciousness of how motives, values, and assumptions move not only between people but across and beyond people, having far-reaching consequences to how people think and act now and in the future. Writers make strategic moves, sometimes knowingly causing harm to some while convincing others to align with a cause or objective. Whether it is the state, or teachers, or writers who do it, students are being positioned to respond aesthetically, cognitively, and/or behaviorally in certain ways. Students must be consciousness of these remarkable transactions attempting to habituate their thinking.

**Aesthetic response.** I use Rosenblatt's definition of aesthetic response. Reading transactions, for Rosenblatt, can be characterized according to purpose. Is the transaction aesthetic (for pleasure or an emotional experience), efferent (for information), or somewhere

between? Data-driven instruction encourages efferent transactions, those that are measurable; however, excludes the educative potential of a literary experience including the sort of knowledge that defies measurement. The reader's experience of literature has been slowly negated as education reform has emphasized "right" readings. However, literature, as an art object, is not a conduit of information but rather an aesthetic object meant to be experienced, and experiences are what connect us as human beings. Understanding the transactions that create literature and the transactions that happen when we read and interpret literature helps people understand themselves and encourages connections to other readers and writers. The emotional response advocated by Rosenblatt is fundamental to my project, but it is limited. Emotions can be unethical; for example, pity for distant suffering can take away the dignity and autonomy of human beings promoting stereotypes.

**Rhetoricity.** For my purposes, rhetoric is less about specific skills of persuasion and much more about how people use language to encourage one another to understand things from one another's perspective. I talk about this as "rhetoricity." Rhetoricity illuminates the motive and agency of language. Rhetoric, for Burke, is how people identify with one another and how people encourage one another to understand things from one another's perspective. We do this every day; it is unremarkable and habitual. In other words, many people are not conscious of the way rhetoric works in our daily lives. Why does this matter? Rhetoric shows the impurities of identification, the ethics of how we encourage identification. Our words are used to move people to hate or stereotype, and to an extreme degree, identification can lead to genocide. Rhetoricity is an element of transactional consciousness, then, because it attempts to make remarkable the ethics of motive and asks how language is used to promote action or inaction, belief or disbelief: all essential transactions in need of illumination. Being conscious of rhetoricity is about

recognizing the causes and consequences of such and how we are implicated ethically by how we read. Readers have a responsibility to consider the rhetoricality of a text, and the English classroom can illuminate how to take up that responsibility.

**Testimonial literature.** In this personal inquiry, I have contemplated how best to cultivate in students an awareness of others as agents with motives without turning them into misanthropes. I found Felman and Laub's work with testimony and witnessing to be incredibly helpful in cultivating in students a consciousness of rhetoricality while also recognizing the privilege of listening to and learning from others. Testimonial literature is testimony that is a written, published, first person, autobiographical narrative in literary idiom. In reading testimonial literature, students experience an account of a trauma survivor remembering and accounting for that which happened and representing it in such a way as to keep the past from being forgotten. Testimonial literature should not exist in the sense that if genocide were fully realized, there would be no survivors to tell their story. Testimony, therefore, requires from our students that they be listeners for those survivors and active participants in the memory and remembering so that the past is neither forgotten nor repeated.

**Witnessing.** Witnessing, for my purposes, is a stance for reading that attends to practical and moral claims made in testimony. I talk about "witness" in two ways: the firsthand witness, who "was there" and the witness-reader (or secondhand witness) who is bearing witness to the testimony by reading testimonial literature. The witness-reader becomes a co-owner of the testimony, partially experiencing the trauma himself (Felman 57). Witnessing-reading entails responsibilities: a willingness to listen, accepting the reality of the referent, and recognizing the voice and the subjectivity of the testifier during the reading event. The experience of reading testimonial literature positions the reader as a witness to the witness, and this is so much more

meaningful than reading for some “right” answer. It honors the dignity and autonomy of the reader as one worthy of being spoken to and trusted with the story of a distant other.

**Agents of memory.** According to Auron, agents of memory act on behalf of the past, remembering and accounting for that which happened and representing it in such a way as to keep the past from being forgotten. Agents of memory can take many forms: books, paintings, sculptures, museums, symbols, monuments, films, and people. They may also use the past for their own purposes, manipulating and even creating memories as the means for setting personal, national, and even international agendas. An agent of memory need not be a witness nor even listen to a witness in order to represent “what happened.” Thus, the representation may be unethical or inaccurate. With this in mind, readers are positioned as spectators, visitors, and viewers who have an active role in the production of memory and its meaning. For me, agents of memory are the artifacts and the people who create the artifacts. This concept is transactional because of the nature of its remembering, accounting, representing, and viewing for and with others. It requires consciousness if readers are to recognize the rhetoricality or motive of the artifact. I see our students, the artifacts they create, and the ideas they speak as agents of memory, which means that our students may go out into the world not only as readers or viewers of representations but as creators capable of representing the past ethically or unethically.

**Genocide novels.** A novel is a fictitious prose narrative of book length that typically represents characters and action with some degree of realism. The aesthetic of fiction is the novel’s aesthetic of plausibility, a mechanism for novelists to negotiate fact and deception. The genocide novel is a mechanism for writers to represent the lives of people who could not or would not tell their story. The ethical considerations in representing genocide in an imaginative

form have been the life's work of many scholars. I offer in this dissertation a very brief overview of the ethics of representing genocide in novel form for middle and high school readers.

## **E. Chapter Summaries**

In chapter Two, "The Education of a Teacher: The First Decade," I introduce myself, my classroom, and my school to provide the context for the genesis of this project and to illustrate the ways I saw the state working to standardize and make efficient reading and literature. I begin with the story of my first year teaching at Lincoln Junior High School and how No Child Left Behind influenced the curriculum and pedagogy of teachers at Lincoln. I then describe my second year at Lincoln when a decidedly different state mandate was passed requiring a unit of instruction on genocide. I tell the story of how I met this mandate in my eighth grade reading class and how my experiences reading genocide literature with my students inspired this personal inquiry to investigate reading practices and develop transactional consciousness, an ethical approach to reading.

Chapter Three, "The Ethics of Reading: Transactional Theory," considers the ethics of *good* reading. Of course, English teachers are concerned with how students read and how they make meaning so that they can become *good* readers. Teachers have traditionally taught reading using schema theory, a way of mapping the text's structure in the service of reading comprehension, and an interactive reading model, which engages students in meaning making by accessing prior knowledge, teaching the student questioning skills, and encouraging the student to do close reading of the text – again, in the service of comprehension for an assessment (e.g., high-stakes tests). The shift with the Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts limits reading preparation (i.e., pre-reading activities) and ignores students' aesthetic responses so as to make interpretation text-dependent. I offer Louise Rosenblatt's transactional reading

theory as a way of reviving reader response and aesthetic reading. By valuing the aesthetic or emotional reading response in the English classroom, students practice recognizing their agency in the reading process, consider the ethics of sympathy, and, as members of a community of readers, work with their peers to deliberate and revise meaning. Ultimately, *good* reading is not right reading but a consciousness of the transactions that create and perpetuate a text's meaning in and beyond the classroom.

Chapter Four, "Rhetorality: Reading 'Genocide' Beyond the Classroom," traces the use of the word "genocide" in several cases for the purpose of illuminating the transactional nature of a word as it is used for different rhetorical purposes. In this chapter, I ask: What is genocide? How does the word "genocide" function rhetorically and transactionally to produce certain actions, results, and/or consequences? I suggest that by reading rhetorically in middle and high school classrooms, teachers and students will become more conscious of the rhetoricality of "genocide" specifically and language generally. The rhetorical situation – the author, the audience, the purpose, the text – is working on the reader in order to get the reader to think about or understand the situation in a certain way, and that way is always partial and manipulative. Members of society and the artifacts they produce (texts, films, images, monuments) are what Yair Auron, a Holocaust scholar, calls "agents of memory." In this chapter, I name many agents of memory who use the word "genocide" to set political, social, and cultural agendas for opposing causes, which calls into question ethics. How do we prepare our students to navigate public discourses to negotiate who is *right* and what society *ought* to accept with so many competing agents of memory out there? This chapter, then, goes beyond the classroom to show why we cannot limit our pedagogy to high-stakes tests and classroom-specific goals. Our students are agents of memory and are already interacting with and responding to agents of



memory in the public sphere. Rhetoricity promotes transactional consciousness because it illuminates motive and the way language is used to move people to believe, think, and act within the world.

In Chapter Five, “Witnessing Rhetoricity, Reading Testimonial Literature,” I describe witnessing as the fourth element of transactional consciousness. Just as rhetoricity extended the implications of transactional reading and reader response, witnessing extends rhetoricity. It is not enough to teach students to recognize how language is used rhetorically to represent human rights violations as though we are detached from it (i.e., spectators). As members of society, we have a responsibility to attend to the situations and people affected. I consider the ethical implications of reading testimonial literature. In reading such narratives, the reader becomes ethically implicated during the reading event because she takes the position as the secondary witness responsible for attending to *why* the witness-writer feels impelled to share her story publicly, *how* the witness-writer is using language to account for her experiences, and then *what* deeper understanding of humanity is illuminated in the experience of bearing witness to another’s life. Teaching about the role of the witness, as discussed by Felman and Laub, and the responsibility of the secondary witnesses is an important feature of the transactional consciousness framework. In this chapter, I share how my students and I practiced taking on the responsibilities of witnessing first as writers and then as readers of *First They Killed My Father*, Loung Ung’s memoir as a child soldier in Cambodia. Dimensions of witnessing are in effect during virtually all reading events; the concept of witnessing, when illuminated in the classroom, calls attention to the personal and ethical nature of reading because it recognizes that we are always active readers and thus responsible for understanding the text or image as a constructed artifact and a representation of humanity.

In Chapter Six, “The Conscious Imagination: Aesthetic, Ethics, and Rhetoric in Genocide Novels,” I explore the final aspect of transactional consciousness theory: the conscious imagination. I argue that reading novels with students provides imaginative access to people, cultures, and ideas beyond their lives and experiences. While in chapter four, I suggest reading testimonial literature offers opportunities for students to practice their role as witnesses to the writer-testifier, this chapter explores how the aesthetic of fiction can cultivate in students a conscious imagination. I explore the aesthetic of fiction in novels and draw attention to the tension between aesthetic and ethics in the creation and reading of genocide novels. I suggest that novelists employ rhetorical appeals to negotiate fact and deception when representing genocide in the form of a novel and that the novel constructs a paradigm of ethical reasoning. Readers bring the general idea of humanity to bear on a concrete situation, which we are invited to enter through imagination. Combining periods of suspended disbelief with periods of detached scrutiny, the conscious imagination anticipates problems, makes suppositional predictions, recognizes potential outcomes, and contemplates *what if*. Imaginative literary experiences have the potential to dismantle institutions and beliefs that perpetuate inequality, injustice, and violence (Nussbaum 92). The English classroom plays an important role in nurturing students’ imaginations so that they can imagine not only a more just society but ways to work toward achieving a more just society.

The challenge of this project was to link a complex set of arguments as a unified theory that had practical merit. While it is ambitiously theoretical, I think its complexity represents the multitude of transactions that I negotiate alongside my students each day. I hope transactional consciousness prompts conversations about what happens, what can happen, and what ought to happen in today’s English classroom in light of education reform. Such an inquiry may support

other teachers in considering what is gained and lost when we, as James Scott says, see (and teach) like a state rather than as beings who have agency to think and feel and imagine more humane and ethical ways of treating one another and our world. This inquiry is a critical step for determining whether and how transactional consciousness can support more ethical reading practices in schools and ultimately a more ethical way of being in the world.

## **II. THE EDUCATION OF A TEACHER: THE FIRST DECADE**

I grew up in a middle class family just outside Chicago, the ninth of eleven children. As a kid, I played with Barbie dolls and tried the sports my older siblings played like soccer and softball never really finding my niche. In elementary school, I ran for class vice-president and later secretary of the student council but never won; I was not popular. I practiced my penmanship diligently so that I could earn the right to use a pen and developed a callous that still reminds me today. In middle school, my father lost his job and never really worked again. While we continued to live in the same neighborhood; we were, in essence, living below the poverty line and surviving on donations from our Catholic church. I spent most nights lying awake watching four of my ten siblings sleeping in bed rolls on the floor around me. We could not afford beds nor would the number we needed even fit in the three bedrooms of our small home. When I did sleep, I would often sleepwalk and talk in my dreams, never able to fully rest my mind or body. Despite the size of my family, eight girls and three boys, and even though my father was unemployed for most of my childhood, in many ways, it was typical, white-bread Americana with church on Sundays, park district sports, roller skating through the neighborhood, family dinners, and certainly sibling rivalry (especially over boys).

But there were differences. In a family of eleven, the odds were with us. We learned about teen pregnancy and adoption first hand. We learned about discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation firsthand. We learned about mental illness firsthand. And we learned about divorce firsthand. I learned all these life lessons as a teenager. Because of these early experiences, I considered myself somewhat well-informed on social issues and even poverty. While working my way through college, I studied sociology and later worked as a counselor for a number of years where I had the privilege of listening to hundreds of life stories usually

through security glass in jail visiting rooms, virtually all of which included early school experiences. I later became a teacher hoping to teach with and learn from the power of stories, which brought me to Lincoln Junior High in 2004. I entered the teaching profession in the early years of No Child Left Behind when school districts were scrambling to design systems to close the achievement gap between disadvantaged and minority students and their peers.

**A. Teaching English with NCLB and Data-Driven Instruction**

I began teaching middle school English in the fall of 2004 at Lincoln Junior High. What I found, at least on first impression, was that Lincoln Junior High was situated in a middle class community much like where I grew up, but there was physical separation and underlying racial mistrust that I did not remember experiencing in my own neighborhood. Several trailers sat on the grounds of the school to accommodate the growing English as a Second Language (ESL) program. I was, however, joining Lincoln as an aspect of the district's plan to respond to the school's changing demographic: to hire more bilingual staff, ESL certified teachers and ultimately integrate ESL methods in mainstream classrooms.

The elementary school connected to Lincoln educated the children from the neighborhood, who were mostly white, and the attached junior high taught neighborhood children and children from neighboring elementary schools who lived in rows of apartments just north of the school and who were mostly Latino. The demographics of Lincoln changed so quickly in the early 2000's that the school purchased trailers for the expanding ESL program. Many veteran Lincoln teachers who had taught middle class European Americans for decades were unfamiliar with strategies to support students' linguistic, cultural, and economic needs. I had training in ESL methods, could speak Spanish fairly well, and had had a lot of experience working with low income families in my social work career and assistantship teaching ESL to

Chicago's Mexican community in Little Village. My credentials were quite different from the majority of the faculty. It was, therefore, surprising, that the two in-service days that preceded the first day of school in 2004 were spent looking at data rather than talking about the linguistic, social, and economic needs of our changing school community. My first day at Lincoln I was given my class rosters: eighth graders who ranged from "gifted," or high-scoring readers, to "newcomers," or newly-arrived immigrants with low levels of literacy in English.

The first English department meeting of the school year was in late August, two days before school officially started. We met in room H103 at Lincoln Junior High School, the department chair's classroom. Each English teacher was handed student rosters with test scores from the previous school year's state exam, the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT). As I looked around the room of a dozen or so teachers furiously highlighting away, I quickly grabbed a highlighter intent to look like I knew what I was doing. I was told to highlight the students who were "on the bubble." Noticing my confusion, Debbie, the department head who later became a good friend, explained that a student "on the bubble" meant that the student did not "meet" on the Illinois Standard Achievement Test (ISAT) but was within a few points of "meeting." In other words, "bubble kids" had the potential to actually pass the ISAT test this year if we "targeted" them. When I asked about all the other students who were below these cut off scores, she essentially said that they were too far below in reading to bring up to grade level in one year and that the administration had directed department chairs to concentrate only on the "bubble kids." I went to work in silence, remembering advice from my student teaching experience: "Do more listening than speaking." I listened (and highlighted).

What did it mean to "target" a student? I was told that, once identified, "bubble kids" would need extra attention until the March ISAT test in order to raise their ISAT scores, and the

“district-approved” curriculum, which would help me to target the skills those students needed, was primarily a textbook aligned to the Illinois State Standards. Students below the bubble would benefit, too, but many of those students would also be placed in an additional reading intervention class.

My department chair went on to explain what was at stake. In 2001, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was signed into law. School districts were scrambling to meet the requirements of NCLB, specifically the requirement that 100 percent of students must “meet” on their state reading and math tests by the year 2013-14. Essentially, NCLB redefined the federal role in K-12 education to close the achievement gap between disadvantaged and minority students and their peers. Federal funding for schools became based on student achievement. If any achievement gaps were identified through the testing process, the school district had to address those issues with a plan for improvement. If schools did not perform and close the achievement gap identified by their state assessment, they risked losing federal funding and being “taken over” or “turned around” by the government. Because of Lincoln’s changing demographics, the district had a lot at stake in the early years of NCLB. Using the ISAT data to drive instruction and target achievement gaps made sense to me.

I did not know the first thing about teaching English from data or using research-based lesson plans, or following a textbook’s scope and sequence. Thinking back to my own learning experiences with high-stakes tests, I couldn’t recall a single time that teachers asked me to look at my scores and set a goal for improving my reading or math scores. I do not remember test prep lessons or performance anxiety. And my teacher education courses did not prepare me for the data collection or goal-setting lessons I would have to do with my students nor did it prepare me for displaying data charts on my bulletin boards (as an accountability measure). I had learned to

develop conceptual units of study with primary sources and authentic writing experiences; I had learned that the classroom walls should be covered with student writing and inspiration. The “good news” was that I did not have to spend my nights and weekends developing such units; the school district had purchased everything I needed, and all this was waiting for me in my classroom: G109. I just had to follow the teacher’s guide.

I was presented a district-approved textbook written by Who Knows and published by Prentice Hall, a Pearson Education company. I was given the “silver” level for my regular classes and the “gold” level for my “gifted” class. The school district paid Prentice Hall a lot of money for literature textbooks that were “research-based.” The package included CD’s with recordings of every text (mostly excerpts from primary sources such as Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* or Daniel Keyes’ *Flowers for Algernon*), VHS tapes for “anticipatory activities,” a database for test questions, three levels of consumables (e.g., workbooks for on level readers, adapted versions for those below level, and even an ESL version), and skills worksheets with every graphic organizer imaginable.

That year, and for a few years more, the classrooms and hallways were covered with data charts and mission statements to raise reading and math scores. I had students charting their reading scores and setting improvement goals. I posted lists grouping students by skill deficits: word analysis, literary works, literary devices, and comprehension. We “targeted” students by identifying a deficit, teaching to the deficit, and then assessing for growth. At one point in my first year, Lincoln even had visitors from other schools and districts to see how we were using data to drive instruction. In 2003, our district had won the only Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award in the category of education. Of this award, Commerce Secretary Donald L. Evans said, “[Recipients] represent America’s best and are setting a high standard for corporate



and social responsibility. Their dynamic, principled leadership has built our economy into the world's largest engine of progress and prosperity" ("Most Baldrige Awards"). The visitors were mesmerized by my charts: weekly word analysis scores, comprehension competitions, and reading scores from quarter to quarter. These charts were what our school called "quality tools" designed to troubleshoot quality-related issues: fishbone, check sheets, Pareto charts, scatter diagrams, and histograms. All teachers were encouraged to use these tools.

As a novice teacher, I did not understand why teachers complained about being underappreciated. The district office was visiting classrooms and celebrating teachers for their efforts. It seemed like teachers were literally shining a light on the students who had been or would be "left behind" had we not looked at the data. It seemed like we were targeting their needs and filling them. There were, however, always students below the "bubble." And when those charts were posted for the school (and visitors) to see, a student knew which dot scattered in this or that quadrant represented her.

Year after year, students who did not "meet standards" on the state test received more interventions, an additive approach. When goal setting did not work, students were placed into an intervention class and tested more frequently. The intervention classes were often expensive scripted programs stating what to teach, when to teach it, and how to teach it. Such curriculum has been coined as "teacher proof" curriculum. After all, when a child is in a school for a number of years and does not pass the test, the school must make changes where it can: the curriculum and the teacher. I think by hiring me, Lincoln was showing cultural and linguistic progress (although not racial progress), and I think by buying the Prentice Hall curriculum, Lincoln was showing progress with research-based materials, and certainly, the "quality tools" represented the image of a cutting-edge education. However, in the name of progress, a typical junior high

student below the bubble did not have room in her schedule for music, art, language, or technology classes. She was spending her day in two math classes, three language arts classes, one science, one history, and a resource class (i.e., homework and linguistic support). And in the name of progress, the potential of the English classroom to be guided by students' stories and literary discovery was neutralized by the specter of the test.

Even though I did not have to develop my own curriculum and had access to many “quality tools,” that first year of teaching was not easy. When I wasn't looking at charts, I was trying to figure out the district-approved curriculum; I was overwhelmed by the graphic organizers and worksheets. Six eighth-grade groups of students came to me each day for forty minutes of reading or writing. We worked on labeling Freytag's plot triangle and identifying the main idea, author's purpose, and literary devices in texts – skills most students had been learning since third grade. While we did read short stories, poems, plays, and essays, we read them out of a five-pound textbook. And while we did discuss some works by Edgar Allan Poe, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Naomi Shihab Nye, Langston Hughes, and Walter Dean Myers, such discussions were prompted by questions at the end of the text. We did not curl up with a good book on a Papasan chair or bean bag like I imagined Nancie Atwell's (1987) students doing in Maine. Such a luxury would have interrupted our “progress”.

Even though most of these kids had been in our district for their entire education, being carefully monitored in the data, by the time they reached junior high, students' reading levels ranged from second grade to high school. The systems of progress were failing many students, and it seemed quite apparent that the categories of students failing were in two of NCLB's subgroups. NCLB requires that 100 percent of all students meet its Academic Yearly Progress goals, and that includes 100 percent of all subgroups. Subgroups are defined by race,

socioeconomic status (i.e., students who receive free or reduced priced meals), special education, and English learners. Increasingly more of Lincoln's students were represented in the low income and English Learners subgroups. There was tension between veteran teachers and new teachers who were hired because they were bilingual or certified to teach English as a Second Language (ESL). Lincoln was once a fairly homogenous white middle-class school. The student population was becoming increasingly more diverse economically and culturally, yet the measurement-oriented changes in the district were not responding to the students' lived lives nor helping teachers to respond to how linguistic, cultural, and economic differences manifest in the classroom. It seemed to me that the focus on testing and interventions failed to address the underlying social forces that brought us all together from 7:55 a.m. to 2:25 p.m. each day.

**B. Two Mandates Intersect: NCLB and Genocide Education**

In the fall of 2005, beginning my second year teaching, I, once again, sat in H103 with the English department trying to get through my data analysis. I was quiet and learned to be quiet after finding, or being assigned, my place in the faculty hierarchy. My department head, Debbie, passed around some welcome-back brownies and said that we needed ideas on two topics today. According to the 2004 ISAT data, our students scored lowest on inferencing questions, so we would have to develop a system for targeting inferencing. Apparently, inferencing was the English teacher's nemesis. How does one teach inferencing well? Maybe we could develop a PowerPoint on inferencing, one teacher suggested. Maybe we should test this skill weekly and assess the data, suggested another. We were fairly certain there was some worksheet on inferencing in the Prentice Hall materials. Most of us agreed, however, that inferencing is not easily measured by multiple choice questions, and the ISAT is a multiple choice test. And then Debbie continued with the second item on our agenda: we also had to do some curriculum

planning for a new mandate. Of course, our curriculum was set by the district and Prentice Hall, so we were puzzled, but then Debbie explained that the curriculum we would be planning was for a new unit on genocide. Groans came from every direction in H103.

Debbie explained that in June Illinois became the first state in the nation to end state investment in Sudan because of what Colin Powell declared was a “genocide” in Sudan. (At that time, I could not have pointed to Sudan on a map, and I could not have defined genocide. And by the looks of the other teachers, they couldn’t either.) She went on to explain that in August, just weeks before school started, Illinois’ House and Senate enacted Public Act 094-0478, the Illinois Genocide Curriculum Mandate, requiring all Illinois public schools to include “an additional unit of instruction studying other acts of genocide across the globe.” This mandate was an amendment to Illinois’ Holocaust Education Mandate, enacted in 1990. In addition to learning about the genocide in Sudan, Debbie explained, students would learn about the Armenian Genocide, the Famine-Genocide in Ukraine, and other more recent atrocities in Cambodia, Bosnia, and Rwanda. Here is an excerpt from the press release written by Illinois’ then governor, Rod Blagojevich:

As we teach our kids the important lessons of history, we have to be sure that they understand that racial, national, ethnic and religious hatred can lead to horrible tragedies. Sadly, these are not just the problems of our parents’ or grandparents’ generations. We have to make sure our schools teach the importance of embracing differences among people and encourage students to fight intolerance and hatred wherever they see it.  
(August 2005)

On my desk were print outs of data, numbers that indicated students’ lack of inferencing skills, and alongside this was an announcement, perhaps a declaration, that schools should teach “the importance of embracing differences” and “encourage students to fight intolerance and hatred.” It was so interesting to me at the time to think about how inferencing would be important to the study of genocide and how data informed the priorities of social institutions.

However, the irony of teaching genocide with data-driven instruction or attempting to quantify understanding of genocide had not, at the time, occurred to me. How did one measure the ability to embrace differences and fight intolerance? How did one measure an understanding of that which is so unimaginable? How was inferencing relevant to genocide? Indeed, inferencing is quite important when it comes to deciphering genocide intent: in the absence of direct evidence, genocide intent can be inferred from circumstantial evidence.

The junior high English teachers at Lincoln responded to this mandate in a variety of ways once the groans subsided: a sigh, a rolling of the eyes, a “what is genocide” whisper, and a “yes, important” comment. As a group, however, we questioned why we, the English department, were discussing it and not the History department, to which Debbie responded that our curriculum had more space for this added unit. (Later, we learned that some History teachers refused to change their curriculum to accommodate the mandate.) And it seemed to her that since we were able to find some great literature to teach the Holocaust in our English classes that we would be able to find some great literature about these genocides, which sounded logical. However, while the Prentice Hall literature textbook included Goodrich and Hackett’s dramatic adaptation of *The Diary of Anne Frank* complete with lesson plans, the publishers clearly had not anticipated this additional requirement.

The mandate emerged out of a well-intended sense of moral outrage at the crimes against humanity in Sudan, but like most mandates, it felt like more work for teachers. No content would be removed from our curriculum, which means we would have to cut out or rush through other units; and we would have to find the materials and create the lesson plans. Because it was an unfunded mandate, we would have to use our department funds to buy genocide literature, which meant we would need to read literature about genocides and decide, together, what was

appropriate for our students and what was worth buying with our precious department money (\$1100-1300 a year). The greatest concern, however, was that this new mandate came at a time when testing was replacing teaching time, and test scores were used to evaluate teachers, track sub groups, and rate schools.

Any veteran teacher will tell you that education initiatives come and go. Some resonate with teachers more than others, and some have more staying power. Teachers have learned to go with it (or appear to anyway). This mandate resonated with me. I was hearing an opportunity to think about how the world, our world, was changing. Clearly, Lincoln was changing, and I was part of that change, but this 2005 mandate reiterated the need for a cultural, political, and even moral education. Instead of skill acquisition as a way of participating in this world, the mandate asked us to teach a way of being, participating, and shaping the world. And there was no textbook. No test. No research-based curriculum. It was up to us to do the inquiry into the topic and figure out a way to make it accessible to junior high students. In my view, the genocide mandate offered an opportunity to think about and talk about something other than goal setting, testing, and data analysis. After just one year of teaching, the data-driven instruction was taking its toll on me, and it must have been taking its toll on the students' love of reading and writing.

**C. Reading the Illinois Genocide Education Mandate**

To teach about genocide means to call attention to the question of how much power a state should have (e.g. state sovereignty), to the responsibility of a community to put humanity over political and economic issues, and to the ethics of every institution that contributes to the development of a nation that categorized some human beings and knowledge as having more value than others. To teach about genocide means teachers and students would need to read stories from beyond the pages of our anthologies and libraries and learn to listen to voices that

ask something more of us, something beyond author's purpose and main idea. To teach genocide means to think about the social forces that brought our students from around the world to a seat in one of Lincoln's classrooms. How would English teachers find time to be students of genocide and teachers of the most unimaginable, unspeakable stories?

Thus, in 2005, when Illinois mandated a unit of instruction on genocide in all public schools, it fell to the English teachers at Lincoln to develop the curriculum to meet this mandate with no training or financial support. What follows is a description of how this new curriculum policy was implemented at Lincoln Junior High School. What happened with the curriculum this first year is worth describing here for several reasons: First, while I began my teaching career at the beginning of NCLB, most of the teachers at Lincoln had been teaching in the school prior to and since NCLB had gone into effect in 2003, which means they had been practicing data-driven instruction for at least a few years. With experience ranging from zero (me during my first year) to thirty-five years, English teachers at Lincoln had both the expertise and years-in to understand the impact and implementation of state and federal mandates including the 1990 Holocaust Education Mandate. Having worked in the school for ten years now, I have observed how teachers have interpreted and thus met the genocide mandate differently in their English classrooms. Most importantly, this first year of the Illinois Genocide Education Mandate at Lincoln is the bases on which the rest of this dissertation builds because it was only in considering how I taught about genocide then that I began to understand the potential and imperative of the English classroom now. I think the summary that follows demonstrates how the state's vision of education has muddled the potential of English to nurture in students a capacity for understanding our diverse world and their place in it. In other words, the obsession with data and testing represented one kind of vision of progress – a vision of data, measurement,

and achievement – while the genocide mandate represented the opportunity to purpose a different kind of vision – recognition of how progress represents and perpetuates discrimination and violence. Ironically, teachers at Lincoln and across Illinois taught about genocide (see Pisapia and Ellison). I will attempt to offer some suggestions for reimagining the English classroom in the chapters that follow. First, we’ll take a look at the mandate. I think it is important to step outside the classroom at this point to understand how House Bill 312 came to pass. I will take a close look at the language of the 2005 mandate and consider how the language speaks to the intention of Illinois legislators considering political, economic, and educational dimensions. Then, I will describe Lincoln’s genocide curriculum development and implementation.

Originally filed January 19, 2005, House Bill 312 was enacted just seven months later on August 5, 2005. The Illinois School Code was thus amended to read that every public and elementary school shall include a “unit of instruction” studying the events of the Holocaust and “an additional unit of instruction studying other acts of genocide” (“Illinois Genocide Curriculum Mandate”). The list of genocides suggested in this document, Public Act 094-0478, includes the Armenian Genocide, the Famine-Genocide in Ukraine, and more recent atrocities in Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda, and Sudan. By naming specific occurrences of genocide, the lawmakers privilege the knowledge of certain genocides while continuing to silence others such as Guatemala, Argentina, East Timor, Iraqi Kurds and others that I again silence here. When this mandate was proposed, was there consideration for how these accounts would be taught, what features were most essential, what materials would be appropriate, and what, if anything, should not be taught? Was there consideration for preparing teachers to implement this mandate? And where was the language for Illinois schools, teachers and parents to glean the temporality of this



legislation, or the rhetorical situation that prompted the amendment? Such questions emerged as I began to develop curriculum and teach this unit, but at the time, lawmakers seemed most interested in reviving the promise of never again.

If we turn to the text, we see it begins with the original wording from the 1990 mandate to teach a unit of instruction on the Holocaust: “One of the lessons of the Holocaust is that national, ethnic, racial or religious hatred can overtake any nation or society, leading to calamitous consequences.” The text indicates that the reason to make teaching about the Holocaust a mandate, to amend the school code as such is to serve as a “reaffirmation of the commitment of free peoples from all nations to never again permit the occurrence of another Holocaust” (“Illinois Genocide Curriculum Mandate”). This is a public declaration by Illinois legislators to Illinois schools (who read the school code) that the Illinois Congress is taking a position and, hence, Illinois public schools shall, too. But, a mandate to teach about the Holocaust has existed since 1990. For fifteen years leading up to this 2005 amendment, schools were, presumably, reaffirming the commitment to “never again” allow another Holocaust. And yet, here we have the need for another public declaration, House Bill 312.

It becomes quite apparent looking at the Illinois Senate transcripts in 2005 that this stand was a hot topic in the 94th General Assembly in the House of Representatives. When I write “hot,” I mean to indicate that the transcript language hints at an inducement to view the “lessons of the Holocaust” as lessons in classical liberalism and its partner, neoliberalism, in the sense that if we consider the context of the development of this mandate and the arguments presented on the House floor, we hear beliefs belonging to liberalism such as civil liberties, political freedom, and a free market to allow for the exercise of individual freedom. We will see how this bit of legislation rhetorically works to condemn the authoritarian state of Sudan and intervene in

state violence that threatens individual freedom, inciting economic and humanitarian action (e.g., divesting in Sudan and teaching about genocide in schools), rather than military action. To be clear, I am asserting that a school code amendment functions rhetorically; words are trying to act upon schools, teachers, and students, to write upon them a way of knowing about the world. What readers fail to notice when responding to such a text is the problem the new policy is attempting to redress. What is in the gap between the Holocaust mandate and genocide mandate? Why now?

It is important to reiterate what I noted above, that prior to the debate about House Bill 312 there was a debate on the Illinois Senate floor about divestment from Sudan (May 17, 2005). Senate Bill 23 was an Act to End Atrocities and Terrorism in Sudan. This bill aimed to “prohibit any state monies from being invested in any entity associated with the Republic of Sudan” (51st Legislative Day 6). It was in this meeting that Rep. Jack Franks reported details on the genocide in Sudan to the House referencing Ruth Messinger’s article “Hotel Darfur” (May 2005). In this title, Messinger alludes to the film *Hotel Rwanda* (Feb. 2005) to make a comparison between the Rwandan Genocide, where 800,000 people of the Tutsi minority were massacred, and the escalating crisis in Darfur: “World leaders knew; our government knew, and did nothing” (Messinger 1). Rep. Franks knew, too, and he took the House floor to take a stand on the record. The transcript from the 94th General Assembly provides a socio- political context for House Bill 312 and content for the mandated “unit of instruction” about genocide. Franks states:

2,000,000 African tribal farmers have been violently driven from their homes by the government of Sudan and the militias they named...called Janjaweed. Despite repeated calls ...from humanitarian organizations and United States agencies warning of the worst humanitarian crises in the world today, there continues to be a systematic program of expulsion, rape and murderous violence that has taken at least 300,000 lives since the crisis began in February 2003...Recently, Jews all over the world remembered the

consequences of inaction by the international community in the face of genocide. We remember and we still cannot, nor will we ever, comprehend how the world looked on as 6,000,000 Jews were gassed, tortured, displaced, starved and worked to death. And we vowed never again! So we must all be the guardians of this call for action, highly sensitive and responsive to all attempts by any people to annihilate another people. The world stood by idly 60 years ago, and again as massacres unfolded in Cambodia, Rwanda, and now Sudan. (6)

This sentiment of “never again” was echoed in House Bill 312. In addition to pointing out the lessons available in this curriculum and the “reaffirmation,” this bill also sought to recognize that “crimes of genocide continue to be perpetrated across the globe as they have been in the past” and “to deter indifference to crimes against humanity and human suffering wherever they may occur” (“Illinois Genocide”). Rep. Franks referenced the United States’ response when he said, “And we vowed never again!” The vow is in President Truman’s signature on the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide of 1948, an international treaty that was not ratified by the U.S. Senate until 1986 when President Reagan was in office. The Convention committed the United States to prevent and punish acts of genocide. A “contracting party” in this convention agrees that “genocide, conspiracy to commit genocide, direct and public incitement to commit genocide, attempt to commit genocide and complicity in genocide is punishable” (“Convention on the Prevention”). A “contracting party” also agrees to prevent genocide.

Thus, it seems that debates in Illinois’ House and Senate in 2005 were attempts to honor the promise of prevention by amending the school code to teach about genocide; however, if we take a look at the stated reason for genocide in the governor’s press release announcing the mandate, we can see that the document lists the need to eliminate ethnic, racial, gender, and religious “hatred” as the reason for the mandate. That in itself is simplistic and reductive;

nevertheless, it covers up the fact that there are complex social, economic, and political causes of genocide while leaving up to the schools to negotiate the nuances of such.

At a time when the national education movement was indeed globally aware in the democratic sense of development, progress, and competition with other nations, the rhetoric of the genocide mandate, and I mean the actual text of this mandate, was highlighting a consequence of such development. While indeed mandating a topic of instruction, which was a part of the official discourse teachers had come to expect, the language of the mandate deviated from language of competition, skills, and achievement by asking for an awareness of global atrocities and doing so without stipulating how to teach it or measure it. In my view, the genocide mandate complicates the public discourse of education because it is not about evaluation or measurement in the quantitative sense but rather overtly asks for a conversation about tolerance and the impact of globalization in the classroom. The mandate calls for some sort of action or change by amending the school code. The Illinois legislators were not telling teachers to teach about mass murder but rather “genocide,” a systematic, complex process that is planned, coordinated, and rationalized according to state and national ideologies. What is not present in the actual text of the amendment, however, is what prompted this call to action (e.g., the conflict in Sudan, political pressure, social conscience); understanding the rhetorical situation requires inquiry, requires mining the gaps of the text. But the teachers sitting in H103 that August morning were not terribly interested in all that. They were thinking: How long does the unit have to be? What do we have to teach them? And when will we fit this in? Such were the questions of data-driven -instruction and high stakes testing.

We were not asking how we can do this in a way that might actually “fight intolerance” or understand what has to happen in order for 800,000 Tutsis to be killed in less than 100 days by

their own neighbors or how a country like Rwanda heals the wounds of a nation. We were not asking how literature might illuminate this problem of talking about the unspeakable and understanding the unimaginable. After all, like NCLB, this was a state mandate to modernize the way we do education by regulating change. However, the result of NCLB and movement toward progress and development has constrained the ways we read and write – the very “tools” with which we make sense of our world and ultimately shape it.

**D. Meeting the Mandates: NCLB and Genocide**

Knowing that it was up to teachers to develop the curriculum to meet the genocide mandate, I joined the Genocide Curriculum Committee for our district, which consisted of a group of interested elementary teachers, two junior high English teachers, and one junior high History teacher. Over a few summer days, we developed curriculum for grades five through eight, which included lists of important vocabulary, key concepts, and collections of articles, stories, and films. We then collected all the materials in a binder to be distributed at the beginning of the school year. Starting in fifth grade, teachers would explore concepts such as tolerance, responsibility, and empathy. Students might read picture books about the Holocaust and/or select longer works such as *Daniel’s Story*, *Touch Wood: A Girlhood in Occupied France*, *Lisa’s War*, *Friedrich*, and *Number the Stars*. Sixth grade would consider world leaders and leadership styles according to historical period they are studying and continue reading from the elementary Holocaust book list. An extension might include the concept of “agents of change” and stories about children in war-torn countries. For the most part, the committee recommended materials to supplement or extend units already in place in elementary classrooms.

For junior high, the committee considered the list of suggested genocides provided in the mandate: the Armenian genocide, the Famine-Genocide in Ukraine, Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda,

and Sudan. We divided the listed genocides by grade level using the History textbook as a guide. Because eighth grade history taught about World Wars I and II and the Vietnam War and because eighth grade English teachers had taught about the Holocaust since 1990, we assigned Armenia and Cambodia to eighth grade. We researched literature, read reviews, and ordered class sets of *The Forgotten Fire* by Adam Bagdasarian, historical fiction about the Armenian genocide, and *First They Killed My Father* by Loung Ung, a memoir about the Cambodian genocide. We had not, however, read either. There were few options, but the reviews for these two were good; the Lexiles were appropriate for junior high; and they offered genre diversity.

Seventh grade, which already had a unit on current events, was assigned Rwanda, and we suggested the film *Hotel Rwanda*. (We would eventually find the 2009 novel *Broken Memory* by Elisabeth Combres as a literary representation of years following the genocide in Rwanda and the Gacaca courts to support the movie's content.) More current than Rwanda was Sudan, so that was assigned to the seventh grade English teachers. We bought the 2004 documentary *The Lost Boys of Sudan* directed by Megan Mylan to help teachers and students explore the conflict in Sudan. Because Bosnia was within the decade and still rather current, Lincoln bought a class set of *Zlata's Diary* for seventh grade English teachers to explore the Siege of Sarajevo (1992-1996), but they would have to teach about Srebrenica (1995) using other materials. While we had some difficulty locating memoirs or even historical fiction about the Ukraine famine (1932), we were able to find some resources so that seventh grade teachers could consider social engineering and antecedents to Stalin's man-made famine. Thinking about this now, the forced famine seems to fit better in the 8th grade curriculum leading up to the Holocaust given Hitler's relationship with Stalin, but I did not know about it at the time, and no one else suggested it.

Essentially, the curriculum committee used chronology to divide up the responsibility of meeting the mandate and developed a sequence of instruction in each grade level and subject. We relied on our experience and summer research to develop the curriculum at the time, not having read or viewed all the materials we were considering nor having taught any of it ourselves. The committee worked as an extension of the state, assigning content, materials, and accountability to meet the mandate. It was up to teachers to use their discipline training to make use of the materials. I had not anticipated that the approach to teaching about genocide would look a lot like skills-based instruction; the study of genocide included naming the stages of genocide, defining terms, and identifying roles.

In 2006, the first year of implementing the plan the curriculum committee developed for the “additional unit on genocide,” the seventh grade teams – all the English teachers including Math, History, Science, Special Education, and ELL teachers – created an interdisciplinary unit where they (teachers and students) watched *Hotel Rwanda*, learned about the stages of genocide from Gregory Stanton, and developed posters or Power Points in small groups with factual information and images.

Students and teachers were organized by what they called “learning stations.” One teacher took a station and facilitated a project based on that station’s genocide. This was organized during the final two weeks of schools, a time strategically selected because this was after ISATs and the final MAP tests (a computerized reading and math tests administered by our school district three times a year).

The first year this unit was implemented in the eighth grade, there was no team wide effort but rather the History department “covered” genocide chronologically as it fit with their textbook, and then the English teachers approached the unit as an extension of the Holocaust

unit. Some teachers chose not to teach an additional unit on genocide the first year having not had time to read through the new curriculum that the genocide committee developed, but all taught the Holocaust, which they have been teaching for quite a few years by now. For the teachers willing to try teaching about genocide, the most common modification made to the Holocaust unit was the inclusion of Gregory Stanton's eight stages of genocide: classification, symbolization, dehumanization, organization, polarization, preparation, extermination, and denial. After applying the eight stages to the Holocaust as a model, students were then assigned a genocide from the list and applied the stages. For example, symbolization in the Holocaust included naming people "Jews" or "Gypsies" or distinguishing them by colors or dress such as the yellow star for Jews under Nazi rule. Similarly, the people from the Eastern Zone in Khmer Rouge Cambodia were forced to wear a blue scarf. The rationale behind the stages, according to Stanton, is that "Genocide is a process that develops in eight stages that are predictable but not inexorable. At each stage, preventive measures can stop it. The process is not linear. Logically, later stages must be preceded by earlier stages. But all stages continue to operate throughout the process" ("The Eight Stages of Genocide"). In the classroom, the stage approach to genocide education would include students' filling out a graphic organizer for their assigned genocide to indicate classification through denial based on the texts they read or movies they watched. If a visitor stopped by Lincoln's classrooms post-ISATs, she might see posters about the eight stages of genocide from Armenia to Sudan.

In my view, the way the mandate was being implemented in the English classes that year was consistent with the pedagogy or learning valued by the state (i.e., skills-based, knowledge accumulation, accountability). And for that reason, I think that while the curriculum met the mandate's objective to recognize that "crimes of genocide continue to be perpetrated across the



globe,” the curriculum failed to “deter indifference to crimes against humanity and human suffering wherever they may occur.” As English teachers, I think we failed to honor that on which our discipline is founded: the reading experience. And while I think we are or have been guilty of ignoring our training since NCLB, teaching about genocide without attending to the complexity of the reading process and the educative potential of the literary experience seemed ethically wrong.

In the teaching of English, teachers are trained to do a critical analysis of how the texts represent life and events such as genocide. In the teaching of English, teachers are trained to teach students how images and language work aesthetically and rhetorically. However, it seemed that English teachers, myself included, had set aside such English methods to meet the mandates of the state, i.e., make sure students knew there were genocides other than the Holocaust. I admit that I made the learning experience more about the accumulation of knowledge about genocide than an interpretation of how genocidal processes were represented in texts and other media forms, rather than an investigation of why we, as Americans, are so ignorant of mass atrocities and so ill-equipped to prevent them. At first ashamed to know so little about genocide, I became deeply committed to knowing everything about it, to becoming the resident expert. Genocide continually preoccupied my mind; it became an obsession (which did not make me a fun party guest). I understand now that the obsession was the consequence of a state pedagogy. Knowledge accumulation could not satisfy the agitation of ignorance.

Over the next few years, I read all the books and films included in the curriculum plan along with a few more that I discovered in my research. Focusing on how literature and film represented genocide, I struggled to merge the way the state seemed to want me to teach English and the way we English teachers read stories and critically analyze texts. One novel, in

particular, haunted me because while it told the story of genocide in a way that eighth graders could understand the stages, it told the story of genocide not mentioned in the genocide mandate: a 2005 novel about the 1980s Guatemalan genocide, *Tree Girl* by Ben Mikaelson. Because the language of the mandate indicated that the list was not exhaustive, I bought a class set with my own money and decided to begin our study with this text asking the very important question: Why not? Why wasn't this genocide listed in the mandate? We considered how globalization and other social forces created the circumstances for the 1980s genocide of indigenous peoples and then used a similar framework for inquiry into other genocides. Students did research, collected information, and then after learning about journalism and media, they rendered the data into their own newspapers writing a hard news article, an editorial, an op-ed piece, a feature interview, and even a Dear Abby column. I also posted these publications for the May open house that year and subsequent years to show off the important thinking we were doing about the world. It seemed to me that these newsletters were more nuanced than the eight stages posters from the previous year, but this genocide unit was not without its problems.

I think the students and I all learned a lot about doing inquiry and rendering knowledge into different genres, but I think I made many mistakes that can best be illustrated by the op-ed pieces students wrote. For this, I asked students to “write about how *classification* leads to genocide and urge your readers – teenagers – to stop genocide by stopping classification.” Essentially, this assignment asked for students to write about being an upstander, but I was actually encouraging students to distill a genocidal process into the simple act of standing up to a bully.

The frame of Gregory Stanton's “Eight Stages of Genocide” appeals to teachers because we can teach our students to name and identify aspects of genocide. Stage identification is a neat

mechanism for teaching about genocide; the stages contain genocide in a framework that is understandable to teenagers (and to teachers). However, stages conflate the complexity of genocide and its transactional nature, i.e., the historical, social, political, and economic implications before, during, and after genocide. I attempt to show in the chapters that follow how the process of genocide and even the word genocide defy such mechanistic ways of knowing. In addition to stage theory, English teachers used methods consistent with data-driven instruction to teach about genocide – Frayer’s vocabulary grid, Freytag’s plot triangle, Pareto charts, and fishbone diagrams. I was teaching genocide like I was teaching inferencing or other content from the textbook. With genocide, however, I began to see the ethical implications of how I was teaching reading. Teaching genocide in such an ordered and constrained way was consistent with the lists, grouping, and procedures of genocide, and yet it was, of course, inconsistent because genocide is beyond comprehension. I saw potential to make a shift in how we were teaching English. Literacy defies measurement. Reading texts – images, film, articles, essays, literature, and even mandates – defies graphic organizers. There is a rhetoricality to such texts. There is a responsibility that comes with knowing, and there is an aesthetic to experience in all texts. Readers are implicated by what they read and how.

While it seemed that some teachers were merely “covering” genocide to meet the mandate, it also seemed that some teachers found value in learning about genocide with their students. The topic engaged teachers and students. The aesthetics of the literature prompted emotional reactions by students and teachers, in addition to parents. When I conducted interviews with several teachers, they admitted they were not experts and were reading and learning with their students. Some teachers shared that there were moments when they and their students would be brought to tears by a novel, and some students revealed stories from their own

families or their community -- an aunt from Sarajevo, a priest from Sudan at their church. Of course, parents questioned the appropriateness of the curriculum such as the use of violent images, the time given to misanthropes like Pol Pot and Stalin, and the time taken away from district approved curriculum. Indeed, the teachers had questions, too, about why they had to teach about genocide (and many continue to ignore the mandate as it is neither tested nor surveilled by administrators). The reaction to the genocide mandate was much more visceral than the reaction to NCLB; we were talking about literature worth reading and literary response; we were talking about what was worth knowing and how to handle controversial topics. Many of these teachers had been teaching about the Holocaust for over a decade, but the unfamiliarity of other genocides and the enormity of the task seemed both moving and paralyzing.

As NCLB pressures mounted and our school failed to meet AYP on the state test (e.g., 2008, 2012, 2013), enthusiasm for meeting the genocide mandate waned. I suspect some teachers used NCLB as an excuse not to spend time on this overwhelming topic. During the 2011-12 school year, I observed that the seventh grade interdisciplinary unit was no longer in place. Instead, the English teachers did a survey-type unit where groups of students researched one genocide and created a presentation board with facts and images on display for the May open house event. During the 2013-14 school year, no seventh grade teacher taught the unit. Most of the eighth grade teachers taught about the Guatemalan genocide, and only one read literature about Armenia and Cambodia, but these “units” looked different from teacher to teacher, ranging in length from one week to one month and including any combination of articles, films, novels, tests, and projects.

For me, despite the pressure to highlight bubble kids and use data to justify my pedagogical choices to the principals over the years (five different principals in nine years), I still

made time to do this additional unit on genocide. And despite knowing that I cannot answer the numerous questions that emerge during the unit and because of that feel like an imposter teacher (and failed expert) most of the time, I am intrigued by the paradox that the more I teach about genocide the less I know. Thus, while other teachers are paring back, I continue to talk about genocide and to teach this unit in part because I know it is ethically important to do so (and other teachers seem to agree), in part because students seem so curious about the subject (again, most teachers agree with this, too), but mostly because nearly ten years later, reading literature like *Tree Girl* (Mayans in Guatemala), *The Forgotten Fire* (Armenians in Turkey), and *First They Killed My Father* (Cambodia) with eighth graders seems like the sort of literacy work we should be doing to prepare our students for life in an increasingly interdependent, globalized world – better than the five pound, 2002 edition of *Prentice Hall Literature, Silver: Timeless Voices, Timeless Themes* still on the desks of Lincoln’s students.

**E. The Problem with Progress: The Darker Side of Modernity**

I am suggesting there are some deeply ingrained traditions of education at work in our schools, specifically the English classroom. Teachers are not held accountable for teaching about genocide in the way they are for teaching inferencing or other standardized skills. There is no test to show students’ academic progress in knowing about global atrocities in the way it is for earning a higher score on the ISAT or MAP tests. But I suspect more of it has to do with the darker side of the progress, or what I will discuss below as modernity, that genocide illuminates. Indeed, the atrocities of genocide are unimaginable; we want to turn away from the images. But similarly, we have turned away from the ways the state has taken over our discipline, English. The state is deciding what knowledge is taught and how. The hierarchy of knowledge and culture that schooling perpetuates makes it risky to think that there is something systemically wrong

with education. It is easier to teach what we can measure. It is neater to read about things that confirm what we know. While the genocide units described above seem to be doing something quite different than test-prep or data-driven instruction, I do not think they brought about a way of thinking about the world or our place in the world that is going to prepare our students for a society that continues to perpetuate mass atrocities, push certain groups to the margins of society, and exhaust natural resources. Clearly, the 1990 mandate to teach about the Holocaust has not necessarily created a more peaceful world, and while the 2005 mandate to teach about genocide helps us acknowledge the perpetuation of state violence, it has not, as of yet, prompted a “delinking” from state pedagogy (Mignolo).

The Illinois Genocide Education Mandate is one specific and concrete example of how education is impacted by political, economic, and global events. The legislative process described above illustrates how the state actually forms or constructs that which teachers teach and, thus, students learn. In my view, the state’s education reform movements (e.g., the Illinois Genocide Education Mandate and the Common Core State Standards) have, despite seemingly different purposes, propagated a pedagogy that actually limits rather than expands the potential of an education, specifically the potential of English education. *What* the state mandates and *how* impacts what and how English teachers design and implement curriculum, and this has far reaching implications for how students read and understand the world beyond the walls of the school.

When considering the implementation of education reforms such as NCLB and the Common Core State Standards, which identify skills and knowledge to be taught and assessed in schools, alongside the Illinois Genocide Education Mandate, which requires the inclusion of “an additional unit of instruction studying other acts of genocide across the globe” for the purpose of

detering “indifference to crimes against humanity and human suffering wherever they may occur,” we can see two examples of the state standardizing the school code in the name of progress. And in this way, the process of re forming education is a mechanism of modernity which influences, if not controls, what teachers teach and students learn. However, I argue that in positing reform for the sake of progress, reform, in fact, enacts an antiquated and even violent logic of reform, one that is exclusionary.

Only one type of knowledge is typically measured in school, and it is the kind that the state can quantify or measure; thus, non-quantifiable ways of knowing are excluded. And teachers, as I have shown earlier, have become quite skilled in data-driven instruction. The dominant discourse of education, measurement, is deeply invested in a value system that no longer aligns with the sort of education that society needs to respond to the economic, social, technological, political, and environmental changes happening around the world. In other words, the standards movement is all about the standardization of learning and efficiency -- marks of measurement but also marks of modernity. Modernity, which I will say more about below, is about efficiency which shuts off opportunities for students to learn how to creatively and humanely engage in a rapidly changing world. Teachers, however, can find room to maneuver within (or even work against) these trends.

Walter Mignolo, in *The Darker Side of Modernity* (2011), explains that the historical origin of modernity is coloniality, that which embodies hierarchical systems that discriminate based on class, race, gender, ability, and sexuality. Theodor Adorno’s work has similar concerns about modernity. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, co-authored with Max Horkheimer, Adorno, a German philosopher, raises questions of why and how modern rationality gave rise to atrocities, specifically mass murders under Stalin’s regime and the Holocaust by Hitler. He argues that

Enlightenment had a self-destructive irrational element and that horrific acts were a necessary outcome, specifically when progress meant strategic dominance of state power resulting in a high degree of distance or isolation between groups of people in society, or social alienation. In other words, progress, even if it is toward some sort of rationality (which we might see as a just cause like NCLB), ultimately excludes (e.g., isolating students from certain learning experiences such as art or music and assigning them labels such as ELL or “does not meet”). Adorno found hope in the arts as illuminating and even critiquing of the established culture and modes of thought. Zygmunt Bauman, a Polish sociologist, similarly argues that alienation of certain knowledges and peoples is essential to modernity. He writes of the Holocaust:

The ‘Final Solution’ did not clash at any stage with the rational pursuit of efficient, optimal goal-implementation. On the contrary, *it arose out of a genuinely rational concern, and it was generated by bureaucracy true to its form and purpose....* The Holocaust was not an irrational outflow of the not-yet-fully-eradicated residues of pre-modern barbarity. It was a legitimate resident in the house of modernity; indeed, one who would not be at home in any other house. (Bauman’s emphasis, 17)

Mignolo, Adorno, and Bauman illuminate the darker side of modernity, which is its order-making efforts. The procedural rationality, the division of tasks, the categorization of peoples – all played a role in colonization and the Holocaust. Such procedures exist to excise that which resists measurement, those indeterminate features of society. The same processes that were at work in colonization and Holocaust still comes into play today, specifically in how the state systematizes literacy education.

The project of the state is to legitimize certain knowledges and skills, which means it delegitimizes other knowledges and skills. In an increasingly globalized world, we cannot afford such narrow ways of knowing. The state decides what knowledge is propagated and what knowledge is delegitimized, and after generations of reproducing certain knowledges, people (actors), including their beliefs and language, were made to believe that their knowledge was not



legitimate, which is actually, as Mignolo shows, a fallacy; in other words, no language or belief is actually more legitimate than another. In order to dismantle this structure, people have to do what Mignolo calls “delink.” This is a process of recognizing the system that has been deciding for you what is worth knowing and experiencing. Transactional consciousness can support delinking because it not only illuminates the forces and consequences of the state; it offers an alternative to state systems of literacy education.

**F. Transactional Consciousness in the English Classroom**

Nearly ten years after the genocide mandate, I teach in the very classroom where I learned to bubble: H103. Debbie has retired along with others, and new teachers have joined Lincoln’s faculty. We just passed at the culmination of NCLB, 2013-14 when 100 percent of all students should have been proficient on the state test. And we are at the beginning of the new Common Core State Standards initiative, which means a new set of standards and a new test that is no longer local. The Partnership for Assessment and State Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) is defined on its website as follows: “a group of states working together to develop a set of assessments that measure whether students are on track to be successful in college and their careers.” It is a computer-based K-12 assessment set to replace the ISAT test in Illinois during the 2014-15 school year. A middle school student will spend almost ten hours taking these tests each year. For the last two years, Lincoln’s school district has spent countless hours and resources training teachers to implement the new standards, including spending workshop time taking the PARCC test ourselves. And the Illinois Genocide Education Mandate has been all but forgotten at Lincoln.

The distance between skills-based instruction and teaching students to understand that “racial, national, ethnic, and religious hatred can lead to horrible tragedies” is vast and as such

exposes a deeper problematic of literacy education, one with ethical implications for what we teach (or don't) and how we teach in our increasingly globalized world. I think what and how we teach has everything to do with how we, as teachers, not only interpret state mandates but read the world and understand the role of English in preparing students to also read the world.

Returning to Mignolo and his concept of delinking, another way of reframing these questions is to ask this: how do we delink if we are in the middle of stated procedures? We need teachers who can encourage a “decolonial education,” an expression of the changing geopolitics of knowledge whereby the modern framework for knowing and understanding the world is no longer interpreted as universal. Knowledge no longer comes from one regional center; it is distributed globally. Mignolo suggests that disciplines that comprise education can be analyzed and critiqued (189). Teachers can show the students how to delink with questions about the subject of the knowledge, the knowledge being generated, who benefits or is exploited by particular knowledge or understanding, and what institutions are supporting such knowledge and understanding (Mignolo). Students come to think that they must conform to schooling expectations, earn a high school diploma, go to the university, and then become some sort of contributor to the current structure of society. A “decolonial education” is about making students aware that they are living among options. According to Mignolo, we are conditioned by modernity not to question our actions -- we don't, for example, question the messages of accumulation. What is hidden is how we arrived at this state of accumulation. We should start with our own personal ethics, he suggests. Create a space whereby we question one another's frameworks of what is right and wrong and, thus, begin to dialogue. However, when the disciplines in school are controlled by a hegemonic system, it is difficult for students to see these options.

Teachers, however, can find room to maneuver within modern trends in education. Transactional consciousness could be a central component to Mignolo's decolonial education in that English can be a site where teachers and students, through conscious reading practices, illuminate and counteract the ways standards and high-stakes tests constrain the way we read and think about reading, limit our purposes for reading literature, narrow the goal of education, and impede discussions of our responsibility as members of an increasingly globalized society. In this dissertation, I propose a framework for reading to support teachers in taking up the task of reimagining the English classroom in this era of reform: transactional consciousness theory.

Transactional consciousness, as I describe and discuss it in this dissertation, is a pedagogical approach to teaching English in middle school and high school. This theory will help teachers and students understand the complexity of modernity (i.e., the coexistence of progress and iterations of violence or abuse) by illuminating the dimensions of the transactional spaces, spaces where ideas are created, shared, received, interpreted, and acted upon in a multitude of ways. The theoretical framework for transactional consciousness begins with a discussion of the transactional process of reading and the value of a reader's aesthetic response in meaning-making.

### III.THE ETHICS OF READING: TRANSACTIONAL THEORY

We who are teachers would have to accommodate ourselves to lives as clerks or functionaries if we did not have in mind a quest for a better state of things for those we teach and for the world we all share .It is simply not enough for us to reproduce the way things are.

---Maxine Greene, *Releasing the Imagination*

When education legislation mandates specific knowledge to be taught or demands accountability through high stakes testing, the state is communicating a set of beliefs about knowledge and learning. Whose ideas are worth perpetuating? What knowledge is worth knowing? How does one learn and then demonstrate this learning? As I discussed in chapter two, school districts, often compelled by state-level statutes, develop systems for measuring knowledge and accounting for learning that constrain education to quantifiable outcomes. As Maxine Greene argues, this makes teachers “accommodate ourselves to lives as clerks or functionaries” (1).

In my view, such a restricted view of education is a matter of ethics, and if we teach reading without a quest for “a better state of things for those we teach and for the world we all share,” then we have failed in this ethical project of education. Transactional consciousness is my “quest,” my contribution to an ethical project so to speak, and transactional reading is a step toward a better state of things.

In this chapter, I claim that reading and the teaching of reading are ethical projects. As a way to highlight the ethical nature of reading, I will briefly introduce Louise Rosenblatt’s transactional reading theory as one way teachers and students can become more conscious and inclusive of all the transactions that contribute to meaning, specifically the readers’ responses. I will then explore schema theory as a useful (though limited) framework for understanding how and why readers are necessarily response to texts. The best way to foster an ethical approach to

reading (and the teaching of reading) is to highlight all of the many transactions that occur when a person reads, transactions that are part of and beyond those described in schema theory. To be aware of and make deliberate use of those multiple transactions is what I am calling transactional consciousness. Then, I will consider how reading genocide literature can illuminate the importance of considering the reading process as transactional, specifically because a students' emotional response to the reading experience and students co-deliberating on meaning builds a capacity for ethical engagement with society. Reading genocide literature is especially useful in highlighting the ethical nature of teaching because genocide is a dramatic example of the horrors that arise when we do not take ethics into account.

**A. The Ethics of Good Reading**

We often think of *good* reading as *right* reading, but when we think of the ethics of reading, *good* takes on a new dimension. According to Arthur F. Holmes,

Ethics is about the *good* (that is, what values and virtues we should cultivate) and about the *right* (that is, what our moral duties may be) It examines alternate views of what is *good* and *right*; it explores ways of gaining the moral knowledge we need; it asks why we ought to do right; and it brings all this to bear on the practical moral problems that arouse such thinking in the first place. (my emphasis<sup>10</sup>)

.Being ethical is not the same as doing whatever society or a particular field accepts. In any field, most people accept standards that are, in fact, ethical, but standards of behavior in education and in society more generally can deviate from what is morally good or right. We know too well that an entire society can become ethically corrupt, and Nazi Germany is just one example. We do not, then, decide what is ethical based on what is accepted. Ethics refers to what one *ought* to do in terms of rights, obligations, and benefits to society.

Teaching is inevitably an ethical activity because we have obligations to our students and the human beings they are becoming. It may seem, at times, that what we *ought* to do or what is

*right* is to follow our superiors and accept their pedagogical leadership. They have been hired to lead and have sought out the research-based materials we are advised to use. Indeed, we do not want to be responsible for “leaving a child behind” because we did not accept our leader’s vision. However, such acceptance has constrained pedagogy, specifically reading practices, in the name of measuring progress. Schools leaders are interested in producing *good* readers, and by *good* we mean on grade level, which is measured by some school-wide, standardized, often high-stakes test. I am not opposed to the goal of making students *good* readers, but I am concerned about how we are defining *good* and what classroom methods are achieving that *good*.

It seems to me that schools are focused on a quantitative *good* rather than a qualitative, ethically-oriented *good*. I think the high-stakes tests have distorted the ethics of reading by limiting its practice and purpose. Limiting, constraining, or constructing a reading event (while hiding other options) for a student is, in my view, an exclusionary practice that is not a value we’d like perpetuated in society. The reading process begins before a student engages with a text and extends long beyond any reading event. To ignore or hide those transactions is unethical because students are excluded from this event; they are denied their right to build a capacity for recognizing their responsibility as readers to be aware of the multitude of transactions shaping their experiences. In essence, I am arguing that ethical reading is the practice of being conscious of the multiple transactions at work in any reading event and responsible for how we read and participate in the transactions that shape society.

## **B. What is Transactional Reading Theory?**

In emphasizing the human dimension of the literary transaction, Louise Rosenblatt, in *The Reader, the Text, the Poem*, foregrounds the ethical nature of reading. Influenced by philosophers such as John Dewey, George Santayana, and William James, Rosenblatt

emphasizes that transactions are exchanges *between* and *among* people capable of reflection and ethical choices.

Transactional awareness as a quality of *good* reading practice occurs when a reader recognizes that reading is a nonlinear event in time in which the reader and text condition each other. “Reading to be right” is a sort of fiction when we understand a reading event as dynamic and unique to the reader. The reader is not seen as invisible, passive, or interchangeable as literary theory focused on *right* reading posits. To focus on *right* reading is to dehumanize the reader on some level, which, for me, is unethical. Rosenblatt’s transactional reading theory’s reader-oriented, human-centered, and transactional perspective is in opposition to what Rosenblatt saw as the objectivism and scientism of the New Criticism; she rejected New Criticism’s emphasis on literature-as-object and its neglect of the author and reader in the reading process. New Criticism is the theory behind the Common Core State Standards’ focus on close reading; it insists on the work itself as an autonomous structure of literary devices. I.A. Richards, a New Critic and author of *Practical Criticism*, neglects the reader because he sees potential weaknesses in readers: “their failure to make out the plain sense, poor sensuous apprehension, erratic evocation of imagery, susceptibility to mnemonic irrelevances, stock response, or inhibition of emotion, irrelevant adherence to doctrines or beliefs...” (Rosenblatt, *The Reader* 144). Mnemonic irrelevances are the misleading effects or interferences of a personal scene, erratic association, or emotional after effects from a past which may have nothing to do with the text. Rosenblatt, on the other hand, sees memories and mnemonic relevances as what makes a literary experience possible. A *good* reader, then, is one who is conscious of her literary experience as both unique and one of many – all valuable, all important in deciphering meaning.

Including the author and reader as human beings who contribute to the text's meaning is, in my view, an ethical perspective on reading instruction. Transactional reading teachers recognize readers as conscious decision makers; they embrace a dynamic view (not fixed) of the text as an opportunity for new and different individual readings that have an ethical dimension: "readings that can be responsibly self-aware and disciplined" (Rosenblatt, *The Reader* 130). Understood as a transactional process, reading literature helps people understand themselves and their world better and encourages connections between intellectual and emotional experience. These understandings and connections put readers in a position of being able to act to improve their own and other's lives. In this way, transactional reading can be an ethical force to inform ways of being in and acting upon the world.

Teachers, then, have an important role – an ethical role – in promoting *good* reading; a practice that encourages readers to develop ethical habits of reading that they can take beyond the classroom, which is to say the habits of recognizing their position as a reader, the author's position as the writer, and the text as some provisional representation of the world which requires care. Being conscious of the author and the self, means a reader will learn to recognize that the differences (e.g., race, class, sex, culture) *may* impact interpretation. And so Rosenblatt's transactional theory values the reader's response and deliberation with other readers in considering how reading impacts our understanding of the world and our place in it.

Attention to transactions in reading does exist in English classrooms around the country, but the transactions included and valued in the English classroom can be constrained due to common assessments and high-stakes tests. I will, in the next section, discuss "schema theory" as a limited version of transactional reading theory, how elements of Rosenblatt's transactional theory have been interpreted and practiced in the English classroom in recent decades, and then



explore a key element of transactional reading theory that we can emphasize toward a more ethical approach to reading: reader response.

### **C. What is Schema Theory?**

Reading is an active and complex process of making meaning. In some ways, teachers' understanding of the complexity of children learning to read has actually been informed by certain elements of Rosenblatt's transactional theory. While Jean Piaget's schema theory (1952) and David E. Rumelhart's interactive reading theory (1976) set forth notions that are important aspects of Rosenblatt's overall approach, schema theory and interactive theory do not include the entire range of transactions that interest Rosenblatt. Piaget explained learning as the modification of a student's cognitive structure, which he named "schema." He defined schema as "a cohesive, repeatable action sequence possessing component actions that are tightly interconnected and governed by a core meaning" (qtd. in *Educational Psychology* 46). Another way of understanding schema is as an organizational system "where" the reader organizes new information with prior knowledge. Wadsworth (2004) suggests that schemata be considered "index cards" filed in the brain that prompt an individual to react to incoming information. In other words, schemata serve as organizers of input. Without them, new experiences would be incomprehensible (Anderson 1977). For example, "a classroom" contains all that is associated in one's memory with going to a classroom. Such actions and events as finding your seat, sharpening a pencil, writing your name on your paper are all organized around the scene of a classroom. Comprehension happens as values for the variables are determined or recognized. Therefore, meaning is neither in the message itself or in the reader's schemata; meaning is a result of a process that combines the two.

Essentially, schema theory provided new developments in cognitive psychology and is used to explain cognitive processes like inferencing, remembering, reasoning, problems solving, comprehension, and memory (e.g., Adams & Collins, 1979; Anderson, 1984; Anderson & Pearson, 1984; Anderson, Reynolds, Schallert, & Goetz, 1977; Bloom, 1988; Bransford & Frank, 1971; Bransford & Johnson, 1972; McDaniel & Kerwin, 1987; Shallert, 1991). With schema theory, teachers are not knowledge-transmitters; they engage students in class experiences so that students can modify their schema with minimal frustration. Prior knowledge, if a student can access it, helps a reader interact with the new information in the text and construct new, or modified, knowledge. Assuming that the prior knowledge is unique to the reader, what is learned, then, is unique to each student. Therefore, teachers must know their students and support students during the reading process in not only making connections to prior knowledge but in working through discrepancies. To be clear, in the reading process, a student's life context impacts the meaning making process. Here, I intentionally use the phrase "meaning making" as opposed to learning because I want to emphasize the reader's agency and responsibility in the process.

Schema certainly helps us understand the complexity of transactions – how the text works on the reader and the reader's prior knowledge works on the text. Schema theory researchers are interested in how knowledge is stored in memory (prior knowledge) and in texts (new information) so that teachers, schools, the state can improve reading and remember what they learned. In other words, if we consider knowledge as stored in memory, then schema theory suggests such knowledge rests in schemata and teaching becomes a matter of accessing prior knowledge so as to modify or add new information to their memory. How does new information from the text fit with prior information? How does a student's memory interact with the text to

produce or interfere with learning? Using the logic of schema theory, it makes sense that English teachers are invested in strategies that activate schemata such as pre-reading activities (i.e., identifying the genre and formal structure of a text, accessing what a reader may already know about a topic) to bridge the student's memory and the content of the text.

One way of looking at the schema theory's interest in transactions is that instruction can fill the gap between writer intention and reader comprehension, as though the reader has a deficit the teacher must accommodate. For example, if the reader had different life experiences than the writer's ideal reader, the reader may come to a different interpretation of the text. Such an interpretation might occur if the content is culturally specific and thus not part of the reader's background or part of the reader's background but carrying alternate interpretations. The concept of "ghetto," for example, for some of Lincoln's students activates schema for dangerous neighborhoods in Chicago (or even in their own apartment complex) where gangs fight over territory. This particular conception of "ghetto" could lead to a misreading if an author referred to ghettos as enclosed city districts where Germans isolated Jews by separating them from other communities, both Jews and non-Jews.

One way to overcome this discrepancy is for students to read within their schemata, i.e., culturally specific texts or texts within students' interest or knowledge base. To narrow reading to subjects familiar to a student will likely improve comprehension scores; of course, Carrell and Eisterhold suggest that "every culture-specific interference problem dealt with in the classroom presents an opportunity to build new culture-specific schemata" (89). Thus, another way to overcome schema-text discrepancies is to help readers build background knowledge on the topic prior to reading with lectures, visual aids, and pre-teaching vocabulary. For example, a teacher might show a picture of the Warsaw ghetto before asking students to read about the 1942

Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Another strategy might be to show a film clip of a novel before a novel study. These activities will build new schema prior to reading to improve comprehension during the reading event. If the goal of reading is for every student to essentially develop the *same* schemata or “files,” then schema theory supports methods that anticipate and fill gaps in knowledge and experience in the English classroom.

The goal of instruction, then, is another transaction to consider during the reading process. An extension of schema theory that considers how a “goal” drives instruction is Rumelhart and McClelland’s interactive theory of reading (1981). Their work incorporates the transactions of the reading situation and how those transactions impact the reading process. The reading situation, according to Rumelhart and McClelland, is the context of learning: the classroom. The context in which a linguistic element is found affects the way that element is processed and interpreted. Considering the situation of the reading process – the English classroom – interactive reading theory attempts to account for the classroom environment, the learning goals, the student-teacher interaction, and the assessment. The context, then, potentially controls the reading process because the context sets the purpose for reading and ultimately decides what knowledge is valued or worth knowing. For example, in reading a text about the Holocaust, if the teacher or curriculum instructs the student to read for the meaning of the word “ghetto,” then the student is reading for that explicit purpose. This is one way to focus learning, but the entire reading event is also limited by such a goal.

The prefix “inter” in interactive reading theory is appropriate in describing the transactions of schema theory (i.e., reading is interactive) if we are to understand the process of meaning making as occurring “among” the reader, text, and context. And so for teachers working from interactive reading theory, it makes sense for pedagogy to be interested in

prompting students to access their prior knowledge on a topic before reading, to draw on experiences during reading, to pay attention to textual patterns, but mostly to be sure that they know the purpose for reading at all times. Is the purpose to identify the setting? Is the purpose to use context clues to find the meaning of a vocabulary word? Is the purpose to find text that supports some assertion of theme? A student will be more successful on the assessment if the teacher can tell her what the purpose for reading is. If these purposes mimic those on high stakes test, the student will be considered a *good* reader, and the school will also be considered *good* for producing this reader.

As I discussed in chapter two, the goal drives instruction and thus learning; therefore, whoever controls the goals, determines what knowledge or ideas are remembered and thus perpetuated. Teachers, students, texts, the classroom, and the learning goals – the English classroom is full of transactions. While schema theory illuminates the transaction between the past (prior knowledge and experience) and current reading, interactive reading theory illuminates the transaction between current reading and the present (visual cues, present circumstances) as well as the transaction between current reading and the future (the goal of the reading activity).

#### **D. The Darker Side of Schema Theory**

In my view, while schema theory can be very helpful in understanding the complexities of transactions, unfortunately some people have used schema theory to develop lessons and curricula that have such a narrow focus that they obscure the complexities and various types of transactions that occur when we read. A limitation of schema theory is that in practice it tends to focus on schema deficiencies, which is to say, a student's deficiencies. The teacher's role is to overcome those deficiencies by providing additional information so that the student can comprehend the text "correctly," which is usually measured by an objective assessment.

Sometimes, the English classroom is so focused on building scaffolds towards some “right” construction of knowledge that we neglect what is pushed to the margins of those frames, dismissed as irrelevant, and ultimately excluded from classroom lessons for the sake of a right reading or progress on a state assessment. Hruby (2001) explains, “structural metaphors guide our thinking and, when incorporated into our models of cognition, stake out the parameters of our epistemologies” (48). While schema theory encourages teachers to consider the reader in order to develop lessons and emphasizes the reader’s experience in the sense that it is concerned about the schemata that are formed through that reading experience, the reader’s emotional response and her capacity to be responsible for her own reading are minimized. In other words, schema theory has perpetuated in readers narrow, constructed expectations for the reading event, expectations that preclude certain reading experiences that I will discuss below.

If we think about reading genocide literature alongside schema theory and interactive reading theory, we have to think about the reader’s background knowledge, the texts they will read, the context in which they are reading, and the purpose for reading. Schema theory recognizes that the reader is not a passive recipient of knowledge. Indeed, even if the purpose for reading is constrained to a standard is not to say that the reader having read *Tree Girl* by Ben Mikaelson (a story about a Mayan girl whose village had been scorched during the Guatemalan genocide) has only learned or experienced the standard. The reader is active in constructing meaning, which means she recognizes when information from the text does not fit with prior knowledge, does not make sense in terms of the way he or she was raised, does not mesh with his or her reasoning on any number of issues related to life and human nature. Nevertheless, while I think that schema theory and interactive reading theory help us understand the reading process as multifaceted, I also think that the way these theories are applied in schools is limiting

the potential of reading, specifically because the context is limited to school, and the purposes tend to be standards-based. Beyond informational vessels, texts, specifically literature, are representations of life that enrich, complicate, mirror, and even distort the human experience. Perhaps the most valuable aspect of critically exploring story schema with students is to uncover just how reading for standards practice is only part of their responsibility as readers of the word and world.

**E. All Transactions Matter: Aesthetic Response in Transactional Reading**

While schema and interactive reading theories recognize reading as active and involve transactions, the reading process is characterized in these theories as “inter”-active or as happening “among” the reader, the text, and the classroom context. What would it mean if we thought about the reading process as happening “beyond” these elements, as in “beyond” the situation of the classroom? And how would meaning be influenced if we were to consider the purposes of and influences on reading as extending beyond the classroom or school to include other readers, other contexts, and other purposes? We would understand the process as what Louise Rosenblatt calls “trans”-actional, meaning “across,” “through,” and “beyond” as in an understanding of meaning as constructed socially.

Transactional reading theory is relevant to the modern English classroom because it is inclusive of all *readers’ responses* in this age of standardized instruction and assessment. Cultural and experiential differences abound in the spaces where human beings connect and communicate. Yes, readers still benefit from learning genre, formal structures, and topic-specific language, but they must also learn to recognize how emotional and experiential responses contribute to meaning and how that meaning informs and shapes future experiences. Therefore, transactional reading theory considers the reader, the text, and the context, but beyond schema

theory, it emphasizes readers' responses. In the transactional reading process, according to Rosenblatt (1938) the reader draws on the past linguistic and life experiences and links the signs on the page with certain words, "certain concepts, certain sensuous experiences, certain images of things, people, actions, scenes" (30), and when a reader struggles to make those connections, "...a complex, non-linear, self-correcting transaction between reader and text continues – the arousal and fulfillment (or frustration) of expectations, the construction of a growing, often revised, 'meaning'" (1988, 4). This transactional process makes for a "never-to-be-duplicated combination" that determines a reader's interpretation, an interpretation which is understood to be provisional and partial until more experiences prompt revised interpretations (1938, 30). If a reader understands that her response is valued in this way, she can then look beyond herself to consider how a text influences others in the same and other contexts.

Aesthetic response, the reader's emotional response to literature, is vital in making and revising meaning. I borrow Rosenblatt's definition of aesthetic response for transactional consciousness theory, which is primarily an emotional response of sensing, feeling, imagining, and thinking about the stimulus of words. For Rosenblatt, aesthetic response must entail the following:

[A] free, uninhibited emotional reaction to a work of art or literature as an absolutely *necessary* condition of sound literary judgment. However, it is not, to use the logician's term, a *sufficient* condition. Without a real impact between the book and the mind of the reader, there can be no process of judgment at all, but honest recognition of one's own reaction is not in itself sufficient to ensure sound critical opinion. (1938, 72 emphasis original)

Transactional reading calls for an instructional approach that encourages readers to experience the work aesthetically noting *how* it appeals to them as unique readers and thinkers. To be clear, the purpose for reading is not to arrive at the right interpretation of the text (e.g., New Criticism); the reader is not dependent on the teacher to build background knowledge or provide reading



activities to guide comprehension (e.g., schema theory). The reason we read something for ourselves (rather than relying on someone to tell us what the text is about) is because the aesthetic experience is irreducible; our experience from our transaction with the literary text as a co-participant in the literary transaction. Our ability to understand and act upon the world is dependent upon our aesthetic experience because it helps us recognize our agency as irreducible to a number, a rating, or a score. To hide or deny discussions of readers' aesthetic responses and how those inform meaning is, in my view, unethical, because it hides or denies our humanity.

As I explained above, similar to schema and interactive reading theories, transactional reading emphasizes the reader's experience in comprehension. In *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* (1978), Louise Rosenblatt offers a useful distinction between two opposing modes of experiencing a text: the "efferent" and the "aesthetic." When readers respond to a text from the efferent stance, they are reading to acquire information. However, when they are responding from the aesthetic stance, their own engagement and experience with the text is primary. Rosenblatt acknowledges that readers move between stances as they read, but much of literature instruction employs methods (e.g., graphic organizers, a correct-answer worksheets or tests) that require students to read from the "efferent" stance. Because schema theories treat a text as a static artifact, she argues that such theories ignore the literary work as a personal and "lived-through" transactional event, which suggests that reading comprehension goes *beyond* identifying the structure of a text.

While I see that schema theory can complement transactional theory, schema theory alone has cultivated a narrow understanding of reading practices and stalled the potential of literature in the English classroom. Transactional reading theory can help release this potential by encouraging an understanding of reading literature as an activity that can engage students not

only in gleaning information about the world as with genocide literature but also in compelling us to examine how our world is represented by others, how our own values shape our response to the world, how or if to act with greater consciousness, and to take up our role as ethical members of society.

#### **F. A Critique of Aesthetic Response**

For three quarters of a century, Rosenblatt's work has been cited in academic articles and books about the teaching of literature, which certainly suggests that many literary scholars and educators, at some level, acknowledge that literature speaks as much to our emotions as to our intellect. In 2002, the National Assessment of Education Progress actually encouraged some aspect of Rosenblatt's theory: making reader/text connections. For years, teachers were encouraging students to make these connections as a reading strategy, in part because it was tested on the extended response portion of the ISATs. (In my view, this was not a meaningful way to include aesthetic response because it was formalized.) However, a decade later, Nancy Boyles and others began to argue that "personal connections...left readers with the notion that the text was simply a launching point for their musings, images that popped into their heads, and random questions that, in the end, did little to enhance their understanding of the text itself." Therefore, while Rosenblatt's ideas articulated what a lot of people have apparently felt is true about their aesthetic reading experience, unfortunately, her ideas have been misappropriated to encourage impoverished views of reading, views that Rosenblatt's notion of transaction was intended to counteract. In my view, this is a significant example of how systematizing reading has adverse affects.

And now, in a march toward "progress" and in an attempt to reign in the reading process once again, the new Common Core State Standards virtually abandon Rosenblatt's insights by

emphasizing close reading: “A significant body of research links the close reading of complex texts—whether the student is a struggling reader or advanced – to significant gains in reading proficiency and finds close reading to be a key component of college and career readiness” (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, 2011, p. 7). Thus, in 2014, Rosenblatt’s work with reader response is still excluded in favor of New Criticism’s view that only that which is *within* the text is part of the meaning of the text; no appeal to the authority or intention of the author or to the reader’s experience is permitted in discussions with New Critics. Of course, there may be a question on the test regarding “author’s purpose” on a high stakes test, but essentially what the English classroom emphasizes is close reading, a systematic and objective method of interpretation that excludes the reader’s response, the author’s intention, historical and cultural contexts, and moralistic bias from analysis. Textbook companies have already aligned their products to these new standards, and consultants across the country are hard at work facilitating teacher in-services on how to practice and evaluate close reading.

I understand that “personal connections” have given Rosenblatt’s theory a bad name because the personal connection has seemingly permitted virtually any interpretation of a text. I think this is a narrow representation of her theory. Indeed, Rosenblatt would say that the way a reader responds to the experience of reading a text is valuable in and of itself; however, she acknowledges that prior reading experiences, ignorance, lack of experience, or even inattentive reading can contribute to misreading, which is not to say that the *experience* of reading was in any way wrong. The English classroom is a site for exploring valid alternate readings and the causes of misreading. The key for Rosenblatt, however, is for students to learn the value of the reading process – the work of reading, responding, rereading, reflecting, constructing an interpretation, and checking in with others to consult, confirm, or even reject their interpretation.

However, I think her theory of reading has been minimized because the transactional reading process is not quantifiable. We teach literature because we want students to have the experience on has in reading; unlike a news story online, students do not read literature only for the information it holds. Yet, we test students on literature as if they were to have read it for information (1968/1938, 235). “Sensuous experiences” cannot be contained in a multiple-choice assessment; an aesthetic response is not viewed as a virtue to be cultivated. The reading process is devalued in favor of a measurable outcome. What the reader brings to the text cannot be controlled or contained or easily measured, which, in my view, is why English methods tend to focus on minimizing aesthetic reading and using class time to set up shared experiences (e.g., images, videos, vocabulary, graphic organizers) to guide the reader to some specific understanding of the text. However, I suggest we free ourselves from this limited view of reader response. I think it is important to call attention to how reader response can enhance and inhibit reading; transactional consciousness means being aware of the implications of all transactions.

    Illuminating the transactions between and among readers and texts as they construct and revise meaning should be the goal of the modern English classroom (i.e., not grades or test scores). Aesthetic reading is crucial to this process, and such reading is ethical because in today’s globalized world we have to learn to recognize, respond to, and work with a world of others primarily through text and images. In the English classroom, we have to practice making and revising meaning when people, texts, images, and events transact with what we know or thought we knew, and that means making the classroom a place that resists constraining reading activities so that the aesthetic response can become conscious to the reader, and she can recognize that how she experiences the world is subjective, individual and dynamic among so many others whose experiences are also subjective, individual, and dynamic. To teach “good”

reading in the modern classroom, we must teach consciousness (and teach our students to be conscious) of *all* the transactions that inform and shape meaning making. To nurture and support an awareness of *all* transactions begins with consciousness for how a text is working on the self. Literature is not about reading for information; it is about an experience. Emotions are the beginning, as in “I felt this” and “what did you feel?” But then we have to go beyond that to explore the undecidability of the text, the space beyond language, the fact that texts push you to recognize your agency as a human being capable of aesthetic response, the agency of others, and the society in which we live. What *ought* that society to be? Literature can push us into politics and places where *right* and *wrong* can be muddled. For me, emotions are a good place to start because of their transactional nature. And this is most apparent when it comes to reading genocide literature with teens.

#### **G. The Ethics of Reading Genocide Literature**

What happens to schema-oriented reading pedagogy when the state mandates students *to look* at the darkest deeds of humankind and *to listen* to stories of victims remembering the unimaginable? Some aspects of genocide are quantifiable. We know, for instance, the approximate number of victims of the Holocaust and Rwandan genocide. However, much of what is most important to comprehend about genocide defies measurement. The experience of reading *Tree Girl*, a fictional account of the Guatemalan genocide, alongside my students is visceral and perplexing. Readers, including me, feel sympathy for the victims and are outraged by the injustice, but even those descriptors are insufficient to capture the range of aesthetic responses students experience when reading genocide literature.

I can understand why when reading genocide literature teachers tend to gravitate to novel study guides focusing on text structure, symbolism, and close reading; such methods distance the

visceral and make neat the perplexing. But genocide literature, because of the scale and degree of the horrors it depicts, compels some kind of aesthetic response and reminds us, as human beings sharing this space of the classroom that we have been unethical in our pedagogy by pushing aside conversations about how a text represents the world, how a text evokes our aesthetic responses, and what our responsibility is to the text, to ourselves, and to those who are reading alongside us in the classroom and beyond. Our methods must support students in reading genocide literature and ultimately reading other texts in the world (beyond the classroom) not so that they will accept whatever society accepts but so that they can contemplate what society *ought* to accept. Genocide literature illuminates state violence in the most extreme ways, and reading genocide literature with our students illuminates the need to rethink how we understand the reading process, how we teach literature in the modern English classroom, and how we read beyond the classroom . Beyond the classroom, texts (books, news media, social media, film, images) not only evoke aesthetic responses from their audiences; they represent events and life in potentially narrow and unethical ways. If we want our students to be able to recognize how all texts are working on them to comprehend the world in certain ways, we have to nurture a disposition to notice their aesthetic response (emotional and experiential) and then go beyond to consider the ways in which texts are constructed and the reasons why they were constructed in such a way (see chapter four on rhetoricality).

My theory, transactional consciousness, depends on transactional reading because such reading emphasizes peoples' relationships to one another and thereby works against violence. Reading ethically, reading in ways that emphasize our relationship with other people, needs to explore all that enters into transactions: the writer and her place in the world, the subject, the genre, the text structure, the reader and her place in the world, the reader's emotional experience

during reading, the community of readers, and then how transactions continue and even transform with new readings. But there are even more transactions to consider, for ethical reading means that the reader is responsible for how she responds and what she does and does not do with the new experiences and knowledge gleaned from reading. For example, when we read about racism in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, transactional consciousness would compel us to consider our own interactions with people of races different than our own and what we can do to improve equity and justice among racial groups.

Teachers possess a powerful role in the teaching and learning about genocide. Yair Auron, an Israeli historian specializing in Holocaust and Genocide Studies and author of *The Pain of Knowledge*, agrees there are consequences to every pedagogical choice. When it comes to teaching about the Holocaust and genocide, Auron considers moral lessons more than historical events as it explores notions of reaffirmation, recognition and deterrence. Teachers are, essentially, ethically implicated in all the choices they make when teaching, but teaching about genocide highlights this issue because teachers are “agents of memory.” For Auron, an agent of memory acts on behalf of the past, remembering and accounting for that “which happened” and representing in such a way as to keep the past from being forgotten. Agents of memory take many forms, e.g., education systems, literary and artistic creations, myths (including ceremonies, symbols, and monuments), and the media. Auron explains, “Many of these agents of memory use the past, at times, for their own purposes, manipulating and even creating memories as the means for setting the national – and even the world – agenda” (xiv). And, agendas can serve opposing causes.

Teachers are agents of memory because students with no memory of the Guatemalan genocide, for example, will have *the* one that a teacher facilitated. What causes will this memory

serve? In chapter four, I will discuss how various agents of memory have taken up the word genocide with specific and opposing causes, but here, I want to emphasize the teacher's responsibility to recognize how certain ways of reading can perpetuate narrow or partial understanding of this most complex and horrific human act. Teachers have the opportunity to embrace their role as agents of memory by dedicating their instruction to the transactions that make up society, sometimes ethical and sometimes not. For nearly twenty-five years since the mandate to teach about the Holocaust (1990) and fifteen years since the mandate to teach about genocide (2005), conscious or not, willing or not, teachers have been agents of memory for victims and survivors when they teach genocide literature (and even other trauma literature). The question is how teachers can take up this position more consciously and then teach their students to be agents of memory for the subjects of everything they read and see in the world.

Reading genocide literature with young readers has helped me to recognize the value of reader response in meaning making and how students can be co-agents of memory alongside one another in the classroom. In this section of this chapter, I will illuminate ethical dimensions of transactional reading theory and how they have worked in my eighth grade classroom. First, I will elaborate Rosenblatt's aesthetic stance by discussing how the sympathy-eliciting function of genocide narratives prompts deep philosophical questions about how life is represented in art, specifically literature (although we read images and films, as well). Then, I will address critiques of Rosenblatt's theory that "any interpretation goes" by exploring how the community of readers sharing their responses offers opportunities to revise or deepen interpretations.

#### **H. *Tree Girl and the Guatemalan Genocide: Reader Response and Sympathy***

Transactional reading practice helps us understand the importance of people's aesthetic responses as they make meaning in their encounters with texts. Artists of various kinds have



known for a long time that human beings are sufficiently complex that we are informed and motivated by much more than factual information; narratives of lived lives help us understand ourselves and the other not only because of the information gleaned from a story but because of the aesthetic response that a story evokes in a reader or listener. For many English teachers, the power of stories, how we are moved by stories, brought us to this profession. Ironically, the value of learning from and with emotions necessary to cultivate sympathy has been overlooked with standards movements. It is here that I build on and extend Rosenblatt's theory for the modern English classroom.

To begin, I want to make a distinction between *sympathy* and *empathy*. Sympathy is from the Greek words *sym* meaning "together" or "with" and *pathos* meaning "feeling" or "fellow-feeling" (Oxford Dictionaries). It is the perception, understanding, and reaction to the distress or need of another human being. Lauren Wispé's *The Psychology of Sympathy* explains that sympathy has two parts:

[First there is] a heightened awareness of the feelings of the other person, and second, an urge to take whatever actions are necessary to alleviate the other person's plight. These are, respectively, the affective-cognitive and the conative components of sympathy. Taken together, they indicate the suffering of the other person is immediately experienced as something to be alleviated. Thus, sympathy is both a vivid awareness of the other person's pain and the altruistic urge to end it. (68)

Empathy derives from the Ancient Greek word *ἐμπάθεια* (*empathēia*), which means "the ability to understand and share the feelings of another" (Oxford Dictionaries). The term was adapted by Hermann Lotze and Robert Vischer to create the word *Einfühlung* ("feeling into"), which was later translated by Edward B. Titchener into the term empathy. Empathy entails a ready comprehension of another's state; it assumes the position of "been there" and the ability to mutually experience the thoughts, emotions, and direct experience of others. Empathy relies on an emotional response that can only come from personal experiences that approximate the

experiences for whom we have empathy. A great deal of literature invites empathic responses because literature reflects the human experience; however, when it comes to genocide, I want to be careful about assuming that one who did not live through genocide could imagine or project oneself into another person's position or experience. Therefore, when I discuss the value of learning from aesthetic response and sympathy, I am suggesting that teachers and students can learn from the perception, understanding, and reaction *to* the distress of others represented in a text: sympathy. To be clear, I see sympathy as within the frame of a discussion of aesthetic reading, and I am talking about aesthetics as Rosenblatt does, which is to say in terms of a felt emotional connection with people represented in the text and not in terms of beauty. However, there is much to say about the aesthetic of genocide novels, which I will take up in chapter six.

The sympathy-eliciting function of genocide literature has great pedagogical potential. Instead of seeing genocide literature as an information vessel (i.e., containing details and dates of what happened), the reading experience can prompt discussions about how "what happened" is representing to elicit our sympathies and even teach us to respond to human rights violations beyond the text. Reading literary works may build a capacity to develop *ethical* sympathy because we are exposed to and, thus, may become more able to identify with the experiences of others. Reader response first builds a capacity for recognizing inclinations and sentiments similar, different, and even contrary from our own. When we read genocide literature, which represents human rights violations, readers consider the general welfare of the person, historical or fictional, depicted. The nature of sympathy is such that it seems to be inherently ethical. We are aware of the suffering other, and we are aware of our urge to want to alleviate that suffering. However, Wispé explains that sympathy is "behaviorally nonspecific": "It may involve helping or nonhelping, commiserating or standing aloof, loving or ignoring" (70). Indeed, there are

examples where help is necessary but impossible in which case there would not be an effective outlet for the sympathetic urge. Sympathy, then, has its limits, and leaves the sympathizer with the question of what she *ought* to do in the present or in the future. The experience of sympathy, then, cultivates habits of imagination and even future action. Thus, I included the modifier “ethical” to sympathy because I want to call attention to the potential of sympathy to teach us how to relate to others, near and distant. Ethics comes from the Greek word ἠθικός *ethikos* from ἦθος or *ethos* meaning “custom, habit,” and “ethical” is commonly understood as pertaining to or being in accordance with right conduct

In my experience teaching genocide literature in middle school, certain images and events evoke Wispé’s first criteria of sympathy, a heightened awareness of the feelings of the other person or character; however, the second criteria, an urge to alleviate the other person’s plight, is not always noticeable. Without the latter, I worry that our reading of genocide literature can be unethical, for how do we keep the promise of “never again” if we cannot imagine how to alleviate the suffering of others? The modern English teacher, in my view, has an ethical responsibility to find ways to foster in students not just sympathy for the plight of other people, but a habitual inclination to analyze and become conscious of how we are conditioned to respond to human rights violations and scenes of atrocities. Why do we feel apathy towards some issues and outrage towards others? Is it because of our personal experiences and connections to the issue or how the texts are appealing to our sense of sympathy (or some combination of both)? How far to some text or images go to get us to pay attention (i.e., are they egregious or exploitative representations)? What are they asking from us – a reaction, a donation, a vote? By considering the dual criteria of sympathy and the ethics of how texts represent human rights violations, I am hoping to illustrate the importance of transactional consciousness. The point,

then, in emphasizing aesthetic responses during reading is to highlight the emotional transactions involved in making meaning, which then makes it possible to subject these emotional transactions to some kind of analysis, critique, and/or conversation so that we can become more conscious of them. Ethical reading highlights human connections and transactions that occur during the reading process, and having achieved consciousness of the transactions that shape meaning, we recognize our agency in those transactions and ultimately act on what is *good* and *right*.

Since 2006, eighth graders at Lincoln Junior High have read a young adult novel, *Tree Girl* by Ben Mikaelson. Set in the 1980s, *Tree Girl* is the story of Gabriela (Gabi) Flores, an Indio (Mayan) girl living a traditional life in the highlands of Guatemala who is spirited and smart. Gabi practices the art of Mayan weaving, walks hours to sell corn and coffee at the market, and is the only girl in her cantón to attend school where she learns Spanish, a *lingua franca* among over twenty Mayan languages. At the beginning of the novel, Gabi is preparing for her *quinceañera*, her fifteenth birthday, when guerrilla warfare comes to her area. Government soldiers are fighting “Communist” guerrillas and driving the Indios from their land. Mikaelson’s writing is rich with imagery of a world so respected by Mayans: trees that bring Gabi “closer to heaven” winds that “carry the voices of her ancestors,” and “small rivers of tears” that she wipes away with her *huipil* (a woven blouse). The students take to Gabi immediately with a sense of respect for her character such as when she traps a group of troublesome boys in a tree, helps her brother kill a pig for her quinceañera, and teachers younger children at school. When soldiers attack her cantón, when Gabi witnesses a pueblo being burned from the safety of a tree, students are moved and troubled by her vow to never climb another tree. They express sympathy for Gabi’s distress and read on to discover how she will cope with what she has witnessed.

In later chapters of *Tree Girl*, when it becomes clear to the students that the Mayans are being targeted by the Guatemalan government, a few notice the social forces at work -- the classification of Indios and Latinos, the language of dehumanization, the policies to manage and control movement of Mayans, and the systematic mass violence (see chapter four for more on Guatemala). Eighth graders, those who learned about genocide in seventh grade, recognize that Gabi's troubles are just beginning. They anticipate the violence to come, and they revise their understanding of genocide as they compare what they learned and experienced in *Hotel Rwanda* to what they are learning and experiencing in *Tree Girl*. Indeed, students shift between efferent and aesthetic reading stances. Students without prior knowledge or reading experiences about genocide relate Gabi's Guatemalan traditions to their own Mexican traditions or appreciate Mikaelson's use of similes or connect the loss of a parent to the death of Gabi's mother. All of these reader responses are important to finding meaning in *Tree Girl*.

One October morning in 2012, we turned to chapter nine of *Tree Girl*: Just after Gabi's cantón in the highlands of Guatemala had been burned by government forces, Gabi and her younger sister Alicia are making the two hundred mile trek towards Mexico's refugee camps when they come upon a mother in labor. Gabi helps birth the child, but the mother does not survive, and so in order to find food for the baby, Gabi hides her sister and the baby under a bush and goes to a nearby market, a pueblo apparently untouched by the scorched earth policy of the Guatemalan army. There, she meets Mother Lopez, a nun who intended to help Gabi until the soldiers surrounded the market. Gabi runs to safety in the branches of a *machichi* tree, and from above the pueblo, she and we bear witness to the soldiers' systematic massacre of every living being in the pueblo over a two-day period. Here is an excerpt:

The pile of burning bodies made a small hill in the plaza, and a wretched scorched smell filled the air. Those devils would have kept killing if there had been a thousand people,

but by late afternoon every living human and creature had been murdered except me...The men went to the *pilas*, the big washing sinks near the church where women washed their clothes. They shaved their faces and took turns washing the blood from their uniforms and skin so that they could return home to their own wives and children. I know that their souls could not be so easily cleaned. After what had happened, I hoped they were all damned to hell...Climbing that tree had not been an act of bravery. It was the act of a desperate coward. Everyone else had faced the soldiers except me. I had hidden while others died. By being the Tree Girl, I had been a coward. (*Tree Girl* 136-138)

Chapter nine is arguably the most graphic chapter of the novel. Before reading this novel, I sent home a letter explaining my rationale for the novel, inviting parents to read the novel, and offering the opportunity for parents to opt out their child from reading certain chapters. I prefer to be alongside my students reading graphic scenes so that we can experience the text and consider its implications together, but I respect that some students have traumatic pasts that genocidal scenes can trigger. And so in some cases, I conference with students privately about the passages, and we talk about how the author is representing these unimaginable scenes. For the most part, however, students read and are satisfied by the graphic representations of genocide. In fact, one student that morning said, “I love genocide.”

I have heard it before. My gut coils in the moments before I respond; I know this response offers an opportunity to explore how genocide is represented and why. The student’s life experiences, the author’s life experiences, the novel’s subject, the words on the page, my life experiences, the classroom – all these elements are transacting in those moments. Having read *Tree Girl* with hundreds of students, I still experience a pedagogical crisis; I am concerned and even uncertain about the value of violence in young adult literature, but this discomfort pushes me to do the inquiry with the students. This is why “ethical sympathy” is an essential pedagogical force in reading literature. I wondered (and still wonder) if it is it ethical for writers to depict graphics scenes in texts intended for young adult readers (see chapter six). I wonder

why student-readers *want* to read graphic scenes. Moreover, I wonder if it is ethical for me, as an agent of memory, to select a text like *Tree Girl* to remember the Guatemalan genocide.

Sympathy is important because it involves an emotional connection—a feeling *for* — another person (including the person depicted in the text). Ethical sympathy is important because, as a teacher, we want students to develop the urge to alleviate the suffering of others, to feel compelled to think about and imagine how we *ought* to relate to others and what ought to be done to prevent further suffering. But beyond these two separate terms, this phrase is important because ethical sympathy is a kind of transaction that my students and I can think and talk about, and in this way, we foster transactional consciousness.

Understanding the reading process as transactional can help English teachers recognize that students' aesthetic responses to texts begin long before they come to the text; there is a history to their lives for which we, as teachers, cannot wholly account, which students bring to our classrooms and to that which they read. While some students respond to a traumatic scene with deep sympathy, others are excited by it, and still others turn away — distancing themselves from the distress or denying themselves a tear.

Aesthetic responses, once invited into the classroom, invite a more substantial and thorough inquiry and critique of the text. We can look to Holocaust literature scholars to help us understand how our students are responding to genocide literature, why they are responding as they do, and for ideas how to support students in developing a capacity for conscious reading that can draw from and accommodate these emotional responses. Holocaust literature scholars' insights can give us a better understanding of the transactions that our students are participating in as they read genocide literature. Because the purpose of genocide curricula is typically information about what happened, teachers and students overlook the pedagogical potential of

literary discussions to illuminate how and why genocide literature elicits our sympathies. Gary Weissman's *Fantasies of Witnessing: Postwar Efforts to Experience the Holocaust* suggests that some people who study genocide, specifically the Holocaust, have a desire "to feel closer to that horror" (5, 209). Weissman makes clear that all attempts to understand the Holocaust are insufficient; all the films and books and poems can only hope to convey some experience of it, but these, too, are inadequate. Thus, perhaps readers just want to get as close as they can, and for that, they let their hearts race a bit more, open their eyes wider, and respond with heightened emotions.

Another perspective is that students experience the text as a bridge connecting them to the past. Alison Landsberg, in *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*, suggests that readers have benefitted from increased access to film, social media, and Internet access, which has made it possible to learn from pasts that are not theirs. Students bring this experience to their reading. Texts then, works as a prosthesis between an individual and a historical narrative about the past that actually creates an experience and makes it possible for an individual to have a "deep felt memory" of the past that she did not live. From this perspective, readers are making new memories when they read.

Still, emotional responses to literary accounts of genocide expose the challenge writers face, some who are genocide witnesses and others not, as to *how* to represent suffering. Brett Kaplan might suggest our students are responding to "unwanted beauty." Kaplan, in *Unwanted Beauty: Aesthetic Pleasure in Holocaust Representation*, argues aesthetic pleasure deepens the search of understanding; "pleasure" is a catalyst for understanding in part because it makes the reader wonder, as I did above, if there is something indecent or unethical about this beauty (47). Imagine reading these scholarly texts alongside genocide literature with our students and



engaging in discussions about how the texts are accessing our pasts and eliciting our sympathies. Thus, one aspect of the aesthetic, as I and Rosenblatt use this term, is critical sympathy, an aesthetic response which leads to this desire for understanding.

Yet one more way reading response informs meaning making is to consider the response as a consequence of what Wendy Hesford explains in *Spectacular Rhetorics*. Hesford suggests that Western readers have developed a habituated response to stories about trauma, specifically because the spectacular figure of the exploited or violated person is most often depicted as foreign, i.e., racially or ethnically different and non-autonomous. Much literature read in schools tells a heroic narrative in which a Western figure saves the foreign victim or a transformative narrative that, according to Hesford, “distracts attention from the severe poverty and exploitation to which the [victims] are subjected”(175). Western readers project their lives as that which the victim should hope for (175). What Hesford describes is a phenomenon that I have occasionally seen in my own classroom. It is not uncommon for me to hear my compassionate students want to bring trauma victims to America for a better life or to, because of this aesthetic pleasure, feel more grateful for their lives. One former student, Rose, who is now a freshman said: “... all these people were dying...and here I am in school and I can learn while someone else can’t...it’s hard for me but I can’t give up. It’s like doing the work for that person. They can’t do it, so I’ll do it for them.” While Hesford’s insights uncover a potential danger of emotional responses to genocide literature, such responses do not necessarily encourage a “hero complex” that detracts from the victims’ suffering.

In sum, then, the sympathy-eliciting function of literature has the potential to not only connect us to experiences we have not lived but to truly illuminate habits of mind and increase consciousness of how our experience transact with the images and texts we read. Misson and

Morgan, in *Critical Literacy and the Aesthetic: Transforming the English Classroom* (2006), capture the potential of the literary experiences well here:

[Readers] find themselves in sympathy with the worldview being represented in [the text], or they find it enlarges their worldview. Having consented to be managed by the text in this way, readers take delight in all that it has to offer. And so they feel replete as readers who have been enabled to have their desires evoked and satisfied, perhaps in new or intensified ways, and who have been shown a world whose ideas resonate with or extend their ideas of how things are or can be. As they sense the congruence of the form that realises [sic] its world, their ideological alignment matches their aesthetic engagement with the text. (97)

## **I. Beyond the Self: Reading with Agents of Memory**

Up until this point, I've been talking about how aesthetic reading encourages sympathy and prompts discussion related to how our sympathies are elicited by texts. If we stopped our discussion here, it would be easy to think that aesthetic readings are limited to a transaction between an individual reader and the text. However, an aspect of transactional, aesthetic reading that Rosenblatt does not emphasize but that I wish to underscore here is the way in which transactional reading theory implicitly values community and the reading process. Transactional reading values community in the reading process. The reader benefits from reading in a social context like the English classroom so that the reading process goes beyond a single reader's experience to include other processes and experiences. While the transactional reading process values the individual reader's prior experiences and emotional responses, it also recognizes how experiences and emotions potentially bias or distort understanding. Extending the reading process beyond the self helps readers recognize how prior experiences construct certain reading experiences and interpretations.

A chief concern that has prompted the shift to close reading and New Criticism is misreading or how a reader's prior readings or experiences can interfere with comprehension.

Reading within a community calls attention to I.A. Richards' concept of "mnemonic

irrelevance,” an interpretation unsupported by the text. Rosenblatt acknowledges the Richards’ concern related to relying on readers’ experiences to make the text come alive, but suggests any potential problems are inevitable and even beneficial. She writes:

Sometimes emphasis on the negative influence of the reader’s personal concerns obscures their positive contribution. The reader’s fund of relevant memories makes possible any reading at all. Without linkages with the past experiences and present interests of the reader, the work will not come alive for him, or, rather, he will not be prepared to bring it to life. (77)

Personal associations can explain why one student values a certain book and returns to it again and again. Tears, giggles, or a coiling gut are signs of a work’s power over us. We do not want to deny a reader’s right to such experiences. Yet, readers do have a responsibility to determine how connotations drawn from personal memories are relevant to the reading experience, and here we see the value of reading in a social context: deliberation, which promotes consciousness. In other words, deliberation is the solution to the kinds of haphazard interpretations that Richards cautions us about. The sympathy-eliciting function of narrative might mean the reader projects something out of her experiences that was only vaguely suggested by the text. While this might be considered a mis-reading of the text (but is still, perhaps valuable to the reader’s self), in the English classroom, there are other readers weighing in. It is the teacher’s role to facilitate the discussion, to know her students, and be responsive to their individual and social needs as they make and revise meaning. Community, therefore, heightens consciousness in our reading practices and mediates the memories that become integrated as new knowledge and experience.

Reading in community can help ameliorate potential problems of misunderstanding and misinterpretation while allowing for alternate interpretations. As Auer notes, human beings, as “agents of memory,” can use the past for our own purposes; we can manipulate and even create memories. Auer’s work characterizes the formulation of the memory of the Holocaust as a

process of competing agents of memory noting education systems, literary and artistic creations, and media. The agents of memory may serve different ideological and political interests, even opposing causes. How do we teach our students to navigate, negotiate, and participate as co-agents of memory if they do not develop transactional consciousness? If students consistently read within a community, they will benefit from the backgrounds, experiences, and intellectual and emotional responses of many. Teaching within the “inter” (between, among) framework rather than the “trans” (across, beyond, through) framework in public schools constrains the potential of the reading process and the potential of the English classroom to teach students to recognize the transactional nature of meaning.

Aesthetic response makes possible a literary judgment and, according to Rosenblatt, “the honest recognition that one’s own reaction is not in itself sufficient to ensure sound critical opinion” (1938, 72). The community and the recognition and respect for other judgments deepened our understanding of ourselves and the text. During the class experience of reading *Tree Girl*, students were initially captivated by the narrative but became protective of their sympathies as the narrative unfolded. In my view, the spectacle of violence functioned as a catalyst for critique with very little guidance from me. The students’ emotional responses –some they could articulate but more that I could not see nor could they name – elicited sympathy for the characters which led to questions, critical conversations, and inquiry. Students were questioning the factors that may have influenced an author to create text; because they saw the text as something created, it was open to critique. For example, recognizing how a fictional account of genocide evokes such real sympathies for an imagined character, eighth grade readers began to question the reliability of Mikaelson’s fictional Mayan narrator. The varied aesthetic responses to *Tree Girl* transacted with what students had learned about the structure of narrative

and the features of genre. Mikaelson, in the book's dedication, writes, "This book is dedicated to the real Tree Girl, who courageously shared her difficult story with me. She did so through many tears, from the protection of a safe house, during a long Guatemala night. Her true experiences inspired this story." Whose narrative is at work here? Recognizing the novel as historical fiction, students felt compelled to know the truth, to understand exactly what happened to Tree Girl and decipher "truth" and fiction. They wondered why "the real Tree Girl" could not write her story, which prompted discussions about *testimonio* (see chapter five) and how authors mediating a subject's experience can enhance or detract from truth. In addition, students recognized the transactional nature of the nations depicted: Guatemala, the United States, and even Mexico acting and being acted upon because of social, political, and economic issues. And we all experienced the transactional reading process – making and revising meaning together. Our work had actually created more gaps than it filled.

Questions about School of Americas, the Genocide Convention, and the massacre at Rio Negro led students to do more reading. Our classroom became a dynamic site of inquiry. We developed a wall of articles on various subjects related to Guatemala (e.g., the people, the culture, the food, the music, the art) and genocide (e.g., the Genocide Convention, the International Criminal Courts). I ordered books and DVDs from local libraries, and created an online file with images and videos from my own travels to Guatemala. Students selected lines of inquiry that resonated, took notes, created projects with their findings, and made these public to teach others what they discovered. For example, one student wanted to learn more about the refugee camps where Gabi lived after her cantón was burned down by government forces. She compared *Tree Girl's* depiction of the camps with articles about the living conditions of refugees citing disease, death, scarcity of food, depression, and trauma. Another student recognized

Gabi's distress as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and read psychology papers about war trauma, public health reports, and articles about the treatment of PTSD. Inspired by the images of weaving I shared with students, one girl viewed Facebook page on Guatemala's weaving cooperatives, watched a video about back-strap weaving, and read a chapter on how the symbols woven into the garments represent different aspects of a women and girls' lives. Students turned their findings into new, original collections of texts for others to experience. We posted all these inquiry projects along the back wall of the classroom, and over several days students unpinned a project, took it to their seats, and read. Students were engaging in a multitude of transactions that were initiated because of aesthetic responses; without that real impact between the book and the reader, there would have been no process of meaning making to carry to the community. The transactions among the community were more productive and complex because students came with the necessary condition of judgment – an emotional reaction – and the recognition that that their own reaction was not in itself sufficient to ensure sound critical opinion (Rosenblatt).

By participating in the personal and social transactions that were evident in H103 that year, I think students were doing the sort of reading that contributed to their growth as ethical members of society because they seemed to become conscious of the multitude of transactions shaping and attempting to shape both their reading practices and their understanding of society. They were taking responsibility for their reading and meaning-making.

If students were to have read *Tree Girl* through schema theory (as described above), these transactions would have been more limited and controlled. For example, study guides and assessments that focus on vocabulary, character traits, symbol tracking, and comprehension limit the learning outcomes by constraining the reading event to just those objectives; furthermore, the schema approach reinforces a view of literature as a conduit of information. Yes, these are

transactions, but they exclude aesthetic responses, alternate interpretations, and further inquiry. One *Tree Girl* test that I found online, available for purchase, was a forty question objective test, which included true/false questions, character-quotation matching, and sequencing events (*TeachersPayTeachers*). The answer key was included. (As a side note, the creator of this test described the novel as a “true story” rather than a story inspired by “true experiences” told to the author by “the real Tree Girl” as explained in the novel’s dedication). Reading *Tree Girl* to achieve a “right” answer or understanding of the novel and using an objective test to assess students’ right reading would have made it easy for me to measure which students were “right” readers. However, I would have excluded the multitude of transactions described above. In essence, when English teachers set objectives for reading, we are making judgments about the purpose of reading and the value of literature. The question is whether or not we see what we do in the classroom as having implications beyond the classroom.

Thus far, I have been showing transactional reading theory as limited to what happens within the classroom. What is the purpose of this new knowledge, these new experiences? Does the learning stop with the test, or does it persist beyond the walls of the school? Students, like teachers, are agents of memory; the reading event becomes part of their prior knowledge, their background, their life experiences, and so when a student learns about genocide, she carries this “burden” of knowing. How can they carry it? How can they share it? Just like the transactional reading process begins before a student encounters a text, it does not end with the last page of the text. Some students felt compelled to tell others, beyond their classmates, what they learned; as agents of memory, they felt a responsibility to talk about what has been accepted by society and what *ought* to be accepted because they were engaged in and increasingly conscious of the multiple transactions they were participating in as a community of readers.

The extended social transactions were in evidence at the University of Illinois at Chicago's (UIC) Annual Youth Development Summit. Because of my associations with UIC, I became aware of the annual Youth Development Summit. The summit supports youth-led social change and is an opportunity for youth development and community activists to come together, share their expertise, and learn from one another. In 2012, I wrote a proposal, and several students were invited to speak at the Youth Voice in Action Summit. Four students spent a week preparing for the presentation organizing how best to uncover for their audience how they came to discover what globalization was and how it is impacting people around the world, specifically the Maya. The audience knew they were witnessing something both remarkable and ordinary when one student said, "You know, America is living in a bubble. And we have to pop that bubble." For many audience members, this was the first they heard of the U.S. training and arming the Guatemalan military that killed over 200, 000 Maya in the 1980s. It was remarkable to hear how articulate these teens were, but it was ordinary in the sense that every student is capable of uncovering, preparing, and presenting research publicly. It should not have been so astonishing, and the fact that people were thinking this was so extraordinary, me included, is an indication that society needs to create more space for youth voices to be heard and for students to experience their role as agents of memory. In my view, the students' transactional readings contributed to their being able to demonstrate their ethical sympathy in this public space, beyond the classroom, and so transactional reading is the foundation of transactional consciousness and the English classroom.

Understanding the reading process as transactional, recognizes that while emotional connections enrich the reading experience, emotional responses invite inquiry. The English classroom can and must call attention to how a text is working on and with prior experiences.



Our work as modern English teachers, then, is invite aesthetic response to the texts we teach so as to nurture sympathy for and recognition of others. Of course, relating to others and negotiating meaning with others is not without conflict; in fact, as agents of memory students will encounter opposing ideas and causes that will call into question interpretations and even ethical principles. As I began this chapter, ethics is not a matter of accepting what *is* but in deliberating what *ought* to be, and I think the English classroom is a *good* place to practice.

**J. Conclusion: Moving Toward Transactional Consciousness**

I know many English teachers have found a lot of success teaching literature from a novel study guide. They swear by New Criticism and look forward to discussing the symbolism of Robert Frost's "Nothing Gold Can Stay" in *The Outsiders*, the biblical references in *Lord of the Flies*, and roaring twenties for *The Great Gatsby*. Building background knowledge, pre-teaching vocabulary, and giving comprehension quizzes have worked for many teachers and students. I also realize that in these classrooms, teachers are inviting reader response and having rich discussions about the universal themes in such literature. While students are working for a grade or learning how to make inferences, they are also learning to appreciate literature and perhaps love reading. I do, however, think that reading genocide literature with our students requires a shift in pedagogy. It does not mean that English teachers have to play the role of history teachers, but it does mean that English teachers will have to consider how the past is represented in literature (e.g., memoir and fiction). It does mean that teachers and students will feel discomfort, even crises, as they rethink the purpose for reading and the guiding ethos of schooling. What are we preparing students for other than a grade, other than a test that decides if they are ready to go to college or participate in an exclusively economic life? How should the English classroom be structured to reflect the values we want to see and experience in society?

Current reading trends omit and constrict aspects of the reading process that I have shown to be vital areas of inquiry in favor of testing.

There is something about this space of readerly discomfort that prompts English teachers to turn away from teaching English, specifically genocide literature, with transactional reading practices. Inga Clendinnen in *Reading the Holocaust* might describe this as the “gorgon effect.” She explains that the gorgon effect is the “sickening of imagination and curiosity and the draining of will which afflicts so many of us when we try to look at the persons or processes implicated in [atrocities]” (7). Clendinnen asserts that we cannot afford to be blinded into silence or reverence by humanity’s atrocities and, thus, from changing things. Nevertheless, oftentimes people turn away from terrible things. We look away because it is unimaginable or unbelievable or even if we just feel like we cannot make a difference. The gorgon petrifies the human in itself and its prey, or those who look into its eyes. However, while it may be difficult to understand genocide, it may be more difficult to say “I didn’t know that happened,” as it was for me and why I took up this subject for a dissertation.

Phillip Gourevitch in *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families* writes about his study of the Rwandan genocide, “The best reason I have for looking closely at Rwanda’s stories is that ignoring them makes me even more uncomfortable about existence and my place in it. The horror interests me only insofar as a precise memory of the offense is necessary to understand its legacy” (19). For Clendinnen and for Gourevitch, genocide is a politic of seeing: if we want to destroy the gorgon – systems that exclude certain knowledges and people – we need to stare back and witness the practices that perpetuate it. As teachers, we are in the position to hold up the gorgon for others to witness and to hopefully

intervene. Thus, the guiding ethos of education shifts from participation in an economic life to participation in an inclusive, global life.

Essentially, I see the pursuit of an economic life and schema-oriented pedagogy as similar in the sense that quantifiable, measureable methods are all part of the standards, testing, progress regime, the aim of which seems to be economic advancement. The shift in pedagogy from schema-oriented methods to inclusive, transactional-oriented methods means calling attention to how the text is constructed by encouraging literary discussions about the ethics of sympathy, of aesthetic responses; it means reading within a community to make and revise meaning together; and it means taking those reading practices beyond the classroom to public spaces and ultimately to how we read social media, images, films, and the news and become responsible for our reading.

The aim of reading genocide literature with transactional reading practices, then, is not to just open students to the spectacle of atrocities in the classroom or to draw out sympathies or to get students to talk to one another. Rather, as Wendy Hesford suggests, the aim is to incite the potential for intelligent social action in response to the social needs revealed by our reading experiences, to move beyond recognition (198). Such a move cannot happen when teachers and students expect logical, evaluative statements in response to reading rather than, as Misson and Morgon put it, more “immediate, inchoate, and emotional responses” (108).

Asserting that teachers and students should trouble correct, compliant, or resistant readings, I recognize that I am attempting to make legible the reading process and suggesting another framework. In my view, the rhetoric of modernity celebrating progress and development while hiding the negative consequences of progressive systems requires teachers and students to be explicit about the sources for one’s expectations and preferences for reading. The work for

teachers is to develop transactional consciousness and ways to illuminate the sources' affective, cognitive, aesthetic, and ideological grounds and the interplay among these – how they transact and shape each other. I have emphasized here the affective response because I think it is, first and foremost, a necessary ethical disposition to cultivate in our students. We are emotional beings who are the audience of a multitude of messages and images on a daily basis, but those messages are not without bias, and our reactions are not without ethical implications.

In this chapter, I introduced the first aspect of transactional consciousness: the transactional reading process, a process that recognizes and values the way readers' experiences transact with a text and with other readers to make meaning. I have argued that schema theory and close reading methods have minimized methods that engage a reader's aesthetic response in favor of methods that support readers in arriving at a "right" interpretation, which compromises transactional reading. In my view and others (Rosenblatt, Misson and Morgan, Hesford), texts are more than information vessels; words move readers to feel, to respond, and to act. Furthermore, texts carry memories that serve political and ideological causes as agents of memory (Auron). Ultimately, readers carry their reading experience and knowledge gleaned from their unique reading process to other texts (literature, magazines, blogs), to media (images, film, video games), and to social experiences (friends, family, travel). My central argument in chapter three, then, is that the transactional reading process is a more ethical way of teaching English because it values an individual's aesthetic experience, builds a capacity for sympathy, and includes others in making and revising meaning. The English teacher's role is to support students in becoming conscious of all the transactions that shape our understanding of society and of our place in it. Reading response, however, also has its limitations if we are to prepare

students to ethically read, participate in, and even transform a globalized world competing for access and control of shared resources (e.g., land, energy, technology).

In the chapters that follow, I offer three additional features of the modern English classroom that will illuminate the ethics of reading and offer ways of reading that nurture and support our students' capacity for transactional consciousness: rhetoricality, witnessing, and the conscious imagination. The next chapter considers rhetoricality and how agents of memory use the past to set agendas that serve opposing causes beyond the classroom. I suggest that beyond reader response, students must learn to read rhetorically.

#### IV. RHETORICALITY: READING “GENOCIDE” BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

Once we add the context of race and ethnicity into the various definitions of murder, the door to more dramatic definitions opens. Merriam-Webster defines genocide as the killing of people that are part of a political, cultural, or racial group. This seems to be the most open and straightforward definition of genocide. Encyclopedia Britannica’s definition requires the murders to be systematic to be labeled genocide. A pogrom requires organized killing of helpless people, usually because of race or religion. And “ethnic cleansing” doesn’t necessarily require murder (it can be “removal”) but for those displaced it is likely tantamount to both.

-- Mallory Moss, “The Language of Genocide”

While language names the beauty and horror in the world, language also constrains, limits, and excludes in the process of naming. As Moss describes, naming an event “murder,” “genocide,” “pogrom,” or “ethnic cleansing” may seem like progress to those doing the naming (or “straightforward”), but for the “helpless people” and “those displaced,” there is nothing straightforward about “the language of genocide.” As teachers of English, we recognize the power of words to move our hearts and mind, but as I’ve been arguing in this dissertation, we have an ethical responsibility to teach students how to read ethically, i.e., how to be conscious of the multiple transactions at work in any reading even and responsible for how we read and participate in the transactions that use language to interpret our world. Ethical reading is first and foremost about recognizing how language affects us, but to stop there would be to turn away from the situations and agents of memory who are using language to purport certain ideas, achieve certain outcomes, and push agendas – sometimes ethical, sometimes not. Once students recognize how they are responding to texts, the next step is to recognize how the language constrains ideas, limits events, and excludes people or ideas in the service of the writer’s (agent of memory’s) cause or purpose, i.e., the rhetoric of the text. Transactional consciousness theory, thus, nurtures in readers a capacity for recognizing rhetoricality.

Because ethical reading goes beyond any single reading event and beyond the classroom, this chapter explores what is to be gained from extending our pedagogical focus to rhetoricality. I draw upon Auron's concept of "agents of memory" (chapters two, three, and four) to demonstrate how agents of memory use the past, at times, for their own purposes, manipulating and even creating memories as the means for setting a national agenda. It is here that I make clear that English teachers are not merely preparing students to earn a good grade or pass a high stakes test any more than we are merely teaching reading as reader response. We are preparing students to be ethical members of society who understand how agents of memory (e.g., people, texts, media) can serve opposing causes and how agents of memory implicate readers in sometimes unethical agendas.

While reader response is more student-centered in that students are learning to be conscious of how a text affects them, rhetoricality cultivates an awareness of other agents of memory who use language to represent events and their experiences of such events and how that emotional response is evoked by an agent of memory (writer). Agents of memory can manipulate language as a means for setting social and political agendas or their own ideas for what society *ought* to be. It is not enough for students to be able to read for school; they have to recognize how texts are always, somehow manipulating or influencing their own ideas of what is *good* and *right*. Rhetoricality is a view of rhetoric as a general condition of human experience and action. Ethical reading, then, values an individual's aesthetic experience, builds a capacity for sympathy, includes others in making and revising meaning *and* entails an awareness of rhetoric and how we use language to represent our perspective of life and the world. Thus, the second aspect of my theory, transactional consciousness, goes beyond the classroom to explore how language is used to construct and transform the human condition: rhetoricality (Bender and

Wellbery, 1990; Kastely, 1997; Neinkamp, 2001; Richards, 2008; Bender, 2012; Rumsey, 2013).

In this chapter, I will demonstrate, through a close look at the word “genocide,” how teachers can develop their students’ awareness of rhetoric in language and texts. English teachers unfamiliar with genocide will learn about genocidal processes while, at the same time, participate in a rhetorical analyses. I consider how the word “genocide” demonstrates the darker side of progress: how a word, such as “genocide,” both names processes that some members of the international community have since promised to prevent and punish while also demonstrating how such naming makes it possible for different agents of memory to utter “genocide” for a variety of purposes, including retaliation. As I will explain below, rhetoricality is about recognizing the way language at once names and constrains our world, and it is our task as teachers to teach “language in all its manifestations” so that our students will go out into the world reading and writing with this in mind.

#### **A. What is Rhetoricality?**

Rhetoric. “Rhetoric” is not a word most middle school English classrooms use when teaching reading or literature although I have met a few middle school composition teachers who indeed introduce students to the rhetorical triangle (i.e., ethos, pathos, and logos) as part of the writing process. Rhetoric, as understood in most English classrooms, is primarily a set of strategies to make arguments more effective, and the word “rhetoric” often implies persuasive communication or even deceit (especially when used in the media to characterize political discourse). When it comes to reading in the English classroom, however, schema theory tends to hide the rhetorical nature of a text because its purpose is to achieve a “right” reading. To teach reading without attending to the rhetoric of a text is unethical in that it overlooks how a text is attempting to modify or transform a person’s perspective.



Rhetoric is inherently transactional. Any consideration of rhetoric includes an author's intention and the way her message is shaped and received by an audience. Texts, meaning print in addition to images, film, and social media, assume a "rhetorical situation," which basically refers to any set of circumstances where *someone* is using *some form* of communication to modify or transform the perspective of another (i.e., audience). The set of circumstances should be the focus of reading so that students can recognize how *someone* is attempting to modify their perspective or move them to act. A reader, our student, who recognizes herself as part of the reading process is always already involved rhetorically.

Beyond a simplistic understanding of rhetoric as the persuasive qualities of speech or as a set of techniques used to manipulate others regardless of ethical concerns, rhetoric is about the human condition, meaning the way in which people come to view themselves in relation to others and the world. According to Burke, rhetoric is how people *identify* with one another – how people encourage one another to understand things from one another's perspectives. Understood in this way, rhetoric is not the study of one particular address, but a "general *body of identifications* that owe their convincingness much more to trivial repetition and dull daily reinforcement than to exceptional rhetorical skill" (Burke's emphasis 26). In other words, rhetoric includes how people align themselves with certain interests or groups as the result of repeated, mundane, and usually unremarkable communicative actions. In my view, rhetorical consideration in reading pedagogy illuminates perspectives, interests, and motives, for, as Burke explains, "however, 'pure' one's motives may be actually, the impurities of identification lurking about the edges of such situations introduce a typical Rhetorical wrangle of sort that can never be settled once and for all, but belongs in the field of moral controversy..." (26). Genocide is an extreme example, but it offers us an example for how notions of identity produce conditions

of inclusion and exclusion and ultimately moral controversy. For Burke, rhetoric deals with classification and considers how individuals are at odds with one another. And when language is used to name this group Hutu and that group Tutsi, for example, people become identified with groups that are at odds with one another (22). For Burke, then, there can be no identification without division, identification's "ironic counterpart," and division in the hands (and tongues) of skilled rhetors can bring human beings to commit "millions of cooperative acts" of the most tragic kind (22-23).

Burke explores rhetoric as *beyond* a set of strategies, techniques or elocutionary options, and I am suggesting that this be our approach to teaching rhetoric in the modern English classroom. Nienkamp explains that rhetoric was generally understood as persuasive speaking and writing, but that it can be understood as "a concern with how language in all of its manifestations influences humans (and sometimes other sentient beings)" (3). To consider "language in all its manifestations" in light of Mignolo's framework for understanding modernity means to recognize the rhetoric of "progress." In the name of "progress," schools have constrained reading practices, and in the name of "progress," other institutions have created environmental waste, economic collapse, climate change, war, and genocide. The modernist perspective that progress is always "good" has hidden the consequences or the darker side of progress. My theory, transactional consciousness, invokes the term "rhetorality" to recognize all the conditions of the modern world, to highlight the transactional nature of language, to build in students a capacity for recognizing rhetorality, and to value rhetoric in the modern English classroom.

"Rhetorality" is "rhetoric" plus the affix "ality," which indicates "having the properties of." Rhetorality is an expanded view of rhetoric as an inherent feature of language or as a condition of our existences as language-using creatures. The term was first used by Bender and

Wellbery in 1990: “We are dealing no longer with a specialized technique of instrumental communication, but rather with a general condition of human experience and action. We have designated as ‘rhetoricity’ this new category – the category that opens the field of modern rhetorical research” (38). In *The Ends of Rhetoric: History, Theory, Practice*, Bender and Wellbery tell the history of rhetoric as a practice of political and aesthetic discourse that was displaced because new attitudes toward discourse arose during Enlightenment and Romanticism. There were five conditions that prompted a shift from rhetorical tradition:

The objectivity promised by positivist inquiry was seen to be impossible as the theories of uncertainty argued that the perspective of the subject could not be eliminated; the centered subject was displaced by the disciplines of social sciences; the rational subject of politics was complicated by the clear evidence that political debate is not a rational exchange but a stylized contest; print as the predominant media was challenged by the emergence of new electronic media; and the nation as the center of cultural production was contested by the international character of the late capitalist marketplace. (23-24)

Rhetoricity sees language as exceeding thought; language is “the name of the rootlessness of our being” (29). In other words, language merely represents events, and rhetoricity calls attention to the rhetorical view of language (and texts constructed by language) as not real but representations of the real. Jennifer Richards, in *Rhetoric*, expresses the value of this new category, “The consequences of this emphasis on ‘rhetoricity’ for the possibility of knowledge are far-reaching...The social fictions we create are inescapable because they are endemic to language itself, which is the only tool we have to comprehend our world” (133). This notion of “social fictions” calls attention to the provisional nature of knowing; any attempt to understand something is dependent on language, which is never quite adequate to the expression of its meaning. Richard’s point, however, overlooks the value of other forms of expression such as art and music, which illuminate the potential and limitations of language. Indeed, art and music express aspects of human experience that are inexpressible in language alone.

In offering rhetoricality as an aspect of transactional consciousness I do not mean to suggest that the traditions of rhetoric do not have a place in the modern English classroom. In other words, while I do not object to traditional rhetoric, I see considerations of rhetoricality as preserving and expanding people's subjectivity. In *Rethinking the Rhetorical Tradition*, James Kastely suggests that when we shift from rhetoric as the art of an agent to rhetoricality as a feature of discourse in general, "the issues of justice and responsibility emerge as problems: can the world still be conceived as a scene for action once subjectivity is pluralized and diffused" (222). Rhetoricality, then, in my view and that of Kastely, is a new rhetoric that "can use the classical tradition and its skeptical challengers as resources for discovery of the possibility for action within a world constituted, in part, by and through rhetoricality" (222). I like this idea of a "skeptical challenger" because skepticism is vital for an individual to understand herself as a subject with agency and responsibility. As a member of society who identifies with certain groups, and as a member who is addressed by rhetors (e.g., state leaders, politicians, reporters, novelists, filmmakers, photographers), we have a responsibility to recognize how our cooperation with certain ideals contributes to both unity and division (Burke). Acts of exclusion, oppression and domination against individuals occur because such action is part of a system where social groups and their hierarchy are produced and positioned by rhetoricality; it is a social fiction that social groups are not ontologically equal, and yet how language is used can make that fiction very painful. Thus, an awareness of rhetoricality helps us understand how and why social hierarchies are established and maintained in addition to how we are implicated based on with whom and what we identify.

This new rhetoric can use the classical tradition of rhetorical strategies and skepticism to expose systems of power and provide resources for people constituted by ideology to listen to

and talk with those positioned variously within this hierarchy. What is essential to understanding rhetoricality in light of transactional consciousness is the recognition of the self and the other as *positioned* by social agents. Therefore, to teach rhetoricality is to teach readers to recognize subjectivity, to be skeptical, to call into question their own conclusions as constructions, to critique positioning, and to critique and uncover the darker side of progress.

On the surface, reader response (chapter three) and rhetoricality (chapter four) may seem very different. With the former, aesthetic reading and reading response are accessible by any child. We don't read literature for the information it contains (though we can and will glean information). We read literature in order to read it, to have the experience one has in reading, to subject ourselves to the experiences and how it may or may not affect us. Rosenblatt's transactional theory focuses on the reader's response to a literary experience, but if we stopped there, we might be accused of a different but still narrow reading, and we might be accused of viewing reader response rather simplistically, as in without ethical implications. Any reading experience, however, is made possible because of language, because of some other person's use of that language. When we think of language working on our students, engaging them in certain ways for certain purposes, we can see that subjectivity is much more complicated than emotions. In addition to responding as readers to the text in an emotional or aesthetic sense, students must *also* understand themselves as reading rhetorically. Ethical reading depends on students being able to recognize that they are a targeted audience, targeted by agents of memory with sometimes unethical agendas.

Again, I use the subject of genocide to illuminate this concept of rhetoricality because the word "genocide" was created to name the ideology and systems that excluded certain groups of people in the most extreme example of social injustice. The inquiry that follows considers how

the word “genocide” is used across contexts by various rhetors to construct certain ways of understanding genocide and to produce seemingly contrary actions. The naming of genocide after the Holocaust assigned a sound, a word to represent that which is unspeakable; the naming, then, has made it possible to talk about genocide and to use the word to represent certain experiences. However, I hope to show that the English classroom has to go beyond language as communication or as a means to transfer information; if rhetoricality is our condition, then our work must account for how every speaker, utterance, and situation that came before and after are transacting to represent not only a condition of human experience but actions that perpetuate disparate conditions. To be clear, what I see as the benefit of teaching students to understand the rhetoricality of objects, events, and people is that rhetoricality highlights the vast number and type of transactions involved in the social construction of the world and our understanding of it. This is why this concept of rhetoricality is essential to my theory; it helps us achieve a transactional consciousness.

Through a series of brief case studies, I hope to illuminate the importance of rhetoricality as a dimension of transactional consciousness by discussing the social and cultural conditions of modernity that prompted the naming of genocide and the use of the word “genocide” across different contexts, including how the word represents our human condition and how agents of memory use the word for opposing causes. In addition, my intention is that English teachers might see the case studies and the resources cited as sources for curriculum development.

## **B. The “Crime Without a Name”**

Recent research on twentieth century genocides indicates how genocide commemorations and tribunals have rhetorically appropriated the word “genocide” to advance specific and sometime contradictory political aims. In the twentieth century and now this twenty-first

century, the word “genocide” has not only functioned to name acts of human rights violations but has also been appropriated as justification for acts of violence. In an October 2012 article, “Memories of genocide at the hands of Germany fuels radicalism in Namibia,” Geoffrey York reports that during an August commemoration of a 1904 battle between the Herero of Namibia and German troops, one of the first “genocides” of the century, a councilor from the unofficial capital of Herero urged his people to take back their land by force. Over one hundred years ago, German troops had forced the cattle-raising Herero into the desert to die, annihilating 80 percent of their population; descendants of German settlers still occupy 46 million hectares of expropriated land. Many Herero live in poverty, and now that the Herero population has grown, they have the bodies for a mass movement and are now demanding the return of their ancestral land. In 2011, when Germany returned skulls of the Herero that had been shipped to Germany for racial experiments during the war, Herero warriors on horseback met the plane with war cries.

For the Herero, genocide is not a static or isolated event in the past. It is alive in the social discourse of their community and in the economic systems of the state. It seems that there have been some efforts by the German farmers to sell cattle feed at a reduced rate, to donate meat from wildlife to local schools, and to raise money for a cultural center, but such contributions have actually maintained rather than disrupted the unequal distribution of land. Thus, every annual commemoration of this genocide stirs the forces of social discourse and opens rhetorical spaces for various oratorical and physical acts. Here, and in the examples that follow, I claim that the scientific veneer of the word “genocide” functions to fetishize or conceal the real kind of cultural and political work it does. “Genocide” names a crime, which produces a sort of justice, but it also has worked to maintain social hierarchies and cultural division. It is the

nature of language, in general, to move people to act, but I see “genocide” as a rhetorical move that is consistent with modernism in its appeals to nationalism as a form of modernity. For several twentieth century genocides, the tale of modernism’s mechanisms for progress provided unambiguous evidence that “genocide” was more interested in asserting nationalist ideology than deliberating questions of rights and equality. In the English classroom, transactional consciousness theory includes rhetoricality precisely because language and texts are both attempting to represent the human condition and ultimately moving people to act. Our students must understand rhetoricality if they are to participate, and in some cases intervene, in the human condition.

On August 24, 1941, in a broadcast to the world, Winston Churchill announced, “We are in the presence of a crime without a name” (British Library of Information). A few years later, this crime was named. In 1944, “genocide” and its definition were constructed by Raphael Lemkin, a Polish Jew and a lawyer who saw genocide as a legal issue. He came to the U.S. during Nazi occupation of Poland, but many of his family members stayed behind and were killed in the Holocaust. Lemkin assisted in drafting the United Nation’s “Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide” formally presented on December 9, 1948 and ratified in 1951. According to “The Convention,”

Genocide is any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group: (a) killing members of the group; (b) causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; and (e) forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

As we can see, the language is quite scientific in that it describes and marks that which will require action or “preparation for” action.



Lemkin, as an agent of memory, crafted this language of genocide carefully so that acts of genocide are identifiable, but language is also a symbol of representation, and here it represents both a history and a future, that which existed and that which is imagined to be. The language names atrocities and appropriates historical imagery for future political, economic, and social action. The sort of action Lemkin imagined this language would bring was action that prevents and punishes crimes against humanity. However, it has failed to do so as evidenced by post-Convention genocides (e.g., Cambodia, Guatemala, Bosnia, Rwanda, and Sudan).

Looking at a few cases closely – Guatemala, Rwanda, and Bosnia Herzegovina (formerly Yugoslavia) – I intend to show how the word “genocide” is actually doing some paradoxical rhetorical work. Indeed, genocide has an ancient past, but in this modern era of projects to improve the human condition, the word genocide becomes quite compatible with modernity. We will see in the example that follows what Mignolo has identified as “the darker side of modernity,” a side that fails to improve conditions for all humans because only certain individuals are recognized as human by the state. As Bakhtin writes in *The Dialogic Imagination*, “at any given time, in any given place, there will be a set of conditions – social, historical, meteorological, physiological – that will insure that a word uttered in that place and at that time will have a different meaning than it would have under any other conditions” (428). Therefore, my inquiry is this: how is the word “genocide,” a word laced with history, making a modernist rhetorical move? Is this modern appropriation of “genocide” deceptive given its nascence after the Holocaust and its temporality in a modern era of rationality, human rights, and the privacy of the individual, a time incompatible with genocide? To put it another way, the paradox of the word “genocide” is that it actually functions as part of a modernist project of

classification and control of the unruly/non-normative populations that continue to exist in this enlightened era.

To unravel this paradox, I would like to first return to Mignolo's concepts of modernity and coloniality, mentioned in chapter two. Mignolo argues that it is our ethical responsibility to know and understand the "house of modernity" that we all inhabit. His book, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, works to expose an important building block of this house: coloniality.

Coloniality is the underlying logic and unfolding of Western civilization from Renaissance to today and a system of power created and controlled by Western imperial countries that maintain a global economy with unequal distribution of land and resources and exploits human beings and their labor. Thus, in Mignolo's view, modernity and coloniality are enmeshed; veiled in the rhetoric of progress and development. Modernity celebrates progress, development, and growth while silencing problems of coloniality to be "solved" by the former such as poverty, misery, inequality, and the dispensability of human life. However, the problems are not solved; movements of modernity fail to include all citizens in the plans of progress.

In all cultures or states, there is a centralizing or centripetal force that has a homogenizing or hierarchicizing influence. As Mignolo explains modernity and coloniality, we can see that nation states appropriate this force as a totalizing authority consistent with principles of nationalism, and they use language (e.g., naming of groups, arguments for cooperation, propaganda, nationalistic stories) to create and maintain divisions. I think Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of languages is helpful in thinking about opposing forces. Bakhtin, in "Discourse in the Novel," explains that languages are in a perpetual state of competition between centripetal and centrifugal forces. The centripetal force shapes official or scientific discourse, and it seeks to impose order on an essentially heterogeneous and messy populace or state. Language gives

expression to forces working towards this ideological centralization. The scientific use of the word “genocide” prepared nations for action as an expression to a force that beckons nations to centripetally unite around a vision of a text- enhanced future to prevent and punish genocide. However, such language functions differently in different conditions; there is another force which positions scientific vocabularies in a social discourse that is much more dynamic, even volatile than Lemkin might have imagined.

Opposing the centripetal force is the centrifugal force, a force that is always directed or moving away from a center or axis. It is an undercurrent or decentralizing force that we might call subversive. It shapes social discourse because it is the unofficial or unscientific natural order. This force disrupts the centripetal force that is trying to order or control that which is perhaps more natural in a state of disorder. Language, then, gives expression to forces working toward this ideological decentralization. Thus, we can see how these two forces are always at work, and because of the dynamism between the centralizing and decentralizing forces, we can anticipate the production of unpredictable actions.

An utterance like “genocide” becomes definable precisely in terms of certain kinds of actions. In one sense, it is scientific in its careful descriptions. In another sense, the term implies that another kind of action should take place: an action that prevents the previously delineated forms of horrific action. In this second sense, therefore, “genocide,” may be said to be rhetorical in that it seeks to persuade people to take the actions necessary to prevent mass killing. However, knowing that oppositional forces are at work, we must ask how the word “genocide” has been used rhetorically when two or more bodies participate in the social discourse and act for different political, cultural and ideological centralization. How is the word bringing people together or building community? How is the word breaking communities apart?

The word “genocide,” as we will see in Guatemala, Rwanda, and Bosnia Herzegovina, reveals the darker side of modernity, the product of order and the effects of naming. In each case, two or more groups of people are constructing, silencing, and reviving the “geno” (family, tribe, or race) of “genocide” according to what Bakhtin writes is the “ set of conditions... that will insure that a word uttered in that place and at that time will have a different meaning than it would have under any other conditions” (428). We will see how “genocide” brings people together in different contexts and for different purposes yet with seemingly similar and troubling results.

### C. **Reviving the “Geno” in Guatemala**

The Pan-Maya movement in the Highlands of Guatemala illustrates the way in which the word “genocide” can be appropriated for either centripetal or centrifugal purposes. Rhetoricity helps us understand how and why “genocide” can be used for these different purposes. Here, we can see that the 1980s genocide of the Maya has been rhetorically appropriated by Mayan agents of memory for the aim of cultural revitalization, a movement that is not, however, unproblematic. The exhumation of mass graves by the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation, a non-profit, non-governmental organization, began in 1990 and by 2004 had investigated over 300 burial sites and recovered nearly 3,000 human remains. The foundation and current director, Fredy Peccerelli, are responding to various groups of survivors who, in 1990, began reporting the clandestine graves which contain the bodies of Maya massacred during the government’s 1980 “scorched earth” policy. It was only in 1994 that the Historical Clarification Commission, Guatemala’s truth commission, was established by the Oslo Accords. The Accords attempted to end Guatemala’s civil war, a war in which an estimated 200, 000 Maya were massacred. The Commission concluded:

[T]he structure and nature of economic, cultural and social relations in Guatemala are marked by profound exclusion, antagonism and conflict – a reflection of its colonial history. The proclamation of independence in 1821, an event prompted by the country's elite, saw the creation of an authoritarian State which excluded the majority of the population. It was racist in its precepts and practices, and served to protect the economic interests of the privileged minority. The evidence for this, throughout Guatemala's history, but particularly so during the armed confrontation, lies in the fact that the violence was fundamentally directed by the State against the excluded, the poor and above all, the Mayan people, as well as against those who fought for justice and greater social equality. (*Memory of Silence*)

There is a Pan-Maya Movement to revive Mayan languages and culture happening in Guatemala in response to the years of compulsory linguistic assimilation, religious conversion, and military service that began with the Spanish colonialization and continued with the modern Guatemalan state's efforts to eradicate cultural difference. The survivors' groups appropriated the symbol of "genocide" to resist further oppression by advocating for the exhumation of the bodies and for criminal proceedings to hold members of the Guatemalan military responsible for what the Commission determined was, in fact, genocide; however, the other aim is to revive indigenous cultures and languages. Is the Pan Maya movement nationalistic? Under these "other conditions" does the word "genocide" have a different meaning (Bakhtin)?

The rhetoric of "genocide" and rhetoric of nationalism are similar in that both are deceptive. For example, the guerrillas in Guatemala, made up of predominantly middle class students, activists and former government workers, cultivated an image of solidarity with the peasants (Maya and poor ladinos) using the rhetoric of Guatemalan nationalism: "We fight for a free Guatemala where Indian and non-Indians are equal." While there were some peasants who took up arms with the guerrillas, most were stuck in the middle of the conflict between the government and the guerrillas wanting only to work their *milpas*, agricultural land, and live the lives of their ancestors.

A central component in the Pan Maya movement, however, is the dialectic of language ideology. According to Brigitte M. French, author of *Maya Ethnolinguistic Identity: Violence, Cultural Rights, and Modernity in Highland Guatemala*, “The Maya movement seeks to create a Guatemalan nation reconstituted and redefined by the politics of cultural difference” (30). The Maya are revitalizing indigenous languages to strategically challenge the homogenizing and exclusionary goals of modernity fundamental to the 1980 genocide. Thus, the diverse Mayan languages link to create an ideal of a collective in a nationalist sense. In this movement, there are convictions of difference for the purpose of legitimizing autonomy. The problematic of the movement, however, is that to produce new indigenous experts to regiment language and culture requires the construction of an apparatus of social engineering, some iteration of a school, with directors, teachers, curriculum, and students. In 2003, the Guatemalan government passed *La Ley de Idiomas Nacionales* to promote languages used by Maya, Garifuna, and Xinca. Thus, in a sense, the discourse of progress for the Maya is a revival of state structures they seek to resist. To put it another way, the indigenous languages will now be taught in schools; people will now be identified by language or, more importantly, categories of culture. Classifying people and assigning symbols to them (i.e., language) may create ethnic pride, but it also creates friction. This situation illustrates the rhetoricality of the word “genocide” because the word has been used to prompt people to engage in a paradoxical initiative – namely, to revive indigenous languages and cultures that are separate from the homogenous state but do so in ways that rely on state apparatuses.

In the summer of 2012, I participated in Tulane University’s Summer Teacher Institute on the Maya, “Signs of Change: A Glimpse of Past and Present Cultural Landscapes of Guatemala.” I wanted to explore Guatemala and its geography, people, and culture. With

archaeologists and local guides, we explored complex issues of identity, globalization, language, and cultural inheritance in Antigua, the highlands, and the rainforest. On this trip, we visited a school in Chimaltenango where the principal is a genocide survivor who, after escaping to Canada during the violence, has returned to his community to build a bilingual and bicultural school for children from two to six years old.

Project *Kaqchikel* (meaning “little sibling,” in a native Mayan language), provides daily meals, healthcare, and education in both English and Kaqchikel. New reports suggest malnutrition leads to lifelong problems, and in Guatemala nearly 50 percent of the children are so malnourished that they are stunted physically and developmentally for life; they do not have access to foods beyond the staple: beans (*PBS NewsHour*). Education and humanitarian efforts seek to get proteins and vegetables to the highlands, but families still have to travel to sites down rough, unpaved roads. Even though the countryside is overflowing with fresh vegetables, very little makes it into local homes. It goes to export markets. Parents let their children go to Project Kaqchikel when they are young because the little ones get in the way or are an added burden on the backs of their mothers working in the fields. When they can be of use, children stop attending school to work. The principal is trying to build more classrooms and persuade parents to let at least one child stay in school, but the project of reviving Kaqchikel in Chimaltenango is dire. With the recent trend of unaccompanied *child* migrants arriving to the United States from Guatemala and other Central American countries because of violence, debates regarding immigration policy are shifting to refugee resettlement, according to the executive director of Kids in Need of Defense (KIND). The transactional nature of the conditions in Guatemala (i.e., history, politics, government, and organizations acting on one another) are quite complex; the state agents of memory and the Mayan agents of memory are using the past to set agendas that

serve opposing causes. Not only are the state agents of memory and the Mayan agents of memory in opposition, the Mayan agents of memory are themselves pursuing a paradoxical agenda in that they are trying to revive indigenous cultures through the very modernist means that destroyed them. We will only understand all these complexities if we assess the situation in terms of its rhetoricality.

D. **Constructing the “Geno” in Rwanda**

In Rwanda, the words “Hutu” and “Tutsi” became polarizing symbols during the Belgian colonial period, which followed World War I. In the colonial days of Rwanda, the Belgians at once unified and divided individuals by naming some “Hutu” and others “Tutsi,” a fictional classification that forced individuals to identify with groups that the state positioned to be odds with one another. Because of the construction of an ethnic binary in the colonial days of Rwanda, there was no national identity of Rwandans when Rwanda was granted independence in 1962. In these circumstances, the history of ethnic inequality created conditions in which the fear of genocide was, paradoxically, deployed to incite genocide in the name of ethnic survival. In other words, the conditions were such that the different tribal groups were of the mind that “we have to kill them before they kill us.” Philip Gourevitch (1998), in *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families*, writes: “Power consists in the ability to make others inhabit your story of their reality -- even, as is so often the case, when that story is written in their blood” (52). Gourevitch goes on to discuss the colonial history of Rwanda as evidence of this saying that when the Belgians arrived, they could hardly have pretended they were needed to bring order to Rwanda. Originally, Hutus and Tutsis were class-based classifying terms; social mobility was possible, and so one could be a Hutu and later become a Tutsi depending on labor and income. In the early 1930s, Belgium went about regimenting Rwandan society along ethnic



lines shifting the internal and structural power effectively racializing the system of dominance by the Tutsi minority who levied taxes against their Hutu neighbors. In 1933, Belgium issued ethnic identity cards making it impossible for Hutus to become Tutsis; labels could no longer be a class issue or an economic issue or even a blood issue because DNA was not available to establish these categories. The centripetal force of the state classified citizens, writing on them and, thus, constructing the stage for “genos” and later genocide. But how did the state decide which class would be the more noble or part of the “humanitas” (Mignolo)? According to Gourevitch, the Western aesthetics provided the criteria for classification, a seemingly ontological logic:

[The Belgians] sought out those features of the existing civilization that fit their own ideas of mastery and subjugation and bent them to fit their purposes....The scientists brought their measuring tapes and calipers, and they went about weighing Rwandans, measuring Rwandan cranial capacities, and conducting comparative analyses of the relative protuberance of Rwandan noses. Sure enough, the scientists found what they believed all along. Tutsis had "nobler," more 'naturally,' aristocratic dimensions than the "coarse" and "bestial" Hutus. (55-56)

Belgium went about “making legible,” as James Scott might say in *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, Rwanda by creating a system of power where the Tutsis were indebted to Belgium for their position of power, then forced through identification to aid Belgium in transforming the economy from subsistence and food crops to export crops, like coffee.

Naming itself is ethically implicated. Scott explains that the modern state takes “exceptionally complex, illegible, and local social practices, such as land tenure customs or naming customs, and created a standard grid whereby it could be centrally recorded and monitored” (2). However, he also suggests that because the modern state sees rational order in visual aesthetic terms, the state gives rise to elites, agents of memory, who “repudiate the past and who have revolutionary designs for their people,” which proves to be inadequate for creating

a functioning social order (5). By this we see how excluding the local knowledge and natural order of Rwanda, the Belgians' attempts to make legible the land and people of Rwanda set the stage for a series of genocides and political unrest. Thus, ironically, it is this scientific, modernist process of categorization that makes genocide possible in that categorizing defines those who are to be included or marginalized even eliminated from the state. The Hutus were roughly 85 percent, and the Tutsis were about 14 percent. The Twa were the remaining percentage. (My naming and measuring here, I admit, feels like a violation of sorts.)

In 1957, a group of Hutu intellectuals argued for a Hutu state on the basis of majority rules, actually using the identification mechanism for their argument. Such was the logic of democracy of the time – “majority rule” defined in terms of ethnicity. The construction of the ethnic binary and desire for an ethnic state was the beginning of political violence between Hutu and Tutsis in Rwanda. Gourevitch calls this the “social revolution” of Hutus organizing a violent campaign against Tutsis using the rhetoric of democracy (majority rules), but it is also consistent with what Mignolo calls the darker side of modernity or the logic of colonialism in that the hegemonic planning mentality excludes the other. In 1962, Rwanda was granted independence, but not before the UN warned “that someday we will witness violent reactions on the part of the Tutsis” (61). Because the Belgians constructed a “superior” ethnicity of Tutsis, the Hutus resented and also feared the oppressive Tutsi rule. This fear of extermination was what ultimately led the Hutu extremists to appropriate symbols of genocide and destroy the entire Tutsi population in order to preserve Hutus’ symbolic ethnic rights. In 1994, the massacre of 800,000 Rwandans took just 100 days. Gourevitch observes, “The mass of participants in the practice massacres of the early 1990s may have taken little pleasure in obediently murdering

their neighbors. Still, few refused, and assertive resistance was extremely rare. Killing Tutsis was a political tradition in postcolonial Rwanda; it brought people together” (96).

The case of Rwanda invited inquiry as to the epistemology (or how) of names and how that naming positioned people, who are ontologically the same, hierarchically with horrific consequences. The project of today’s Rwanda, as an agent of memory, is to replace multiple names (Hutu, Tutsi, Twa) with one: Rwandan.

In the broader discussion of rhetoricality and transactional consciousness, the central point of my discussion of Rwanda is that by looking at the rhetoricality of the word “genocide” as it applies to this context we can see how rhetoricality helps us understand all the ways in which different transactions contribute to our overall understanding of these events. Furthermore, by emphasizing the rhetoricality of “genocide” we can better appreciate and understand how historical events and the influences of modernity are all implicated in what we understand to be genocide.

#### **E. Silencing the “Geno” in Yugoslavia**

The third, and final, example that follows stretches a bit longer than the previous two because I include a description of my visit to Sarajevo, Bosnia Herzegovina in 2013. The Illinois Genocide Education Mandate, specifically the 2005 press release from Governor Blagojevich, was the catalyst not only for this dissertation but for my life. It has compelled me to go beyond the texts that initially constructed my understanding of genocide to see the places and meet the people whose lives were changed by genocide and continue to be changed by the political, geographical, cultural, and economic impact of genocidal processes. My travels, of course, change how I have come to understand genocide education specifically but education more broadly. Thus, in this final section, I share how my experiences in Bosnia Herzegovina impacted

how I see myself as a teacher, which is to say that my travels have made me more conscious of the importance of connecting what we do in the classroom with why we do it. Why we “do it” has everything to do with what is beyond the classroom.

While I have shown in the above cases that identification is affirmed precisely because there is division, silencing identifications also has implications (Burke 22). Rhetoricity is about illuminating transactions that we can see and name but also about inquiring into the transactions that are hidden or silenced by agents of memory. Language is a social force that cannot be silenced. It works to move people as an utterance and as an artifact. Bette Denich, a research fellow at Boston University whose work centers on the manipulation of collective memory and public discourse in the formation of ethnic violence, explains the memory of World War II’s ethnic conflict in Yugoslavia was deliberately minimized by the Tito regime in the decades that followed. In “Dismembering Yugoslavia,” she argues Tito’s regime functioned as part of a centralizing force to suppress symbolic reminders of Yugoslavia’s ethnic differences for the purpose of creating a new, unified nation state; for example, a play called *The Pigeon Cave* was banned because it restated the massacre of the Serbs and was understood to promote Serbian nationalism. However, and this is the consequence of attempting to silence the “geno,” such reminders were later revived to, in fact, dismembered Yugoslavia in the late 1980s. The point, in this case, is that modernist classifications of ethnicity functioned to make ethnic divisions “legible” in such a way that they could be managed by a homogenizing power like Tito and to exacerbated ethnic tensions to subvert homogenization. The “geno” of “genocide,” however, resists attempts at homogenization; it cannot be silenced.

In discussing the exploitation of historical traumas, Samuel Totten, Professor Emeritus in Curriculum and Instruction at The University of Kansas and scholar of Holocaust and genocide

education, explains the historical context by which Slobodan Milosevic, a Serb nationalist, appropriated genocide. In 1941, three factions emerged within Yugoslavia: the Chetniks, Serbian nationalists who fought against Germans and Italians; Communist Partisans, a multiethnic faction against the Axis forces led by Tito; and the Croatian “Ustasha” led by Ante Pavelić, which was allied with Hitler. Totten writes in *Century of Genocide: Critical Essays and Eyewitness Accounts*, “Between 1941 and 1945, more than 180,000 Serbs were deported, approximately 250,000 forcibly converted to Catholicism from Orthodox Christian faiths, and more than 300,000 murdered” (422). The Communist Partisans won leadership in Yugoslavia and chose to order the state through a homogenizing mechanism of silencing ethnic symbols of genocide. Therefore, while the Belgians brought order to the colonial state of Rwanda by way of ethnic symbols, the method of making legible post-war Yugoslavia was to eradicate ethnic symbols.

During the Tito regime, survivors of the World War II massacres had to quietly remember the dead by visiting pigeon caves and other unmarked burial sites. The Tito regime did not want to commemorate the burial sites because it did not want reminders of the nationalist ideologies of World War II. Not long after the suppression of the performance of *The Pigeon Cave*, a play that critiques the Ustasha massacre, an outburst of art, literature and scholarship on national themes portraying Serbian history and the context of the World War II genocide emerged. The author of *The Pigeon Cave*, Jovan Radulovic, set the play in the early 1960s, fifteen years after the end of the war, at a deep cave called Golubnjaca, or “the pigeon cave.” During the war, the Ustasha massacred a Serbian village and disposed their bodies in this cave. Radulovic’s protagonists are children; they play war games at the entrance of this cave using the discourse of nationalist ideology they’ve heard at home. One boy, however, is a war orphan who

finds a grenade at the cave; critics argued that the grenade symbolized genocide and the potential of history to destroy this younger generation of Yugoslavs. Because of its political message, this play was banned by Yugoslav party officials in the Tito regime afraid that the contents would incite nationalistic hatred.

In opposition to the Tito regime's homogenizing efforts, the Serbian nationalist revitalization appropriated the "geno" of "genocide" for their cause: to secede from Yugoslavia as its own state. Both Serbs and Croats turned to formulations of nationhood such as the excision of ethnic groups from territory, and, thus, resurrected a framework that had culminated in the pigeon caves, the Ustasha massacres of Serbs by Croats in 1941: genocide. In this case, we see how genocide is used to argue for a homogenous state for both sides. Denich explains this logic of separation for better relations, "In order to avoid in the future the great suffering the Serbs' neighbors will inflict upon them whenever they have an opportunity to do so, the Chetniks [Serbs] proposed a 'homogenous Serbia'" (375). Following this logic, Dr. Steven Moljevic, a Chetnik National Committee member suggested in June 1941,

Transfers and exchanges of population, especially of Croats from the Serbian areas and of Serbs from the Croatian areas, is the only way to arrive at their separation and to create better relations between them., and thereby remove the possibility of a repetition of the terrible crimes that occurred even in the First World War. (qtd. in *The Chetniks*)

We can say, then, that the word "genocide" is used as an argument for social engineering. James Scott, however, explains that "one of the great paradoxes of social engineering is that it seems at odds with the experience of modernity generally. Trying to tell a social world, the most striking characteristic of which appears to be flux, seems rather like trying to manage a whirlwind" (93). The friction of ethnic division ultimately led to violence.

On July 25, 1990 the new government of Croatia took office as a real action of division and ethnic opposition. The Ustasha flag was raised, symbolic exclusion of non-Croats. Serbs

knew the coat-of-arms symbol represented the very Croatian nationalism that fueled the massacre of Serbs years ago. Denich argues that "the reappearance of the symbols associated with genocide must be examined in light of memories that had been both individually and collectively repressed and, in light of their transformation, over a half-century, into a cultural artifact of a particular sort" (381). Vuk Draskovic, a Serbian novelist wrote, "If war comes, I fear most for the fate of the Croatian people. In Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia there isn't a Serb to whom the Croats don't owe several liters of blood. There isn't a house in which someone wasn't massacred....So I understand why Serbs, if war comes, would like to fight against the Croats" (qtd. in Denich). Denich clarifies that the *modern* Serbs had not experienced the Ustasha genocide, and "their wartime suffering had come at the hands of the Germans...rather than Croats"; however, the pigeon caves were exhumed literally and figuratively for both modern Serbs and Croats to resurrect the narratives of genocide from their ancestors for their own nationalist agenda, a social, political, cultural, and economic agenda.

While Belgium was an example of an imperial state's violation of the land and people of Rwanda, a violation that created the "genos" for what was later appropriated for genocide, the state's failure in the Balkans perpetuated conditions for the appropriation of the word "genocide" to rationalize and justify acts of genocide. We might consider this creation and perpetuation as the residue of modernity and the effects of centralizing forces attempting to make legible a land and people amidst ever-changing definitions of progress and development. The language of identification is used rhetorically by all sides in this case for similar albeit divisive purposes. In a sense, there is unity in the way that human beings seek unity by identifying with some and thus against others. Rhetoricity encourages us, alongside our students, to confront the implications

of division, and “genocide” certainly illustrates the most tragic, destructive consequences of division.

**F. Beyond the Classroom**

While transactional reading’s reader response is important to transactional consciousness because it is about making personal, human connections (which is more ethical than reading for a standard or a high stakes test), rhetoricality adds intellectual, cognitive work to distinguish between the agendas of different agents of memory. Above, I have included several (though limited) examples of how the word “genocide” was used by different agents of memory, how the past was manipulated and memories were created to set national, social, economic, cultural, and political agendas (and for opposing causes). It is not enough, as human beings, to respond emotionally to the transnational situations, though recognizing the suffering of distant others is a necessary start. To stop there would be unethical in that it would overlook the social forces that create conditions of state violence and human rights violations. Rhetoricality is about recognizing how language represents the human condition. As teachers of readers and writers who will participate and shape the human condition, we have a responsibility to look closely at how language constrains, limits, and excludes and then seek out utterances that might fill in gaps, go beyond limits, and include silences.

As stated previously, Philip Gourevitch, in *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will be Killed With Our Families: Stories from Rwanda*, explains that his reason for taking a close look into Rwanda’s stories is that ignoring them makes him “uncomfortable about existence and my place in it” and the horror interests him “only insofar as a precise memory of the offense is necessary to understand its legacy” (19). He explains quite plainly that we already know right from wrong. We know genocide is wrong, and yet some of us willingly come to



books like his with “hope for some understanding” such as “a moral, a lesson, or a clue about how to behave in this world.”

The best reason I had for going to Bosnia in 2013 is the same reason I gave to my husband for going to Guatemala in 2012 and the same reason Gourevitch gives: “I am uncomfortable about existence and my place in it” (19). I wanted an excuse to look more closely and “genocide” beyond the classroom, beyond the books that tried to contain the stories. I wanted to see what “genocide” meant today for the person buying *elote* (corn) on the streets of Antigua and for the person waiting on tables in a Sarajevan restaurant. Because the transactional reading process is an ethical way of teaching English, because it values an individual’s experience, builds a capacity for sympathy, and includes others in making and revising meaning, and because rhetoricality calls attention to the rhetorical view of language as not real but representations of the real, it was important for me to go beyond the classroom to engage with real people, face-to-face, an important dimension of rhetoricality and transactional consciousness. There is a “real” that language attempts to represent, and I think that, as teachers, we have to help our students to reach out to other people in an effort to confront (physically rather than textually) the implications of division. Beyond the texts and beyond the classroom are real human beings who remind us that we can all identify with humankind.

In October 2013, my excuse to “look more closely” at Bosnia and Herzegovina was a conference. I prepared to attend the annual conference of the Alliance of Universities for Democracy in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Founded in 1990, the Alliance of American and European universities share the common purpose of supporting higher learning institutions in their development of democratic development. This year, specifically, members contributed to concerns in Southeastern Europe as states engage in democratic nation building and seek peace

with justice. Scholars from Bosnia Herzegovina specifically addressed the fall of Yugoslavia, the Hague Tribunal, responding to the needs of women victims of rape during the war, and children's exposure to family violence post-war as an effect of post traumatic stress disorder.

On the third day of the conference, I met Hasan Nuhanović. Nuhanović is a Bosnian Muslim survivor of the 1995 Srebrenica genocide. From 1992-1995, he and his family stayed in the "safe area" protected by the United Nations. Nuhanović became an interpreter for the Dutch, and when Srebrenica fell to the Bosnian Serb Army, Nuhanović's family -- his father, mother, and brother along with 5000-6000 refugees found shelter on the U.N. base in Potočari, with some 30,000 Bosnian Muslims outside the base. "Negotiations" between the U.N. and the Bosnian Serb Army prompted the Dutch to order all refugees out of the base essentially handing over the refugees to the Serbs because of the humanitarian crises on the U.N. bases, explained in detail in Nuhanović's book *Under the UN Flag: The International Community and the Srebrenica Genocide*. Nuhanović understood the implications of this evacuation and beseeched the Dutch to allow his family to stay with him on the based. Nevertheless, Nuhanović had to interpret the orders and tell his people, including his family, to walk into the hands of the Serbs.

More than 8,000 Bosnian Muslims were killed in and around Srebrenica in July 1995. The remains of Nuhanović's father and brother were found in mass graves. In 2008, his father was discovered in a secondary mass grave, which means there was a reburial effort to conceal evidence of mass murders. In early 2010, his mother's remains were found not far from his family home in Vlasenic. He wrote in an editorial, "The Serbs who lived there threw garbage on her for 14 years. She wasn't alone. They killed another six in the same place. Burned them. I hope they were burned only after they died" ("15 Years After the Srebrenica Massacre"). And then in June 2010, Nuhanović identified his brother by his tennis shoes.

In 2013 Sarajevo, Nuhanović says that Muslims, Croats, and Serbs find a way to survive if not *with* one another then *next* to one another. In a sense they are co-agents of memory, however, their memories of the past ring of dissonance. Public symbols of genocide, visible and “invisible,” blanket the fractured country. Here is what Nuhanović had to say about Sarajevo and the symbols:

It’s an open city. Serbs come here for shopping if they don’t live here. There are Serbs living here, of course, but a far fewer number than Bosniaks. The majority of the population in this city is now Bosniaks [Muslims]. Just like the majority of the population in Eastern Bosnia is [Serb]. Just walk across the invisible – it’s supposed to be invisible – Inter-Entity Boundary Line...but the Serbs made it visible. When you go there, like three miles from here, you will hit the sign saying “Welcome to The Republic of Srpska.” If you enter Sarajevo from the other side, it will not say “Welcome to The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.” We are not proud, officially, we are not proud of being an entity within Bosnia and Herzegovina, but the Serbs are proud...trying, of course, to undermine and emphasize their own statehood within a state. You get the message if you are not a Serb, and I am not a Serb. And I have survived all this, and when I read the sign “Welcome to the Republic of Srpska,” what does it mean? *Srpska* means Serb. Is that? What? I am not a Serb, so how am I supposed to feel being in a place that stole Srpska? At least the federation does not bear the name of any ethnicity... even though Serbs refer to it as the Muslim- Croat Federation. (AUDEM address)

The rhetorical situation was clear to me as I listened to Nuhanović. Here we were in an international conference on democracy listening to Nuhanović remember and account for what happened to him and his family. He represented it in such a way as to communicate clearly to his audience that by most accounts, the past is not forgotten. The past cannot be forgotten because this Inter-Entity Boundary Line is, in fact, not invisible. The peace treaty did not resolve the conflict, and the genocide has not ended. He was, for us, witnessing the genocide of his family all over again for us so that we would see the symbolic representations of genocide that exist throughout the country. The language on the signs and the state-created boundary line are making different claims about what happened. How one interprets that boundary, as achieving peace or maintaining an exclusionary system, depends on a multitude of transactions, but

Nuhanović wanted to be sure that he had some influence over how we understood Srebrenica and Bosnia Herzegovina and how we will tell the story of Srebrenica to others.

In old town Sarajevo, teens smoke cigarettes and shop in designer clothing stores unaware of what the symbols, also agents of memory, represent Nuhanović's generation. Schools do not teach about the Siege of Sarajevo or the genocide in Srebrenica because the case of genocide is ongoing. As recent as July 2014, a Dutch court ruled that Netherlands government is liable for the deaths of about 300 victims in the 1995 Srebrenica massacre in Bosnia, saying that the United Nations' Dutch peacekeepers failed to prevent those deaths. Efforts to exhume the remains of those killed in the genocide to identify victims and perpetrators are unsettling any sense of reconciliation between Muslims and Serbs. Even though there is a museum to tell the story of Srebrenica in the heart of Sarajevo; it is more for the tourists (like me) than for the people of Sarajevo. Many Sarajevans are ready for Bosnia Herzegovina to represent something other than genocide (like their soccer team, their cuisine, their architecture). It seems that while some want to quiet the past and make invisible symbols of ethnic tension, others want to exhume the past and make visible symbols of hate – to face the gorgon so as to destroy it, perhaps (Clendinnen).

To some parts of the world, Sarajevo represents solidarity when during the Siege of Sarajevo, citizens cut off from food, water, electricity, and first aid supplies built an underground tunnel to transport supplies from safe zone. To other parts of the world, however, Sarajevo represents insufficient peace. The rhetoric of the Dayton Peace Accords, especially when taught in public schools, can be communicated as a solution, as a victory of diplomatic negotiation by and in the West. However, many Bosnians born in Srebrenica have yet to return home now that the road from Sarajevo to Eastern Bosnia is paved with Serbian signs. The reason this

conference was in Bosnia and Herzegovina is because while there was a peace agreement signed in 1995, this country is still a divided country with a pervasive if hushed ethnic tension that may prevent Bosnia and Herzegovina from ever joining the European Union. People from all over the world interested in democracy and education flew into Sarajevo over one weekend in mid-October to understand this tension and to talk about what education can do to support peace and equality for everyone.

My last night in Sarajevo, it was raining. My husband and I grabbed our umbrella and began a half hour walk into the hills for dinner at *4 Sobe Gospodje Safije*, The Four Rooms of Mrs. Safije. This 1910 building commemorates the tale of a forbidden love affair between Safije, a Sarajevian girl, and Johan, an Austrian Count during the city's shift from Turkish to Austro-Hungarian rule. Modern designers have updated the interior while leaving the four-room structure intact. At the end of our meal, our waiter asked us where we were from. "Chicago," we answered. He then told us he had a sister in Minnesota but had no intention of leaving Sarajevo. "It is my home," he told us.

As we put on our coats and headed for the door, we discovered our umbrella had been taken, and as he found another umbrella for us to take on our walk back to our hotel, we thanked him. He replied, "And thank you for not asking me about the war."

Rhetoricity means understanding rhetoric as an inherent feature of language. The rhetoric of the word "genocide" is such that it can name state violence and can hide the forces that both create and perpetuate genocidal processes. The word "genocide," then, has a transactional nature. As Bakhtin writes, "a word uttered in that place and at that time will have a different meaning than it would have under any other conditions" (428). The word, the place, the time, the conditions, and those uttering the word or silencing the word shape its meaning, but as

we have also seen here, the meaning leads to actions that have consequences that extend to other times and places. On that rainy night in Sarajevo, I did not utter the word, but the waiter recognized its silence.

This dissertation promotes transactional consciousness. Recognizing the rhetoricality of language is essential to fostering transactional consciousness, and studying genocide is a *good* way to teach rhetoricality because the word “genocide” is such a powerful and consequential illustration of the ways in which “genocide” can mean different things depending on who is uttering the word, the historical context, and the speaker’s purpose.

#### **G. Conclusion: Moving Toward Rhetoricality**

Given the degree to which genocide has permeated the international community and the sheer numbers of people murdered by state violence since the Holocaust, why have our schools given so little attention to rhetoricality and the discourses that shape our understanding of international issues and how nation states are not only politically and economically but ethically implicated in human rights violations? We don’t want another generation to be ignorant of the globalized nature of our world nor think they are immune to the social forces that shape our political, economic, and social systems. One of those social forces is language. Our discipline, English, in public schools has been complicit in perpetuating a narrow understanding of language when we can be doing so much more.

I think that as we comply with the mandate to teach a unit on genocide or as we make changes in our curriculum to build knowledge, enlarge experience, and broaden worldviews, we can see this unit as about preparing students to ethically engage with international issues. They are already agents of memory and thus participants, but they see themselves as spectators – not at all directly involved by their watching or reading of texts and images that depict social issues.

The shift in education needs to come from the discipline of English, where we have a tradition of storytellers and translators always seeking alternative interpretations and diligently ruling out mis-interpretations. The English classroom has to go beyond language as communication or as a means to transfer information; if rhetoricality is our condition, then our work must account for how every speaker, utterance, and situation that came before and after are transacting to represent not only a condition of human experience but actions that perpetuate disparate conditions. While rhetoricality is a quality of language, it is, more broadly, a condition of our human experience. Thus, rhetoricality is essential to transactional consciousness, but, like transactional reading theory and reader response, it is still limited. There is a great deal of the human experience that is beyond knowing. How can students practice ethical reading – aesthetic reading and rhetorical reading? In chapter four, I offer and explore a reading stance that students can practice in the English classroom with testimonial literature (literature written by firsthand witnesses of genocide): witnessing.

## V. WITNESSING RHETORICALITY, READING TESTIMONIAL LITERATURE

Seeing ourselves as projected witnesses of human rights internationalism and its staging of the spectacle of suffering...requires that we attend to how human rights law and culture work together, and how human rights and humanitarianism converge to sustain normative frameworks of inclusion and exclusion and to legitimize certain identities, subjectivities, and social and economic relations.

– Wendy Hesford, *Spectacular Rhetorics*

In *Spectacular Rhetorics*, Wendy Hesford, scholar of rhetorical theory, human rights, and law and literature, explains that discourse about human rights tend to transform the focus on human rights into a spectacle that positions some nations as more powerful or ethical. In other words, whereas the attention should be *on the situation* that caused a human rights violation (land disputes, political power, resources) and *on the people* violated, the focus shifts to the feelings or ideas *of the person or institution* learning about or reacting to the violation. It is precisely here that Rosenblatt's theory of reader response intersects with the ethics of reading. Aesthetic responses can, in fact, be unethical in the sense that they perpetuate stereotypes or misunderstandings about distant others. As teachers who potentially confront students with stories and images of human rights violations, the question Hesford raises is how we can ethically notice, read, and respond to human rights violations.

In the case of the Illinois Genocide Education Mandate, Illinois government, schools, teachers, and even students learning about “violations” in other countries are situated in a position of safety, privilege, and power, not having experienced the atrocities. If teachers follow the mandate, students read about Armenia, Ukraine, Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda, and Sudan; they might respond with sympathy for the victims; they might begin to see how agents of memory are using language such as “genocide” for opposing causes. Still, though students are engaged emotionally and reading rhetorically, they are far removed from the situation and struggle to understand what to do with their reading experience and knowledge. In my view, the



problem with students reading about atrocities is that distance, spatial and temporal, obscures a sense of responsibility for how they respond and relate to victims and violence. Witnessing in transactional consciousness theory, as I will discuss in this chapter, is the conscious and ethical act of reading where the reader has to be at the same time a witness to what she is reading and a witness to herself, a simultaneous awareness of the transactions that align and position herself and the speaker-author of trauma. I argue that witnessing is an act we must practice in the classroom so that our students can bear witness to one another's lives beyond the classroom.

According to Samera Esmier, in "On Making Dehumanization Possible," because human rights campaigns and various agents of memory tell "what happened" in novels, films, poems, and news reports using images and testimony from victims, we focus on and respond to people "thought to be dehumanized by their regimes and awaiting the promise of humanization by international human rights campaigns and legal reforms" (2005, 1546). For Esmier, Hesford, and for me, in light of my argument in chapter four, any account of the scene of an atrocity is a rhetorical address, and the witness (reader, audience) is moved to look for a way of relating to the dehumanized victim. Any depiction of *dehumanization*, however, invites us (and even conditions us) to see the people we are reading about as without humanity; by not providing identification other than that of *victim*, humanity becomes a matter of "endowment, declaration, or recognition," and we as reader-witnesses become the endower (1549). Because the reader-witness is positioned to look at the spectacle of suffering and feel pity for the victim rather than to contemplate her responsibility as a witness, the *learning about* "victims" can reproduce hierarchies of race, nation, and class even if the intention is to bring about awareness and change. To be clear, then, I am suggesting that when we read about genocide in the English classroom, even if we are responding emotionally and recognizing rhetoricality, we can potentially

perpetuate systems of oppression and exploitation by failing to recognize and acknowledge the full humanity of the victims.

How, then, *ought* we to read? Hesford suggests that beyond seeking some understanding of suffering or some shared, felt experience, we *ought to* consider how human rights representations constitute the witnessing publics they seek to engage, specifically by acknowledging our perception as a mediated act. Rather than consumers of information about genocide, we can consider ourselves as global witnesses. In my view, witnessing implies ethical responsibility. “Witnessing,” according to Carrie Rentschler, “is a rhetorical act constituted by multiple levels of mediation: material artifacts, media texts, bodies, aesthetics, cultural and national politics, and so on” (298). Human rights media (news, public service announcements, social media, reports, essays, films, books) use such mediation to make their audience global witnesses to historical events and human suffering to build awareness and perhaps to him and fulfill the promise of “never again”; however, Rentschler warns that “witnesses can also act complicitously in others’ suffering by watching it without seeking to alleviate it, and they can empathize, or ‘feel with,’ others who suffer – an imagined form of affective participation” (298). Rentschler’s concern is that witnesses feel with no direction for how to act. Hesford is also concerned; similarly, Hesford suggests that the danger in seeking any “imaginative identification with the suffering other” is that we become complicit in “transforming the other into an object of feeling and sight” *for* the witness rather than becoming cultural actors and moral agents illuminating the darker side of political, economic, cultural, social systems (57). In my view, however, *if* the “witness” is acting complicitously or “transforming the other into an object of feeling and sight,” then she is more of a *spectator* than a *witness*, for witnessing, I will show, constitutes an obligation to attend in a way that spectatorship does not.

I have said earlier how important it is for a student to emotionally respond to a reading event, but I have also indicated that our job, as teachers, is to cultivate ethical sympathy for others by considering how a text elicits our affective participation. I suggested that transactional reading theory (chapter three) illuminates the many transactions that shape students' experiences and interpretations of texts and that reading rhetorically (chapter four) illuminates how agents of memory (e.g., people, institutions, texts, and media) use the past, at times, for their own purposes, manipulating and even creating memories as the means for setting an agenda (Auron). The way we teach students to read texts and other media about the world, then, has ethical implications for how they position themselves in relation to distant sufferers and global events in and beyond school. How can we resist complicity? How *ought* we to read representations of suffering? How can we practice witnessing rather than spectatorship?

If we think of witnessing's rhetorical dimensions, we become conscious of *how* media (texts, images, films) align audiences with the suffering other, regimes, institutions, and other media. For Hesford – and in my view – our work as witnesses to global atrocities is to consider “how these rhetorical alignments as scenes of address foster certain forms of recognition, engagement, and action” (57). For me, if English teachers can begin a rhetorical analytic of the *how*, as in how texts mediate our perception, we might transform how our students recognize, engage, and act with other human beings beyond the walls of the classroom. The rhetoric of genocide illuminates the importance of teaching English in ways that build consciousness of the human beings who are using language (and images) for sometimes opposing causes. Students must learn habits of reading and seeing that help them recognize how they are being drawn into the spectacle of distant suffering as spectators and positioned in a hierarchy of humanity in the hopes that they can be more than spectators in this world. Witnessing is the element of

transactional consciousness that teaches students to go beyond the role of spectator in their world, to practice how they might engage with distant human beings to create a more just society.

In this chapter, I suggest, in addition to transactional reading (chapter three) and recognizing rhetoricality (chapter four), the English classroom must nurture and support an ethical practice of *witnessing*, a practice that cultivates an engagement with the people constructing the text (film or image) and represented in the text as an active way of considering our epistemological and ethical responsibility to people and their causes. In the framework of transactional consciousness, as I am describing it, witnessing is a *principled basis* for reading and listening to stories told by other human beings. It is neither autonomous nor authoritative but a deliberative stance that acknowledges we need others to make sense of our shared world. This kind of witnessing is facilitated by transactional readings and rhetorical analyses. In my view, the genre that best teaches us how to witness each other's lives is testimonial literature because it asks that we attend to the testifier *and* how she is able to tell her story. Such literature is an opportunity to practice a rhetorical analytic, which considers how a text mediates our perception. Thus, we will continue our study of genocide and how to teach it. I will focus on the genre of genocide testimonial literature because, in my experience, it can help us become proper witnesses of people who enable us to make sense of our shared world and prompt us to action.

To begin, I will define testimonial literature as a genre written by firsthand witnesses to atrocities. Next, I will define "witnessing" based on Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's work in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (1992) in two ways; first, there is the firsthand witness whose testimony is necessarily subjective and provisional, and then we have the secondhand witness who listens to the firsthand witness. It is the

secondhand witness, listening to or reading testimony, who must practice her epistemological and ethical responsibility to the testimony and the testifier: teachers and students. I explore reading-as-witnessing as cultivating transactional consciousness because of the reader's responsibilities to attend to the "darker" side of witnessing, which is the trauma careful reader-witnesses experience when facing the gorgons of our world. Shifting to pedagogy, I consider how to nurture and support the ethical practice of witnessing in the classroom before moving "Into the Classroom." In that section, I consider how writing pedagogy (the writing workshop) can support transactional consciousness (reader response, rhetoricality, and witnessing) and offer a glimpse into my own classroom as we practice witnessing one another's lives before reading a testimony to the experiences of one child in Pol Pot's Cambodia: Loung Ung's *First They Killed My Father*.

#### A. **What is Testimonial Literature?**

As readers, we are witnesses to stories told by others, questions we did not know to ask, and discoveries that are not ours. But when we read the testimony of a genocide witness, we become that survivor's listener and bear witness to her testimony. According to Shoshana Felman in *Testimony*, when a survivor of genocide (or other human rights violations) feels impelled to transmit her testimony, the testimony is *addressed* to others and invites transactions. For Felman, the witness-reader is the vehicle of an occurrence "composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition" (5). In other words, testimony is not a "totalizable account" of those events (2). Witnesses have dealt with their memory of genocide experiences in a variety of literary forms that can be considered "art": testimonial narrative, extended essays, novels, short stories, and poetry. My

focus in this chapter is on testimonial literature: testimony that is a written, published, first person, autobiographical narrative in literary idiom though I believe my argument extends to other literary forms. In *Holocaust Testimonies*, Lawrence Langer writes:

Written memoirs, by the very strategies available to their authors – style, chronology, analogy, imagery, dialogue, a sense of character, a coherent moral vision – strive to narrow this space [the space of imagination separating what the victim has endured from the reader’s capacity to understand it], easing us into their unfamiliar world through familiar (and hence comforting?) literary devices. (19)

Written memoirs, then, involve conscious choices in language to transform memory into a coherent and sharable narrative. The medium, then, acknowledges gaps between the experience of the events and efforts to assign language to that experience.

Autobiographies and memoirs are literary representations of their author’s life histories, yet the question of how to represent one’s life and how to account for what she witnessed offers writers and readers challenges unique to this genre. What the witness-writer owes to the reader is the ability to persuade her that the narrator is *trying* to represent the experience at hand. It is a “given that memory isn’t factual or accurate, nor should anyone claim it to be”; it is an expression of “a series of fragments, moments, memories, dreams, perceptions, lies and stabs at truth” (Lauck). The witness-writer is impelled to revisit her trauma and share it with the public. Elie Wiesel, a Holocaust memoirist, said he penned his memories of living in concentration camps “to justify my own survival” (1995, 2); “I needed to give some meaning to my survival” (2006, viii). Wiesel, and other testimonial writers, enters a relationship with language, depending on language to help him establish an account of his experience. James Young, in *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*, interprets testimony and suggests: “Even if narrative cannot document events, or constitute perfect factuality, it can document the actuality of the writer and text. The writer and link to events may thus be reified not in the writer’s words, but in the writing activity

that brought words to the page” (420). In other words, understanding testimonial literature means recognizing that a real person somehow needed to tell her story and that the writing of the story was instrumental in remembering her experiences. The words on the page do not (cannot) tell the whole story of the event, of the writer, or of the meaning to her survival, but because someone (our students) will read those words, the writer might “justify” her survival.

Testimonial literature is specific to the author; it cannot give the wider picture or list chronological stages, but what it does is to depict and scrutinize the effect upon individuals of the events taking place, even when those events are not fully understood by the narrators. Judith Kelly wrote about the human and historical value of Primo Levi’s testimonial literature *If This is a Man*. The value, she argues, “resides not in its documentary accuracy, not in any reliance upon dates, figures and facts, but in its personal, subjective nature, its recounting of the experience of the individual, and, in so doing, its reconstruction of that experience in such a way that the reader – any reader, at any time – can come to some understanding of it” (2). Testimonial literature, then, is a genre in need of an informed and ethical readership, informed in understanding the genre but, perhaps more importantly, ethical in the practice of reading testimonial literature.

An Internet search of “testimonial literature,” will bring up over a million results with most referencing testimonial narratives from Latin America called *testimonio*. Before going on to the role of the reader as witness, I want to make note of *testimonio*, a body of testimonial literature prompted by periods of social and political turmoil throughout Latin American in the second half of the twentieth century (e.g., Cuban Revolution, Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua, indigenous human rights struggles in Guatemala). John Beverly’s *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth* (2004) offers *testimonio* as “a nonfictional, popular-democratic form of epic narrative” (33) and as a “novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet [...] form, told in

the first person by a narrator who is the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a ‘life’ or a significant life experience” (31). *Testimonio* is a story that needs to be told, but it also involves some pressing and immediate problem of communication because the witness—the one who experiences the human rights violation, the war, the oppression – has limited literacy skills. The witness, like Rigoberta Menchu (Guatemala) or Domatila Barrios de Chungara (Bolivia), tells her story to an intellectual who transcribes her story. Thus, the question of authorship becomes a critique of this genre (although this critique could be extended to other co-authored testimonial texts). As a mediated narrative, is the text still a first-person account? This is just one critique of *testimonio*.

In my view, *testimonio* captures the transactional nature of testimony by illustrating how a state works to constrain the potential of human beings while also illuminating human resilience. As readers, we also become implicated because we can at the same time witness and be a part of the hierarchical tension; we are in a position of relative authority and privilege in relation to the witness. Furthermore, we are implicated by the text’s rhetoricality, a text used to further a political cause (like Menchu’s emergent indigenous Mayan movement in Guatemala in the 1980s), to fight back, or to engage recognition of something kept hidden. Beverly suggests that *testimonio* aspires to change the world. He writes, “How one interprets the world also has to do with how one seeks, and is able, to change it” (xvi). Because *testimonio* is a specific type of testimony, it also requires an informed readership. The transactional nature of *testimonio*, specifically the intersections of privilege and oppression, democracy and communism, and tradition and revolution, offers the modern English classroom an intriguing site for inquiry. Thus, while I focus on testimonial literature written by genocide survivors in this chapter, I see testimonial literature as an inclusive genre that responds to a human and universal need to bear



witness in many contexts. I include *testimonio* here because some testimonies are writers' renderings of firsthand accounts. These testimonies are helpful in emphasizing the special transactional nature of all testimonial literature.

## **B. The Reader as a Witness**

Witnessing as part of the framework of transactional consciousness theory considers the relation between literature and testimony, between the writer and the witness. In the English classroom, our reading of testimonial literature enables the unfolding of accounts of trauma and genocide. However, the mere reading of genocide literature does not necessarily fulfill a testimonial resolution. For the testimony to emerge, a reader must carry out her responsibilities as a secondhand or belated witness: to understand the emergence of the narrative and how she is positioned by the narrative to observe, remember, and carry on the testimony. Testimony is a means toward witnessing rather than a means toward some fixed or static knowledge. Witnessing in the English classroom, then, means being conscious of our alignment with and responsibility to the writer of testimony; it is a practice of relating to others in an ethical and responsible way.

I think that the transactional reading process described in chapter three is a necessary foundation to the practice of reading as witnessing because of the emotional response evoked by testimonial literature. The reader must be allowed or rather encouraged to experience the text and must have ample time to respond personally and emotionally before deliberating interpretation with her community of readers. The process of reading testimonial literature is particularly tenuous because the reader is responding to a firsthand account of genocide, an account by a real person. As a reader in the act of reading, the "knowing" of the event is realized, and she becomes party to the creation of knowledge, however unsettled or fragmented. In other words, the reader-listener (secondhand witness) becomes a participant and co-owner of the traumatic event; these

two distant beings become aligned (Felman 57). If the testimony-text is an alignment between the reader-listener and the testifier-witness, what would this alignment mean? What are the implications? In my view, the meaning of this alignment is embedded in the reading process because of the transactions at work, but as we discussed in chapter three, rhetoric is an inherent feature of language; it is a condition of our existence. Thus, it would be unethical to teach reading practices and literary analysis without attending to rhetoricality, a condition of the human experience and action. Texts written by witnesses to atrocities serve as a reminder that our world is divided in zones of safety and danger, wealth and poverty, and progress and stagnation; they raise questions of how such discrepancies persist and what to do.

Witnessing as a stance for reading is a way of attending to practical and moral claims because it is a stance in which readers take responsibility for their role in a reading transaction, a responsibility that recognizes the rhetoricality of the text, specifically how the agent of memory uses language to represent an event and her experiences to serve a cause. The agent of memory is first the author of the testimonial literature, but the witness-reader, once without such a memory, becomes an agent of memory who will share and potentially teach others about the author's life. The witness-reader becomes a co-owner of the story and thus responsible for it.

Can student witness without being an agent of memory? Yes. Once a reader becomes the co-owner of the testimony, she is faced with the choice of whether or not to become an agent of memory. An agent of memory acts on behalf of the past, remembering and accounting for that which happened and representing it in such a way as to keep the past from being forgotten. Thus, if she chooses not to act on behalf of the past, not to represent it for others, she does not become an agent of memory. Agents of memory who construct museums, books, films, art, and memorials in remembrance of the past invite others to participate in a collective remembering,

which means that they invite people to witness the past. The agent of memory, however, can manipulate or even create memories as the means for setting personal, national, or world agendas, which means that agents of memory are certainly rhetorical but may also be unethical or inaccurate. Thus, it is important for students to be conscious of their role as readers, spectators, visitors, and viewers of the past, and, when they become agents of memory, their role in the production of memory as they construct and project narratives of the past into the present.

To begin, witnessing should be distinguished from other possible responses to testimony such as voyeurism and spectatorship. Voyeurism is the act of obsessively watching others, and spectatorship is the act of watching something without taking part. The principal characteristic of both is that the voyeur or spectator does not interact directly with the subject, which positions the subject as a distant spectacle. In witnessing, however, the testifier recognizes the listener, depends on the listener to witness her testimony. The witness to the testimony comes to “partially experience the trauma in himself” (Felman 57). In other words, if we think of reading as a way of listening or witnessing to testimony, the reader takes part and, in doing so, becomes implicated in a number of ways. For Simon and Eppert, in “Remembering Obligation: Pedagogy and the Witnessing of Testimony of Historical Trauma,” “the first-order witness initiates a chain of testimony held together by the bonds of an ethics forged in relation of responsibility and respect” (176). The reader reads the words of the witness and becomes a witness (secondhand witness), and the reader, through the act of reading, is “placed under the obligation of response to an embodied singular experience not recognizable to one’s own” (176). The alignment between the reader-listener and the testifier-witness suggests that reading-as-witnessing obliges the reader to “double attentiveness,” an attentiveness to ethical and epistemological responsibilities. Double attentiveness, for Simon and Eppert, is a condition for witnessing testimony that means

“attending to what is said while hearing how the saying of testimony undoes the discursive grasp one has of the other’s story” (183). To be clear, testimony imposes certain obligations on those who receive it, obliging the reader to take part. How the reader takes part is a question of ethics, i.e., how we view ourselves in relation to the subject and what we believe society *ought* to be.

One way of thinking about a reader’s obligation is Simon and Eppert’s focus on what to do after reading a testimony. They suggest the secondhand witness ought to carry stories of past injustice “beyond their moment of telling by taking those stories to another time and space where they become available to be heard or seen” by “re-presenting” the story to others, or by enacting “one’s relationship with others so as to make evident that one’s practice has been informed by the living memory of prior testimony” (178). Their article offers suggestions for class activities where students re-present through words, images, and actions what is “worthy of remembrance” (178). While I agree witnessing obliges the reader to respond ethically, I do not necessarily agree that re-presenting a survivor’s testimony is the most ethical response or that readers should feel obliged to attempt a retelling. Testimonial literature is carefully crafted, and I would not presume to decide nor ask my students to decide what is worth remembering from a victim’s testimony. However, I do see Simon and Eppert’s double attentiveness as an ethical response and act that has been informed by witnessing. Therefore, I offer that reading-as-witnessing is about practicing our attentiveness to intertwined epistemological and ethical responsibilities as readers. Teachers can teach ways to resist spectatorship, recognize transactions, and notice rhetoricality.

In my view, the witness’s obligation to the testifier is to accept epistemological responsibility: to be concerned with *how* knowledge of a given subject could be obtained. How is it possible that this writer of the text (the eye witness testifying) knows what happened if she was traumatized, for example? To be clear, I am not suggesting that the reader-witness

necessarily accuse the testifier of fraudulence; rather, I am suggesting the reader-witness attend to the writing activity that brought the words to the page for her privilege of bearing witness to another person's life. The reader becomes "an apprentice to the provision of memory," which is to say the reader learns, as she listens to the testimony, the limits of what one can say and needs to say and tries to respond to what lies beyond (Simon and Eppert 179). In some cases, there may be intentional deception in testimony, and it is also the responsibility of the modern English classroom to do inquiry into the publication and distribution of testimonial texts. The ethical reader, thus, attends to *how* a person translates her experience of trauma across time and space, which means she has to decipher what the testifier claims to know and what she does not or could not know. In other words, the ethical reader considers the rhetoricality of the text.

To accept ethical responsibility is to attend to all these epistemological concerns so that the testifier does not have to carry the story alone. The transactions among the testifier, the reader, and the reading process teach the reader the privilege of bearing witness to another life quite distant from their own (Felman and Laub 85) rather than teaching readers to act "complicitously in others' suffering" (Rentschler 298) or view the other as an "object of feeling and sight" (Hesford 57). The privilege of bearing witness, however, is not without some degree of trauma for the reader.

### C. **Trauma: The Ethics of Teaching Reading as Witnessing**

A reader-as-witness can be seen as a companion, listening to the testifier as she witnesses her own suffering. What does this companion, now aligned to the testifier; do with this new knowledge and experience? Dori Laub, M.D., the co-author of *Testimony*, testimonial interviewer of Holocaust survivors, and child survivor of the Holocaust, examines what it means to bear witness to a testimony. Through his work as an interview-listener, he considers the

implications of listening to testimony. For our purposes as English teachers, I'd like to consider how reading, like listening, aligns testifier-witness and the reader-witness. In this case, we would consider the adolescent reader as the listener to the narrative of human pain. In the teen reader, the testimony to the trauma of the victim is inscribed anew. Unlike the historical documents and artifacts about an event, in the event of reading a testimonial narrative, the "knowing of the event is given birth to" (Laub 57). The listener, our student, comes to be what Laub calls a "co-owner" of the event who, he suggests, partially experiences the event and the trauma. The reader-listener, then, must attend to the feelings that the victim experiences if the trauma is to emerge and for witnessing to take place. At this point, many teachers might be thinking that it is unethical to ask a teenager to carry such a burden. Indeed, it may be. But it also may be that the English classroom can be a place where students and teachers work together to ponder such ethical questions related to literary representation of trauma, where a community of witnesses can address "bewilderment, injury, confusion, dread and conflicts that the trauma victim feels" (58).

Reading testimonial literature has its hazards. How can the child reader assume the testimony and maintain perspective that she is not the victim? In her essay about testimony in her college class, Felman writes:

[Readers cannot] fulfill their task without, in turn, passing through the crisis of experiencing their boundaries, their separateness, their functionality, and indeed their sanity, at risk. They have to learn how to recognize these hazards, how to integrate these pitfalls of the witnessing into the fulfillment of their ...human task, and how to bond with the narrator in a common struggle to release the testimony. (xvii)

Once the listener engages with testimony in such a way that she shares some aspect of the experience of the original witness, she cannot ignore any number of experiences or questions: "the question of death, of facing time and its passage; of the meaning and purpose of living; of the limits of one's omnipotence; of losing the ones that are close to us; the great question of our

ultimate aloneness; our otherness from any other; our responsibility to and for our destiny; the question of loving and its limits; of parents and children; and so on” (Felman 72). Even in middle school classrooms, testimonial literature can evoke deep philosophical discussions about the power and limitations of language to ask, explore, discover, and sometimes answer questions about humanity. The teacher and students must be aware of potential, protective responses to existential questions explored in testimonial literature. According to Laub, students may withdraw, express outrage, foreclose through facts becoming obsessed with fact finding to assuage uncertainty, and/or respond hyperemotionally. Hyperemotion, according to Laub, looks like compassion and caring but acts as “defensive affectivity” and can drown out the testifier (73). While the defenses may be conscious or unconscious, there is this urgency as reader-listeners to pull back, to distance ourselves from the other’s suffering. What can we learn from this sense of urgency, from the trauma of listening, from the testimony, and from the very process of our listening? Is the trauma of witnessing worth the testimony? The answer, I think, is to consider what would be lost had we not read that testimony, had we not experienced urgency, had we not listened, had we not been a witness to that life.

In my view, Laub’s work is an important reminder to teachers to keep to include testimonial literature in our curriculum and to teach witnessing. In Laub’s chapter, “An Event Without a Witness,” he explains how the survivors could not bear witness during the *actual* occurrence. And this seems so fascinating to me and helpful in understanding why we should read testimonial literature, why it is essential to modern education. The survivors did not have the capacity to be aware or to comprehend the event during the occurrence – “its dimensions, consequences, and above all, its radical *otherness* to all known frames of reference” (84). To give and to listen to testimony calls attention to the human will to live and desire to know the

"circumstances designed for its obliteration and destruction" (84). What was the totality of the event? What were the beliefs, ideas, and systems that made the event possible? What are the institutions (such as schools) that cultivated the beliefs and ideas? Laub ends his chapter with what I think is going to be incredibly important in arguing for genocide literature in our schools, for what it can do for human beings and our citizenry:

It is the realization that the lost ones are not coming back; the realization that what life is all about is precisely living with an unfulfilled hope; only this time with the sense that you are not alone any longer – that someone can be there as your companion – knowing you, living with you through the unfulfilled hope, someone saying, "I'll be with you in the very process of your losing me. I am your witness." (92)

Reading testimonies is an opportunity to contemplate in their own terms (though prompted by the testimony) essential questions about the human condition. Indeed, bearing witness to trauma can be difficult and risky, and this risk leads some to justify silence as a preferred ethical and pedagogical response, but such a position constrains experiences and knowledge and potentially meaning-making transactions. An ethical education teaches the courage to witness. A teacher, who also experiences the trauma of witnessing, can help make reading testimonial literature a productive, human experience.

#### **D. How to Nurture and Support the Ethical Practice of Witnessing**

Testimonies are communicative practices that convey to others a sense of prior events; testimonies of historical trauma attempt to translate the tangibility of occurrences across time and space. As translations they are insufficient and inadequate to render fully the realities of human cruelty and suffering and limited by memory of the past. Testimonies enact betrayal. The betrayed has the obligation to convey "what happened" to those who survived and to those whose deaths ended the possibility of their witness. The rhetoricality of testimony allows the listener to attend to what is said while hearing how the saying undoes the grasp one has of the



other's story. According to Levinas, "The unspoken is necessary, so that listening remains a way of thinking" (80).

Learning how to be a witness is essential to the framework of transactional consciousness. I think Felman and Laub's work with testimony and witnessing has illuminated, for me, how I have taught students to read as somewhat passive spectators to trauma and suffering. Much of my reading instruction has been focused on accumulating knowledge about distant others rather than considering our reading and viewing habits as voyeurs or spectators – disinterested, un-implicated readers. Hesford asks us to go beyond recognition, beyond recognizing the spectacle. I argue that to do this, to be a witness rather than a spectator in the world, we have to practice testifying to our own lives and listening to the testimony of those with whom we share our days. For most English classes, students spend about forty to fifty minutes a day with the same people, and in most school years, that is for about one hundred and eighty days. In witnessing our own lives and bearing witness to the lives of others, we become conscious of agents of memory—people and stories that create memories in others, memories that have the potential to transform perspectives and ways of being with others. How, then, do we practice witnessing?

What makes witnessing an ethical practice is what Simon and Eppert call "the obligation to bear witness – to re-testify, to somehow convey what one has heard and thinks important to remember" (187). Simon and Eppert suggest the classroom can become a community of memory where students can work through the difficulties of responding to the experiences and questions identified above by Felman. This is the foundation of ethical or *good* reading. In classrooms, a community of memory is set in motion by the practical questions of how, and for what purposes, a testimony is given, i.e., to uncover rhetoricality. A classroom as a

community of memory means finding ways to help students articulate the (often unspoken) questions that compel the writing of testimonial texts, while opening to collective investigations the possibilities and limitations inherent in different ways of responding to these questions.

What are ways to help students read testimonial texts meaningfully, to explore how and why they were written, to recognize in them expressions and articulations of the human condition that are relevant to their own lives, and to find in them enriched understandings of injustice and alienation that prompts them to action? One way might be to draw upon writing testimonial texts as a way of teaching students the *process* and *experience* of writing testimonial texts. Donald Graves (1983) inspired many teachers to make writer's workshop a part of the English classroom, and the work of others like Donald Murray (1985), Lucy Calkins (1986), Nancie Atwell (1987), and Jane Hansen (2001) has supported K-12 writing workshop over the years. Process-oriented classrooms recognize that when writers work through the stages of writing (e.g., prewriting, drafting, revising, conferencing, revising again, and editing for publication), they are working through questions that they need to answer for themselves and readers (Dutro and McIver 94). The writing-reading relationship, then, has potential to support students in their writing practice and their reading practice.

To prepare students to write or to support students during the writing process, teachers might bring in "mentor texts," or exemplars in a specific genre, so that students have examples of the genre's text structure or an author's techniques (Dutro and McIver). In writing, then, mentor texts are in the service of writing practice. While I do think (and will show below) that the process of writing a personal narrative can nurture and support the ethical practice of witnessing and prepare students to read genocide literature with greater consciousness of their role in that reading-writing relationship, I do not think testimonial literature should be used as mentor texts.

In the case of genocide literature, we would want to avoid students reading a genocide testimony as a tool for problem solving their own memoir, just as we would want to avoid asking a student to imagine a genocide situation (or some simulation) in order to prepare them to read. According to Totten, “The activity may engage students, but they often forget the purpose of the lesson, and even worse, they are left with the impression at the conclusion of the activity that they now know what it was like” (18). Instead, I suggest that the process of writing a personal narrative has the potential for building a capacity for witnessing.

#### **E. Into the Classroom**

In thinking about how to nurture and support witnessing in my own classroom and before witnessing the testimony of a genocide survivor, I wanted students to practice the transactions among witnessing, writing testimony, sharing the testimony, and listening-bearing witness to the testimony of others. I realize that most English teachers do not teach just reading and literature any more than they teach just composition. Most of us have about fifty minutes a day with students to teach *all* that is English (reading, literature, vocabulary, grammar, composition, speaking, listening, etc.). During the 2012-2013 school year, I was fortunate to have a double-block or eighty minutes with a group of about thirty eighth graders to teach “all that is English.” And so in this section I invite readers to bear witness in my classroom as I put into practice the witnessing of transactional consciousness theory. You will hopefully notice all the transactions that have shaped me and continue to shape me as a human being and inform my practice and choices as a teacher: my own life experiences, authors, scholars, professional development, travel, reading experiences, writing experiences, and certainly, students.

A few weeks before we read *First They Killed My Father*, a memoir about the genocide carried out by Pol Pot and his Khmer Rouge regime between 1975 and 1979 in Cambodia, we

began writing personal narratives during writing workshop time, which was usually the second half of the block. During writing workshop, I wanted to call attention to the partial-ness of narrative, how despite all our efforts, any story we wrote would leave gaps, and perhaps those gaps are what make narrative so intriguing. I had spent a decade practicing the lessons of writing pedagogy experts like Nancie Atwell, Donald Graves, and Donald Murray, and I think I had done a fairly good job of honoring their student-oriented pedagogy. During that school year, however, I had read another text on writing during a graduate course at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC): *Writing as a Way of Being* (2011) by Robert Yagelski. Yagelski offered an ontological argument about writing with others that moved me to recognize that my focus on the writer and the writing product blinded me to the potential of focusing on the actual writing experience. And when I became conscious of this, when I focused on the experience of witnessing my life with writing, I recognized how writing was witnessing. Through the activity of writing, we are witnessing our lives.

In *Writing as a Way of Being*, Yagelski explores what anyone who has ever written something they believe at the time to be important already knows: the actual experience of writing is quite separate from the text. And this is why once the piece of text is “finished,” a writer may feel distanced from the memory, I would go so far as to say somewhat melancholy, realizing that the “finishing” of the text was nowhere near as exhilarating as the writing itself. As Young indicates above, “the writer and link to events may thus be reified not in the writer’s words, but in the writing activity that brought words to the page” (420). The writing activity, then, is the remembering (if not reliving) and the translating of the occurrence across time and space. When the writing stops, so too does the occurrence.

When teachers talk about writing as having the potential to change the world, admittedly a lofty goal, they might (as I did) overlook that it is the experience of writing that often has greater potential to move the writer to a place of greater understanding of herself and the world rather than the information contained on the page.

With an emphasis on skills-based learning and correct text production in the writing classroom, teachers and students are missing out on pedagogical benefits of Yagelski's ontological argument. He emphasizes a pedagogy that focuses on the "writer writing" rather than the "writer's writing":

The text does not disappear in this pedagogy, but rather than being the focus of writing instruction, it becomes a component of the process of inquiry into self and world that the act of writing can be. In this way, the text becomes part of a larger act of inquiry through writing, which in turn becomes a vehicle for truth-seeking...In other words, we write as a way of being together in the world -- as a way to understand ourselves and our connection to what is around us; in this formulation, we write *with* the text rather than to produce a text. (8)

As students revise or work on drafts of any writing, Yagelski suggests a pedagogy that asks about the experience that was the focus of writing (not the text). Teaching writing is engaging in writing as an act of inquiry into our own experiences of the world much like Rosenblatt's theory of transactional reading. Writing is participating in the world and who we are in this world. If students can experience and understand writing as such, then when they read, they will be aligned ontologically with the other writer and ready to bear witness. In other words, they will sense a connectedness in being.

The challenge to the English classroom is to cultivate pedagogies that take into account the complexities of human learning and human life that are part of distinct and overlapping global communities (Yagelski). The narrow curriculum that is prescriptive and measurable is an attempt to control such complexity. Yagelski wonders what if we would have always taught kids

writing as a way of being. Might it have “opened up a capacity of writing to understand anew their experience of themselves in the world...[and] what might the communities they created look like?” (163). In my view, Yagelski is suggesting that writing as a way of being may just contribute to our students’ capacity to imagine how our communities *ought* to be, how we *ought* to relate to one another.

#### **F. Writing as Witnessing**

I had written with and for students in the past using Atwell or Murray’s writing workshop approach, but I had not developed trust in the process. Perhaps it was pressure to teach skills or difficulty balancing the teaching of reading and writing; nevertheless, every year, despite my best intentions, I would inevitably do more explicit instruction and cut back on in-class writing time. Reading Yagelski’s book alerted me to the need to revise my teaching practices. The day after my graduate class met to discuss Yagelski’s book, I watched closely my eighth graders in classroom H103 as they drafted personal narratives. Some were writing; some were thinking; and, of course, quite a few were fidgeting. I wondered about the sort of community I had created: *How many were witnessing a scene of their lives for the first time? How many were producing a product? And when students would inevitably peer conference their memories, how many would listen to their peer as though it were a privilege to bear witness to that life? Had I taught them to do that?* No. No, I had not. I was not, however, entirely sure how to teach “writing as a way of being.”

It was during a professional development day not long after reading Yagelski’s work that I first met Dr. Jennifer Berne from Northern Illinois University. In a demonstration lesson, she stood in front of a room full of English teachers and talked through her writing process: an A to Z brainstorm activity, a select-and-reject activity to choose her topic, and a graphic organizer to

plan her piece. She also made visible and audible her thinking, from anxiety about seeing a blank page to struggling to find the right word. It was a five-minute frenzy, but it was enough for me to see how I might shift the focus of a writing workshop mini-lesson from producing a text to the experience of writing. If I could come to the writing event open to the possibility of experience, I might be able to support the *act* of writing as witnessing rather than writing as a product. I knew that we would write about our lives, and I knew that I would have to be and teach being vulnerable if we were to draw out what it means to write with and for others.

Over the course of a few weeks, I carved out a few days here and there for students to watch me write; notice what they noticed; and then either try out something I did or just keep on writing what they had the day before. This was my way of trying to tune into the act of writing. I made the decision not to have a skill or standard in mind nor any plan for what I would write about other than a personal occurrence that I wanted to explore through writing. I did my best to go to that place and time and make visible my struggle to gather the fragments into some coherent rendering. Here is a sketch of how I try to make visible my writing experience for students (Berne):

I turn on the overhead projector and document camera. I lay out my notebook, opened to a fresh page. I grab my felt tip pen and announce that I am going to be Sarah (the person, not the teacher) for a few minutes.

“Just watch me write and listen to me think about my writing, and then we will talk about what you notice.”

I do not plan what I am going to write, but I know I want students to think about how something unexpected can spark a memory or move us to action. I have in mind the next text we

are going to read (*First They Killed My Father*), so I am hoping to help them write about a childhood memory.

“So I hate a blank page. It stresses me out, almost paralyzes me. I am going to just do some brainstorming to see if I can find a place to start, a place I want to know more about, or a place I want to think about.”

I admit that I am drawing a blank and am feeling anxious, so I turn to the back of my notebook where I have taped a list of writing prompts to spark memories and experiences. I am not opposed to writing prompts if the writer finds them useful. I scan through and then write a few on my blank page: my first funeral (which was when I was ten and my twelve-year-old cousin had just died of leukemia); a special place in my childhood (which was the closet); when my life changed forever (which was when my father moved in with me and my husband). I write the topics, and then I write “so what” next to each deciding which is worth writing or which “so what” I was most interested in discovering (Atwell).

At this point, students, who are supposed to be *just* noticing, call out to me which topic they want me to write about. Most students are fascinated by the lives of their teachers. I decided on writing about my funeral memory. I talk about (as I write) all the memory bits I can pull together. I was about ten when my cousin, Ray, died. I think he was about twelve, the same age as my older sister, Libby. Ray died of leukemia. I have a vivid memory of where and how my dad told me that Ray died. I have another vivid memory of the car ride to the funeral. I was riding in the “back-back” of the family “sportabout” station wagon; it was raining, and head lights from the cars behind us reflected in the rain drops that fell on rear windshield just inches from my nose. I talked about how “what happened” was blurry and why it mattered to my life now was unclear. Then, I stopped. It was time to hear what the students noticed (e.g., I got



stuck; I brainstormed; I considered the so what; I drafted; I talked to myself). And then it was time for them to bear witness to their own childhood.

During the days that followed, we worked through the standard writing process (brainstorming, planning, drafting, conferencing, and revising) in the same way and with different memories. One student wrote about her visit to Poland for a family wedding, playing disco polo and eating *kielbasa*. Another student wrote about her first funeral, too, and then her memory of visiting her father in jail. Side-by-side we wrote our memories. We'd cross out and erase words on the page; we'd turn to a neighbor and talk through some part that we just couldn't capture with words. As I talked through my own writing, I was careful to deliberate the choices, always asking if it was the truth and how the story was, in fact, my own. I shared my frustration that which ended up on the page was far from a "totalizable account" of my experience (2).

I tried out different techniques to try to call forth a memory or fill in gaps. For example, I tried writing my memory first from the voice of a young Sarah and then as my older self to see how the narrator represented my memory differently. I wondered out loud which rendering would be more authentic, even fair. In a few writing events, I had to admit that I was filling in gaps with a bit of fiction or even with what I felt happened but could not recall for certain. For those scenes, I tried a different type face or asterisks to alert my reader that I was being more inventive. I suggested this was an ethical obligation I had to my reader. And dialogue, while wholly inventive for my piece, helped me imagine (even project) how my father might have comforted me, for example. It was a childhood memory after all. I could ask my siblings, but I could no longer ask my father about the memory because he has passed; even so, whatever my family remembers from my cousin's death would also be a memory and, thus, partial and subjective. I wondered aloud if we should even tell our stories suggesting it was a little unethical

because of the problem of truth. How can I really know “what happened”? I tried to model, to make visible, my “double attentiveness” (Simon and Eppert). How did I know what happened? What were the limits to what I *could* know and tell with any kind of authority? And what was my ethical responsibility to the reader-listener? How can I help her to experience this memory alongside me in an authentic way?

I even wondered if I was being too personal as a teacher. My greatest concern was whether or not I was teaching students to bear witness to one another’s lives or whether I was teaching them to be spectators, even voyeurs. Some students were excited to hear my memory of people sobbing or of what my young cousin looked like in his casket. For the most part, however, I felt like students were bearing witness to my life as I was witnessing my childhood memory for the first time. When I looked up from my paper, some students made eye contact with me as if to say, *Go on, I’m with you*. Others looked down, perhaps uncomfortable with the level of intimacy (i.e., hearing a teacher share personal things), perhaps just showing respect for my memory. As a child, I did not have the capacity to be aware or to comprehend the event of my cousin’s death; I did not have the capacity to fully comprehend how that memory shaped my understanding of death. The students listening to me so attentively during my writing – and listening to one another during conferences – illuminated our human desire to know about one another’s lives. I am not sure that I was able to make explicit in any way how subjective and even rhetorical my writing was, but I think the students understood (as I do now) the vital role we each play as listeners in one another’s lives, for without a listener our testimony would not exist.

It has been my privilege all these years as a teacher to listen to students’ stories about their lives. I have read thousands of personal narratives, but in making visible the act of writing

alongside my students, I experienced what it means to witness my own life through writing, to enter a relationship with language, to depend on language to help me establish an account of my experience, and to trust my students to be my witness.

During writing workshop, I observed powerful moments as small groups of students read their stories to one another with respect and compassion. Indeed, peer response is an act of community building and shared meaning making, as Yagelski argues, because it is not limited to improving texts. I think that while I had essentially taught the writing standards by going through the writing process with students and doing mini-lessons on some writing techniques, my “objective” was to illuminate and be conscious of the activity of writing. The products were secondary and perhaps better because they were not our focus. I think we made a lot of progress toward using writing as a way of witnessing our own lives and as a way of teaching us to bear witness to one another’s lives.

#### **G. From Writing to Reading**

I wondered what would happen if we took this way of thinking about writing and listening to literature. Could we bring this understanding of the experience of writing, of narrative construction, of the rhetorical moves the writer makes to express and communicate to the reading experience of books? Would the students read a memoir, produced outside the writing workshop, with greater understanding of the writer’s experience? Would this be another valued story and writer in our community of writers and listeners, or would this text be an outsider and thus an “object of feeling and sight” (Felman)?

Loung Ung, in her talk “Writing the Truth,” explained what moment prompted her to write her memoir *First They Killed My Father*. Born in 1970 in Phnom Penh, Loung Ung is a survivor of the killing fields of Cambodia. Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge regime systematically

killed nearly 1.7 million Cambodians, including Ung's parents, two of her siblings, and twenty other relatives. Only a child at the time, Ung was forced to train and perform duties of a child soldier in order to survive. In the three-minute clip of the talk, Ung tells us the "four little words" that prompted her to write her 2000 memoir: Pol Pot is dead. She says that when she heard these words on the radio, "My heart shattered like a stained glass dropped on a concrete floor. My eyes in such shock that I could not blink...I could only hate." Pol Pot was characterized in the report as "kind" and "gentlemanly" and "charismatic." While she wanted to "crush" the radio, instead she said, "I could...pick up my pen and tell my story and tell the truth about the mass murderer that he was."

In the weeks that followed the transition from writing workshop to reading workshop, students considered more deeply truth-telling and bearing witness. Ung's memoir helped us understand storytelling in a more public context, what it would mean to publish our personal narratives for the world to read and witness. First, we have someone, a survivor, who willingly relives or perhaps really witnesses for the first time in the act of storytelling an experience, and second, we have the other who is that survivor's companion in experiencing the story (the reader-witness). In other words, the reader is a secondary witness, also bearing witness to the events, trauma, and atrocity, seeking an understanding that of which is unimaginable and, perhaps, unknowable, but no less impactful as a way of being in the world. To help us understand this somewhat existential experience, my class read a blog post called "Talking Wounds" that summarizes several points that I first read (and discussed above) in Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*. This blog, written by visual artist Marilene Oliver and human rights philosopher Sophie Oliver, "seeks to explore ways of ethically discussing and representing human rights atrocities."

Oliver and Oliver quote French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard who describes the model of listener as one “who actively and ethically listens, recognising the voice and subjectivity of the testifier in the process is not merely an additional benefit; (s)he is a vital element without which the testimony would not exist” (qtd. in “Talking Wounds”). The blog, Ung’s memoir, and our own writing experiences transacted to help us make sense of our responsibility as writers and readers of testimony and other agents of memory; we are vital elements.

At this point, I need to pause to admit that I initially read *First They Killed My Father* in 2006 because of the Illinois Genocide Education Mandate requiring me to teach about the Cambodian genocide. Prior to 2012, however, I had not read this book whole-class though Lincoln had a class set in its book room. Instead, I had jigsawed the genocides listed in the mandate (see chapter two) as a way of covering the genocides. Jigsaw is a technique whereby the teacher arranges students into home groups; each group member is assigned a different text to read on their own or with members from other groups assigned the same text; then, members return to their home group to “piece together” the information (similarities, differences) gleaned from each text. In other words, only a handful of students each year had read Ung’s account of the genocidal processes that killed her family, and they were responsible for retelling Ung’s story for their peers. Clearly, there are ethical issues with my past practice that I have tried to illuminate here and in previous chapters. The dilemmas I faced as an English teacher trying to meet a state mandate about human rights violations were so profound that I pursued a doctorate in English so that I could research these dilemmas for myself and others.

My experiences learning and teaching about genocide, a simultaneous process, prompted a shift in my treatment of *First They Killed My Father* from a book about genocide to an inquiry of public testimony. I found this notion of bearing witness essential to understanding the stories

we tell and the stories we hear, essential to developing what I have been calling transactional consciousness theory. For Felman and Laub, the listener (or reader) is “party to the creation of knowledge” (15). Teachers following state mandates (whether that means teaching about genocide or the Common Core State Standards) are a vital element without which those mandates would not exist; our task then is to take up this role actively and ethically, which means considering what and how we *ought* to teach.

In 2012, then, we read Ung’s memoir as a class. I did not want anyone to be alone in witnessing her life nor did I want any student to feel responsible for retelling Ung’s experiences as a child soldier in Khmer Rouge Cambodia. We read the first chapter of *First They Killed My Father* for narratorial style primarily. I wanted students to notice how the grown-up Ung was witnessing her childhood, translating her experiences through sensory language, imagery, thoughts, feelings and observations, dialogue, poetic language, and perspective:

Ma says I stomp around like a cow dying of thirst. She’s tried many times to teach me the proper way for a young lady to walk. First, you connect your heel to the ground, then roll the ball of your feet on the earth while your toes curl up painfully. Finally you end up with your toes gently pushing you off the ground. All this is supposed to be done gracefully, naturally, and quietly. It all sounds too complicated and painful to me. Besides, I am happy stomping around. (3)

Students heard the voice of five year old Loung, and they noticed how she is representing herself as a precocious, middle class, tomboy-ish child who can’t seem to please her mother but shares a special bond with her father.

Students began a text-based discussion journal to note passages where they became conscious of their witnessing. How are you relating to Ung, whose life seems so distant from yours? What aspects of that passage make it difficult for you to attend to Ung’s memory? How is Ung using language to help her establish an account of experience? What words and phrases resonate with you? What images help or disturb? Are those necessary for Ung? For her readers?

After reading, students converted their notes into interpretive questions for their peers, and we held a fishbowl seminar. For that class, a fishbowl seminar entailed an inside and outside group. The inside group of four to ten students sat in a circle with their notes to discuss selected passages for the purpose of deepening their experience and understanding of the text. The outside group practiced witnessing the discussion by making notes on communication dynamics and the discussion topics. For our first fishbowl, it did not take long for students to express sympathy for the child narrator and how she was “unreliable.” The innocent voice, so young, couldn't possibly remember this detail, they offered. Can we trust her? Is it a matter of trust or in recognizing how this narrator was Ung's link to events? How can testimony be considered nonfiction? (Students did not immediately make the connection to our writing workshop.)

We read some public critiques of Ung's memoir because I wanted students to know that they were cueing into real issues with writing and reading testimony for the public. I wanted them to see how for other survivors who have memories of Cambodia's killing fields, Ung's writing has very real implications. Contributors to a website moderated by the Cambodian cultural group named the Khmer Institute write this critique (among others):

To further impress her readers, Ung actually goes so far as to claim to have shot an AK-47 (142). To be only seven years old and malnourished and still capable of firing an AK-47, a weapon that is even difficult for a full grown adult inexperienced in its use to manage, Ung had to have had superhuman strength. The Khmer Rouge were extremists, but it is hardly believable that they would give such an important and valuable piece of weaponry to a little girl at a time when they were killing people with axes and machetes in order to save bullets. Finally, keeping in mind Ung's constant refrain about how the Khmer Rouge did not trust and hated light-skinned people, why would they then give such a weapon to a light-skinned girl? She explains, "They think I am one of them, one of the pure base children"; but how could they if she is so different in appearance that, as the reader is often reminded, she is constantly discriminated against? (Hor, Lay, and Quinn)

Students were in an uproar. Was Ung trying to “impress her readers”? Maybe. Hadn't we all tried to impress our readers to some degree with our stories? But doesn't desperation make us

capable of “superhuman strength” at times? And hadn’t Ung’s light skin been camouflaged by dirt or by her work ethic? And remember, the students would argue, Ung was a child. We had to trust that the adult Ung was doing the best she could to remember.

Students, working from their personal, emotional responses, seemed to be attending to Simon and Eppert’s “double attentiveness.” They were getting at epistemological questions and exploring the rhetoricality of that text when they were questioning Ung’s choice to write her memoir from the voice of her child self. They noticed Ung’s choice to italicize, indicating sections that were more inventive. Ung’s typography worked to establish trust with the reader because the shift in typeface told her listeners that she had reached the limits of her memory but that she was using writing as a way of investigating what lies beyond. The ethical practice of witnessing (as a reader) means being conscious of how the person (in this case Ung) is translating her experiences across time and space, and the students were engaged in this project. To be clear, the “ethical” part of reading as witnessing is not about sympathy per se; it is building a capacity in readers to recognize the process (and all the transactions) that made public that which was once silent.

#### **H. Conclusion: Moving Toward Witnessing and an Obligation to Attend**

When the state writes a text that mandates a unit of instruction about the Holocaust to “study the events of the Nazi atrocities of 1933 to 1945,” how do we, teacher-readers, read such a text? And when the state revises that text to recognize “that crimes of genocide continue to be perpetrated across the globe...and to deter indifference to crimes against humanity and human suffering wherever they may occur,” how do we read that text? What do these texts attempt to represent? I admitted above that what inspired me to select, order, and share *First They Killed My Father* was such a text: a curriculum mandate crafted by elected members of the state of



Illinois. I think it is worth considering how this text moved me as a reader and writer, ultimately informing my practice as a teacher and path as a human being. I assumed a certain contract with the writers (Illinois legislators), almost a moral relationship, and felt compelled to attend to the call to action. At first, as Hesford argues, the focus was on how I and students would react to the human rights violations, but we learned how to be more conscious of how we were viewing the “spectacle” and shifted our focus and responsibility to the people who needed us to bear witness and remember.

My pedagogical choice to read *First They Killed My Father* with eighth graders not as a vessel of information but as a testimony to which students would bear witness was a deliberate effort to nurture students’ consciousness of how they are ethically implicated by the texts they write and read. They are not spectators but rather witnesses who can either distance themselves from the human beings represented or attend to them and in doing so bear witness to a life mediated by language, in this case, that of Loung Ung. Of course, as I have been arguing, teachers have a responsibility to nurture and support ethical witnessing. In our writing workshop, I had tried to illuminate writing as witnessing and the relationship among writing, reading, and bearing witness. I think by shifting the focus of our work to the activity of writing, we created a community interested in writing as a process of testifying and truth-seeking rather than writing as a product, thus calling attention to how events and experiences are always mediated.

While I recognized the writing experience as a way of witnessing my life and seeking truth, while I tried to support this way of being in the classroom, and while I think it prepared us to then bear witness to Loung Ung’s testimony in *First They Killed My Father*, I think that some students did not see the text as an alignment between themselves (reader-listener-witness) and

Ung (testifier-witness). From what I saw in faces as we read and heard in seminar discussions, Ung's narrative did not stir in them a shift from spectator to witness. Perhaps I failed to engage students in this transaction, or perhaps the "hazards" of listening were too much for some students. The pedagogy of transactional consciousness is complex and hazardous. There is much uncertainty in the transactional spaces among students, teachers, texts, and beyond. Ignoring this transactional space is, indeed, easier than attending to its uncertainty. Nevertheless, I think we have a responsibility to teach the ethical practice of witnessing, for it will prepare our students to go out into the world understanding that there are agents of memory out there ( people, social media, TV, movies, books) addressing our students, positioning them to be global witnesses to historical events and human suffering. What will they do? How will they relate to the distant sufferer? Will they turn away? Will they act complicitously (Rentschler)? Will their interpretations perpetuate hierarchies and stereotypes? Or will they take up their epistemological and ethical responsibilities as a reader and human being?

My hope is that students will know that when they read testimony they recognize that while they are not getting the whole story, the fragments and gaps are valuable and necessary. Their responsibility to the testimony (and to the story) is epistemological (i.e., how it is possible that this writer knows what happened, what are the limits to what the writer can say, what lies beyond those limit) and ethical, as in accepting the obligation to attend to the human being who testifies. Ultimately, our students are not only addressed by the world agents of memory but they are agents of memory, who will use language to mediate events and experience of their lives. What practical and moral claims will they put upon their listeners? Will they know and practice their ethical responsibility to their subject and their audience? Our ethical responsibility as teachers, then, is to cultivate in our students habits of mind that will impact not only their

learning in classroom, not only their choices in colleges and careers, but ultimately the roles they take up in society.

Testimonial literature has an important role in the modern English classroom. Through witnessing, students learn to attend to others, but what of all those stories without witnesses, stories to which our students do not have access? Consider all the voices that remain silent, all the accounts of the human experience hidden by oppressive institutions and beliefs that perpetuate injustice and violence in the world. One way our students can gain access to those hidden experiences of humankind and contemplate what their society *ought* to be is by developing their conscious imagination. The next chapter explores the value of reading novels in the modern English classroom, a value that has been challenged by education reform, as one way of cultivating a conscious imagination. I suggest that the aesthetic of fiction within novels has the potential to expand our imaginative capabilities so that we might imagine and ultimately act toward a more just society.

## **VI. THE CONSCIOUS IMAGINATION: AESTHETIC, ETHICS, AND RHETORIC IN GENOCIDE NOVELS**

The novel constructs a paradigm of a style of ethical reasoning that is context-specific without being relativistic, in which we get potentially universalizable concrete prescriptions by bringing a general idea of human flourishing to bear on a concrete situation which we are invited to enter through imagination.

– Martha Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*

In Nussbaum's view, literary imagination is "an essential ingredient" for human beings to concern themselves with the *good* of other people. A philosopher and professor of law and ethics, she argues that the novel engages us in the contemplation of lives different from our own and expands our imaginative capabilities so that we may better make judgments about what society *ought* to be. Reading novels, she argues, can help people imagine society in ways they otherwise wouldn't by representing people and places excluded from public consciousnesses. In my view, and as I have been arguing, transactional consciousness can help people better understand genocide and its causes and then nurture a capacity to respond to those atrocities more effectively and humanely. My hope is that transactional consciousness may even move people to think and behave in ways to prevent human rights violations more generally; that is, if we can imagine such a world. Thus, in this chapter I explore how reading novels, specifically genocide novels, can develop in our students a conscious imagination, the final element in the framework of transactional consciousness theory.

The purpose of this chapter is to make an argument for novels in the English classroom to develop a conscious imagination in our students. The implication, then, might be that nonfiction, such as testimonial literature, does not engage the imagination. Before moving on to novels, I want to make a distinction between testimonial literature, as discussed in chapter five, and genocide novels with regard to the pedagogical potential of these different genres. Both entail "a

creator, the work created, and an audience” (Misson and Morgan). With testimonial literature, a writer has to make many decisions as to how she will render her testimony with a reader-listener in mind. However, testimonial literature, in my view, is really about the firsthand witness – her experience witnessing genocide and her experience trying to put language to that experience. The reader knows that the text is a memory that does not claim to be wholly accurate, and yet she is no less responsible for understanding that memory and how it was recalled and put into language for others. According to Lauck, a memoirist, “Memory is personal to the perceiver and to explore memory – in the form of writing – is to explore a personal truth of perception.” In my view, testimonial literature aligns the reader and writer in a way that asks the reader to bear witness to the writer’s life, which is why I think reading testimonial literature teaches epistemological and ethical responsibility in reading and being in the world. However, with genocide novels and the aesthetic of fiction as discussed in this chapter, the creator is a nonwitness author; the work is genocide fiction in the form of a novel. A genocide novel imaginatively represents subjects, people, and history using narrative techniques employed by testimonial authors (e.g., dialogue, sensory language, typography) but also imaginative methods less common to nonfiction (e.g., fictionality, nonreferential individuals, third person narrator, split-subjectivity). The aesthetic of a genocide novel demands different epistemological and ethical responsibilities of the reader because of its fictionality (discussed below). The author is not a survivor of genocide, and so the reader is not aligned as the listener of testimony. In sum, the transactional process of writing and reading testimonial literature and genocide novels creates different aesthetic and ethical concerns because while both are created, the aesthetic of fiction distances the reader from a real witness in order to ask the reader to imagine that which is beyond or in the gaps of the survivor’s testimony.

Readers of genocide novels enter a narrative plane to practice and nurture transactional consciousness because they imagine and explore the cultural, political, social, economic, and environmental factors that come into play before, during, and after genocidal processes. Winfried Fluck, a professor of American Studies in Berlin, writes: “The fictional text is a medium for expressing a sense of injustice while making up for the experiences of injustice by increased recognition and by establishing justice on a symbolic level” (22). For Nussbaum and Fluck, then, the novel can be a tool for justice because the novel is especially good at helping us recognize injustices, imagine more just alternatives, and work toward those alternatives.

To be clear, the conscious imagination is an essential element of the framework of transactional consciousness because the imagination is essential to the reading process. Our imagination, and all our life experiences that color our imagination, transacts with the symbols on the page to create images in our minds, images that become part of our memory. By including imagination, I ask my fellow teachers to consider how we teach our students to be conscious of the way their imaginations are being influenced; how we can better understand the ways our imaginations transact with the aesthetic of the text (video game, film, television program); and how we can uncover the ethics of such reading encounters? If we are to be conscious of how our imagination is engaged by fiction to envision and contemplate society, we must, as English teachers, develop ways to illuminate the aesthetic, ethics, and rhetorical qualities of those transactions.

In the first half of this chapter, I begin with an argument for imaginative texts to establish a rationale for including fiction in the English classroom. Then, I examine the development and function of aesthetic of fiction in novels. Next, I consider the ethics of representing genocide in the novel form, specifically how secondhand witness-authors represent genocide to examine the

tension between aesthetics and ethics in the production of art (novels). I ask and attempt to answer: Should artists attempt to represent such unspeakable crimes against humanity? How can it be done in ways that do not violate or exploit victims? Should art attempt didacticism, teaching lessons about accepting diversity and exploring the dangers of indifference? I suggest that such aesthetic and ethical questions *ought to* be part of classroom inquiry. The transactional tension between and across aesthetics and ethics in art exists in many mediums that our students engage (e.g., video games, TV, films, social media), but, as in other chapters, the problem of representing genocide in fiction illuminates the ethics of the word and the pedagogical potential of novels to help us understand, critique, and ultimately improve society.

In the second half of this chapter, I examine three genocide novels. Authors of young adult genocide novels take up the challenge of representing the most unimaginable and unspeakable moments of humankind for adolescent readers. In negotiating fact and imagination, authors must craft a believable, plausible aesthetic for their readers. They make rhetorical moves to establish credibility, to appeal to the reader's sympathies, and to create a factual, believable narrative. Fictionality nurtures a conscious disbelief, which prompts judgments about the story's believability, and to make such judgments, teachers and students can consider the transactions among aesthetic, ethics, and rhetoric in a novel. I offer three examples: *Never Fall Down* by Patricia McCormick for the ethical appeal of narration in a story about the Cambodian genocide; *The Hunger* by Marsha Skrypuch for the emotional appeal in split-subjectivity in a modern story about the Armenian genocide; and *Daughter of War* also by Marsha Skrypuch for the rational appeal of didacticism in a historical account of the Armenian genocide. Both authors listened to testimony of survivors as part of the imaginative process, but beyond listening, they crafted

imaginatively accessible art that contemplates genocide, the disparities of human rights across our world, and how we, as citizens of that world, can imagine something better.

**A. Imagining Justice in the Classroom**

One of the benefits of novels is that they grant us imaginative access to experiences we would not otherwise have. In *Poetic Justice*, Nussbaum goes so far as to suggest our politicians and legislators (whom she calls “Guardians”) *ought* to read imaginative literature to develop the necessary sympathy to recognize “the irreducible singularity of each human being and the qualitative aspects of each person’s experience” (32). Narratives produce a sort of enlightenment as they draw us into sympathetic involvement with the characters as individuals, eliciting our sympathy to inspire and lead readers into the public for *right* action (also Rosenblatt, see chapter three).

Reading a novel, the literary experience, is akin to reading the world (Freire). We must, at one time, relate to the humanity of others across time and space while recognizing their mode of expression as “social fictions,” for language is never quite adequate to the expression of its meaning (Richards, see chapter three). Unlike testimonial literature, a novel cannot rely on the “been there” quality of a testimony that obliges the reader to attend to the witness, nor does a novel pretend to have “been there.” The beautiful problem of fiction is that while it engages us in the contemplation of lives different from our own and while it expands our imaginative capabilities, it acknowledges its fiction. The reader is not aligned to the writer as with testimonial literature; instead, the reader experiences, on different levels and at different times, detachment or a distance that enables her to get a more refined sense of what her emotions actually are and to sort out beliefs and intuitions better (Nussbaum 69). While the art object is fiction, the literary experience of reading a novel and the contemplation it evokes are real. Thus, for



Nussbaum (and for me) the imaginative literary experiences afforded by novels promote habits of mind that, if read with transactional consciousness, might dismantle institutions and beliefs that perpetuate inequality, injustice, and violence (92).

Returning to Louise Rosenblatt's theoretical perspective on transactional reading theory (chapter three), I think Rosenblatt would agree with Nussbaum in that novels encourage readers to contemplate their values as human beings and members of society. In *Literature as Exploration*, Rosenblatt says, "The implied moral attitudes and unvoiced systems of social values are reinforced by the persuasiveness of art" (8). Texts embody these "implied" ethical and cultural attitudes and values, and so teachers have the responsibility to teach students how to negotiate the "persuasiveness" or rhetorical terrain of the art object. As discussed in chapter three, students need space to respond to texts, to notice how their lives and experiences transact with the plane, to feel the emotional, ethical, and logical appeals of the text. For Rosenblatt, "Teaching becomes a matter of improving the individual's capacity to evoke meaning from the text by leading him to reflect self-critically on this process" (26). In transactional consciousness, "this process" includes how a fictional narrative moves us and teaches us in ways that are far from fictional. The conscious imagination recognizes that images and texts invite us to imagine people and places outside our lives and experiences and that while those images and texts make people, places and ideas accessible to us, they are created by human beings who have intentions with ethical implications.

Therefore, there is a danger that the imagination could be used to stereotype and dehumanize people. The sympathy-eliciting function of narrative can lead readers into the "wrong" direction or can be misappropriated for unethical purposes. If we consider Hesford's *Spectacular Rhetorics*, we will remember that narratives can enact a spectacle of human rights

violations exploiting the victim to provoke sympathy. Indeed, how productive is sympathy that projects and perpetuates exclusion? Thus, while I suggest that the novel expands our imaginative capabilities (e.g., imagining how society *ought* to be), the novel can also perpetuate narrow views of society (e.g., stereotypes). The modern English classroom, then, must take up the task of uncovering the way imaginative texts represent justice and injustice. Readers might ask: Is the author's representation exploiting the victim? What is the author's purpose in depicting a particularly graphic scene in the novel? Our project, and our ethical responsibility as teachers, is to make conscious the imagination of genocide novels.

In making transactions conscious, the English classroom can ensure these exercises of the imagination (which come through reading novels) direct our imaginations in positive and productive ways. The way we can best assure the proper exercise of imagination is to pay attention to the ethical, aesthetic and rhetorical appeals (emotional, ethical, and rational) of fiction. In chapter five, I suggested that what reading-as-witnessing teaches young readers is "double attentiveness" or attending to the epistemological and ethical responsibility of bearing witness to testimony (Simon and Eppert). This double attentiveness is important when reading testimonial literature, where a witness of genocide or trauma tells her account of "what happened," because testimony aligns the reader in such a way that she becomes a co-witness who is ethically implicated to attend (i.e., Auron's agent of memory). While testimonial literature is unique in the way it engages distant beings, I think the epistemological and ethical responsibility of witnessing can be accessed by readers when reading other genres. In a novel, the epistemological and ethical concerns shift from the testifier of testimonial literature (e.g., memoir, autobiography) to the fictional representation of genocide. The reader might ask *how*, as

a project of imagination, does this text attend to the past, express human experiences, and illuminate the transactional spaces where people, places, and events intersect.

The best way to cultivate *good* uses of the imagination is to foster with students what I am calling a “conscious imagination.” The conscious imagination includes and requires an awareness of the aesthetic of fiction as an art object that is transactional (artist, subject, medium, techniques, audience), the ethics of imagination, and the rhetorical appeals of fiction (ethical, emotional, and rational). I argue, with Nussbaum and Fluck that the aesthetic experience of reading fiction nurtures and makes conscious our imagination. While the state may want students to be “college and career ready,” I suggest that we, as a society, should want more (Common Core State Standards). We want students to go into those colleges and careers with an understanding of things they could not have experienced and an imagination for that which is *good* and *right* in the world.

## **B. The Aesthetic of Fiction**

If English teachers will accept the argument that the English classroom is a site to nurture in our students a conscious imagination, which allows us to imagine just relationships and circumstances, then our use of the imagination in reading novels to promote justice necessarily involves attention to the aesthetics of fiction. In this section, I look at the aesthetic of fiction in the novel beginning with the early eighteenth century and consider the how the way this genre negotiates fact and deception can cultivate in readers a conscious imagination.

In previous chapters, I talked about how transactional reading includes a reader’s aesthetic response building a capacity for sympathy and inviting deliberation as students read and interpret texts. In that context, I used “aesthetic” as Rosenblatt did, defining it as a primarily emotional response – sensing, feeling, imagining, and thinking about the stimulus of words.

Misson and Morgan see aesthetic as transactional; it “entails a creator, the work created, and an audience” (33). In other words, for Misson and Morgan, aesthetic is not located in the stimuli (the art object) nor in the responder but in the transactional space where they intersect and produce perception. As I discuss the aesthetic of fiction, then, I am referring to the transactions among the creator, the work created, and the audience that produce perception. The aesthetic of fiction is not static; it is never stable. Aesthetic, seen as transactional, is dynamic, open to insight and discovery with each reader and reading event.

I will begin with “the work created” in order to define two terms that are central to this element of transactional consciousness: “fiction” and “novel.” Fiction, according to the Oxford Dictionaries, is defined as an “invention or fabrication as opposed to fact”; in addition, fiction is “literature in the form of prose, especially short stories and novels, that describes imaginary events and people.” A “novel” is “a fictitious prose narrative of book length, typically representing character and action with some degree of realism.” According to Catharine Gallagher in “The Rise of Fictionality,” the second use of “fiction” and this definition of “novel” came into existence around the turn of the seventeenth century. By the mid-eighteenth century “an explicit and ongoing discourse of fictionality” developed in British narratives (337). Gallagher suggests that the nature of fictionality changed in these narratives to constitute a new form that readers today still anticipate when picking up a novel. Initially, fiction was associated with genres such as fables and fairy tales that made no claims to realism and would not be accused of deception; prior to the eighteenth century few readers had trouble recognizing fiction for this reason. Gallagher explains, “When the obvious nonexistence of its reference separated it from both truth and falsehood, even the most naïve readers could recognize fiction” (338). In other words, fiction was unproblematic for readers because of its “blatant incredibility.” By the

early eighteenth century, as some authors experimented with more realistic forms of fiction, any narrative that did not contain talking animals or flying carpets but did seem referential was accused of fraud. Readers new to the transactions across fiction and realism had trouble deciphering fact and fiction, and some novelists were accused of libel and deception. The ethics of realist fiction troubled both readers and writers because a “conceptual category of fiction” was lacking and because the stories did not “solicit belief” (340). The work created, the novel, needed the reader and the writer to imagine how to negotiate the real and the fiction.

The “creator” or the novelist avoided being a libeler by renouncing references to real individuals. Instead, novelists imagined and created fictional individuals understanding that the novel’s realism depended on the “over fictitiousness of its particulars” (342). Gallagher explains:

The fictionality defining the novel inhered in the *creation* of instances, rather than their mere selection, to illustrate a class of person. Because a general referent was indicated through a particular, but explicitly nonreferential, fictional individual, the novel could be judged generally true even though all of its particulars are merely imaginary. (342)

Thus, with a new category of fiction and some parameters to avoid fraud, the novelists of the time moved toward more credible settings and believable stories. The novel’s aesthetic of plausibility above reality became a mechanism for novelists to negotiate fact and deception.

Once novelists had a category of fiction (one with plausibility) that allowed them to represent reality, British authors of the time used the novel to represent the human condition, a human condition that represented the lives of people reading novels and the lives of people who could not. Some author’s critiqued modernity, social and economic progress, by exposing the sickness and poverty of modernity’s darker side (De Foe’s *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders*). Such novels created in readers a capacity to sympathize with the distress of the other and to contemplate aspects of society perhaps not previously perceived by the classes able to read and afford novels. By calling attention to its fiction, authors nurtured in

readers a capacity to perceive a human condition caused and perpetuated by modern mechanisms through characters marginalized by modernity (who were not able to read novels). What is interesting to note, however, that the mode for critiquing modernity (i.e., fiction) featured traits encouraged by modernity: disbelief, speculation, and credit” (346). Thus, in doing so, as Gallagher points out, the early novel emphasized “gullibility, innocence deceived, rash promises extracted, and impetuous and financial investments” (346). The aesthetic of fiction once defined by “blatant incredibility” began to “solicit belief.” In a way, the novel began to unveil the rhetoric of the time for people to first imagine in the privacy of their reading experience and then, perhaps, to witness in public spaces.

As the novel and the novelist changed, the reader’s ability to decipher fact from fiction progressed, and her responsibility to the novel’s fictionality took on a critical dimension. At first, novel readers sympathized with innocent credulity; however, the practice of reading, of negotiating the real and the fiction developed a conscious disbelief. The reader developed a capacity for anticipating problems, making suppositional predictions, seeing possible outcomes and alternate interpretations. The eighteenth century reader was positioned to speculate on the action and hypothesize about it. In sum, fictionality began to nurture (and continues to nurture today) a conscious disbelief, which prompts judgments “not about the story’s reality, but about its *believability*, its plausibility” (Gallagher 347).

The aesthetic of fiction urges a reader to suspend disbelief while inviting the reader to speculate on the action. In reading a novel in the English classroom, we call attention to the work as fiction so that its aesthetic is about believability or plausibility rather than reality. What is “reality” or “real” when it comes to representing our world through language? Can language ever wholly capture an experience or “what happened”? At the beginning of the nineteenth century,

Coleridge said, “fiction solicits a *willing* suspension of disbelief, and this sensation of individual control over disbelief set novel-reading apart from other acts of skepticism” (Gallagher 347). For Coleridge, the will of a human being is the key. While Gallagher points out that the novel has been accused of “seducing its readers into imaginary experiences that were remarkably hard to exit” (348), Coleridge seemed to have more faith in the novel-reader. For Coleridge, belief is a judgment that cannot be made without will; engrossed as we may be in a novel, we are conscious of its fiction. In my view, the beauty of fiction is what Gallagher names a paradox: “The novel gives us explicit fiction and simultaneously seems to occlude it; the novel reader opens what she knows is a fiction because it is a fiction and soon finds that enabling knowledge to be the subtlest of the experiences’ elements. Just as it declares itself, it becomes that which goes without saying” (349).

In sum, since the beginning of the novel, there have been ethical considerations with representing the real in a form defined by its imaginary such as fraud and deception. The creator, the work created, and the reader are part of the transactions that create the aesthetic of fiction and are thus compelled to negotiate questions of deception and plausibility. In my experience teaching with and learning from genocide literature this past decade, the ethical concerns of genocide novels *create* a framework for responding to genocide. Lawrence Langer, in *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*, writes, “the art of atrocity is a stubbornly unsettling art, indifferent to the peace that passeth understanding and intent only on reclaiming for the present, not the experience of the horror itself...but a framework for responding to it, for making it *imaginatively* (if not literally) accessible” (Langer’s emphasis, 12). The art is the work of the artist who, in the case of fiction (as opposed to memoir or autobiography) having not “been there,” can focus on them (the events) rationally and imaginatively (20). The aim of the

genocide novel is not to shock the reader so that she cannot react to the work or to the atrocity; the purpose should be to facilitate the beginnings of a response, to carve out in our minds a memory of the atrocity so that it is not forgotten. If we think back to chapter three and Yair Auron's concept of agents of memory, we will recall that the novel, like other forms of art, can be an agent of memory because it transmits memories of the past. And if we think back to chapter four (rhetoricity), we recall that agents of memory can serve different political and ideological interests and opposing causes. Thus, when reading genocide novels, readers are negotiating deception and plausibility so that they are not implicated in a cause that perpetuates injustice or in a shallow understanding of the complexity of our human condition (e.g., stereotypes, victimization, nationalism).

In the next section, I propose that genocide novels not only offer students a glimpse into the atrocities of humankind but they offer a framework for ethical reasoning. What are the ethical implications of reading an object of realism, the novel, which depends on its fictionality?

### C. **The Ethics of Imagining Genocide**

If English teachers will accept the argument the imaginative potential of the novel's aesthetic of fiction, which allows us to imagine just relationships and circumstances, then our use of the imagination in reading novels to promote justice necessarily involves attention to the ethics of imagination. As English teachers in middle and high schools, should we read with our students texts that imagine and thus reproduce the society that generated genocide? In this section (and in this dissertation), I make the argument alongside other scholars that, yes, we should.

The English classroom is the ideal site to illuminate the tension between aesthetics and ethics in the production of art that represents genocide. This tension is best articulated by the



highly cited phrase by Holocaust survivor Theodor Adorno: “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (1982/34). Adorno asks how an artist-author presumes to represent something as extreme as genocide when one cannot do so without, in some way, depicting the values of the systems that produced it and biases still present in societies around the world. Adorno’s concern gets at the heart of transactional consciousness. To consider how authors represent our world is an endeavor for which English teachers and students are well-suited. And in asking ethical questions of representation, we also consider what it would mean to not “write poetry.” After all, isn’t it a necessity to write so that we do not forget? But what are we remembering? How are we remembering it? And what are we to do with an imagination conscious of the darkest deeds of humankind? What a worthwhile project for the English classroom.

With the subject of genocide, the artist-author has a responsibility to her subject and her readers to ethically negotiate the forces of historical fact and imaginative truth in her medium. The task of the artist, then, is to make that which is never wholly invented or factual a reality possible for the imagination. On one hand, the “fiction” might be perceived by survivors in the way Imre Kertesz suggest, “the survivors watch helplessly as their only real possessions are done away with: authentic experiences” (269). Indeed, a novel representing genocide may offend the survivors of genocide. On the other hand, survivor accounts have their limit, and an artist-author may create a plausible account of what happened to those who did not survive and of atrocities not otherwise accessible to our minds. As Primo Levi wrote in *If This is a Man*, an account of the year he spent as a prisoner in Auschwitz: “We, survivors, are not the true witnesses...[W]e are those who by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch bottom. Those who did so, those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it” (63-64). As survivors, then, they did not, in the case of the Holocaust, go to the gas chamber or know what was happening in

other camps or countries. Through fiction and the aesthetic experience of reading, the true horrors of genocide (i.e., without surviving witnesses) can be depicted and understood as an aesthetic experience to become part of the memory of generations living in its aftermath. The questions of how an author negotiated historical fact and imaginative truth and whether or not the object created is a just representation of the Gorgon is, in my view, a valuable and ethical line of inquiry for the English classroom because it nurtures a capacity for questioning the way human rights violations are represented in all mediums and the cause such representations serve. How is the artist imagining the subject and representing it in this medium, the novel? How does this art object ask us to imagine lives, time, and places different from our own? What theory about society does this art object invite us to contemplate?

The ethics of imagining genocide, specifically, and the ethics of imagining more broadly are a concern for readers so that they are not drawn into the spectacle of violence or distant suffering (Hesford). For Berel Lang in *Holocaust Representations: Art within the Limits of History and Ethics*, that means “how to justify what *is* spoken (my emphasis 19), and for Thomas Trezise in “Unspeakable,” that means “not *whether* but *how* it should be represented” (my emphasis 43). In 1975, Lawrence L. Langer, in *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*, makes a unique contribution to literary criticism by introducing “literature of atrocity,” which includes literature written by survivors and non-survivors, fiction and nonfiction. I have named this genre genocide literature to call attention to the rhetoricality of the word “genocide,” but Langer and I, both mean to call attention to how this body of literature has devised an idiom and style for the unspeakable.

Langer’s work attempts to impose some critical order on selected imaginative works around the themes of the aesthetic problem of reconciling normalcy with horror, the

displacement of the consciousness of life by the immanence and pervasiveness of death, the violation of childhood, the assault on physical reality, the distinction of rational intelligence, and the disruption of chronological time. It considering these “problems,” he is noting the ethical nature of representation and the authority of the artist-author over these problems. Langer explains the aesthetic and ethical endeavor of such “Art”:

[I]t is not its transfiguration of empirical reality but its disfiguration, the conscious and deliberate alienation of the reader’s sensibilities from the world of the usual and familiar, with an accompanying infiltration into the work of the grotesque, the senseless, and the unimaginable, to such a degree that the possibility of aesthetic pleasure ... is intrinsically eliminated. (3)

The principle of aesthetic stylization such as the sequence and structure of an experience is one way that art forces us to search for more adequate bases for apprehending the human suffering. Langer seems to be suggesting that some artists, in representing atrocity, create aesthetic distance by “infiltration” of the “grotesque” and “unimaginable” in order to prevent or minimize a pleasurable response from readers. However, it seems to me that such an approach is risky in that the horror will shock the reader or cause her to turn away, leaving her numb and incapable of a response that might foster conscious deliberation. On the other hand, to push for the *unfamiliar*, to not attempt to recreate the horror, might be a way of covering up the inadequacy of our imaginations when confronted with genocide. Thus, some artists, as nonwitnesses who do not and cannot know the horror of genocide, rely on the *usual* and *familiar* to show that genocide can and does repeat itself in a society structured like ours. Zygmunt Bauman, who argues the Holocaust was rooted in modernity writes, “The truth is that every ‘ingredient’ of the Holocaust – all those things that rendered it possible – was normal...in the sense of being fully in keeping with everything we know about our civilization, its guiding spirit, its priorities, its immanent vision of the world...”(9). Seen this way, the Holocaust and genocide, are not moments of

“barbarism” in our history but a development of modern culture that continues today, and so in representing genocide, artists can refrain from attempting (and failing) to represent the unimaginable by portraying the familiar.

When reading genocide literature, teachers and students will see examples of artists attempting “deliberate alienation” with the grotesque and authors relying on the familiar to show the genocidal processes of everyday life, but for Elie Wiesel in *Against Silence* it is not one or the other: “The aim of every book, of every tale is to initiate as many encounters on as many levels as possible: between the writer and reader, speaker and listener, fact and fiction, imagination and reality, past and present” (1:310). Readers with a conscious imagination can judge which aesthetic stylization is more ethical. In reading a variety of genocide literature, teachers and students can uncover the varied ways artists make sense of “our civilization.”

In chapter three, I discussed how Ben Mikaelson’s *Tree Girl*, a fictional account of the Guatemalan genocide, prompted inquiry into narratorial gaps and fictionalized events. We were reading the novel with attention toward our aesthetic experience – noting our emotional response – in service of deeper, deliberative interpretation. Our focus, however, was ultimately on how the author represented the genocide. Questions about how events were depicted within the text prompted inquiry projects; for example, students studied the refugee camps or the significance of weaving for the Maya. Such questions were a matter of filling in gaps or enriching our understanding of certain events. However, the most intriguing questions were matters of the author’s artistic choices in representing genocide. Why did he choose fiction? Why first person? As a white man, was it ethical to appropriate an indigenous voice? Why did he represent the violence in such a graphic way? Did he create a spectacle of real victims’ deaths? Did it give enlightenment, arouse wonder, and reveal our capacity for consciousness and understanding?

Was the book, as a whole, an ethical representation of a Mayan girl's experience during the Guatemalan genocide? Conscious of all the transactions during the reading process, conscious of the rhetoricality of the word "genocide," and conscious of their role as a witness to the survivors of genocide, students recognized the novel's artistic project, an object to be interpreted by human sensibility and understanding – not a tool to prepare for high-stakes tests or college entrance. In my view, the way we read *Tree Girl* (as described in chapter three) is an example of imaginative and ethical reading. For transactional consciousness, it also means considering the reader's participation in the imaginative world. What will she experience? What will she do with her experience? How might her reading experience inform future action?

The fictionality in a novel has the advantage of making it possible to convey what happens at the moment of death or defy spatial constraints by conveying parallel experiences. The choices are the artist-author's art. The novel is a form of representation that reminds us that the imaginary is constructed, and it asks of readers and their imaginations to consider the ethics of that construction. In effect, fictional representations of genocide provide a framework for contemplating in the English classroom the ethics of the imaginary. And finally, the aesthetic of fiction in novel form offers a framework for ethical *reasoning*. As I stated in chapter three, teaching and reading are ethical endeavors. The claim of fiction is that the literary imagination is an essential part of both the theory and practice of humanity balancing emotional response and rational thought. Nussbaum cites Wayne Booth in explaining the act of reading as "ethically valuable" because, she says, "it is constructed in a manner that demands both immersion and critical conversation" (9). Specifically, Nussbaum sees the novel as a genre that constructs a paradigm of ethical reasoning that is context-specific without being relativistic, in which we bring the general idea of humanity to bear on a concrete situation, which we are invited to enter

through imagination. If we think of reading in this way, as combining one's own absorbed imagining with periods of more detached critical scrutiny, we can begin to see how the aesthetic of fiction prepares us to contemplate ethical representations of genocide specifically and the human condition more broadly (Nussbaum 9).

In the second half of this chapter, I suggest one way we can practice with our students this balance of absorbed imagining with periods of detached critical scrutiny is to read genocide novels with a rhetorical approach. Reading rhetorically illuminates ethical, emotional, and rational features in the aesthetic of fiction so that readers can develop a conscious imagination.

**D. A Rhetorical Approach to Illuminating the Ethics and Aesthetic of Genocide Novels**

The modern mechanisms of the twentieth century brought a century of cataclysmic conflicts that led to a century of genocide: Armenian genocide, Ukraine's forced famine, the Holocaust, Pol Pot's auto-genocide, Guatemala's genocide of the Maya, the Srebrenica genocide, the Rwandan genocide, and the ongoing genocide in Sudan (with still other here unnamed). Like eighteenth century novelists, some twentieth and twenty-first century novelists have taken up the task of writing genocide novels to expose the darker side of modernity and how interests in technological, economic, cultural and political advancement have lead to crimes against humanity (Mignolo). As Gallagher writes, "[A]lmost all the developments we associate with modernity – from greater religious toleration to specific scientific discovery – required the kind of cognitive provisionality one practices in reading fiction, a competence in investing contingent and temporary credit" (347). And so we might see fiction's aesthetic of plausibility as doing that which nonfiction cannot. The novel represents not only what has been reported as real but that which is beyond knowing yet plausible. Fiction creates distance from reality while inviting a

temporary suspension of disbelief so that we can, in fact, build some sort of capacity for considering how society *is* beyond our experience of it and how society *ought* to be.

Genocide novels illuminate the author's ethical responsibility in representing human rights violations and the reader's epistemological and ethical responsibilities in negotiating history and imagination. In creating her art, the artist-author is faced with the concerns put forth by Kertesz, Levi, Lang, Trezise, Adorno, and Wiesel regarding the "barbaric" act of representing the most horrific acts of humankind. Readers feel the ethical dilemmas of expressing human rights violations through language as the page confronts their own sense of our civilization. However, unless the English classroom calls attention to students' agency in the transactional reading process and the rhetoricality of the text, the ethical reasoning that fiction offers can be lost. To be clear, I am suggesting the aesthetic of fiction negotiates fact and deception through its aesthetic of plausibility above reality and that the novel is a framework for ethical reasoning. In order to uncover the benefits of the aesthetic of fiction in novels, however, we must teach students to read a novel rhetorically, i.e., to read for ethical, emotional, and rational appeals. How does the artist earn trust from her readers and establish credibility in this realm of fiction? How does she make emotional appeals while representing genocide? Finally, how does she treat the didactic and "rational" details of that genocide?

What follows are three rhetorical readings of the aesthetic of fiction in genocide novels. You will notice that while I have separated the examples by rhetorical appeals (ethical, emotional, and rational), all three appeals are present in each text and work transactionally. And while I analyze authorial choices, I am also analyzing the work created and considering its impact on the implied reader – again, to demonstrate the transactional nature of aesthetic and the reading process. I begin with an analysis of each rhetorical appeal and then attempt to illuminate

how the artist-author works within the aesthetic of fiction to appeal to her audience. In each instance, I consider the ethical questions author-artists consider when representing genocide, the ethical implications of their choices, and the responsibility of the reader to recognize how the artist-author is attending to the details of the past, treating the experiences of survivors, and caring for the consciousness of her young readers.

### **1. Ethical Appeal: *Never Fall Down* and the Child Narrator**

The ability of literature to create characters is a unique and powerful rhetorical tool. It can enable an author who did not witness firsthand genocide to speak through a created personality with a stronger ethical appeal. According to Mannix,

[Literature] can place the personality of the character, and , therefore, his ethical appeal, at the very heart of the artistic experience. If that personality changes as the result of the conflicts that the novel presents him with and if these changes somehow enlighten us, we have an artistic work with a high thematic content. If we feel compelled to change an opinion or take some action on the basis of our experience of the character's transformation, we have a literary and rhetorical artifact. (46)

The artist-author determines the rhetorical modality of the narrator's speech and what kind of witness he will be as the narrator. Genette explains this as focalization – the degree to which the narrator is aware and the extent to which her knowledge is restricted. This modality of knowledge is about the narrator's position or outside-ness in relation to the story. To what degree can a character witness the genocide process and to what degree must the narrator, relying on research or real witness accounts, tell about these events? Such is the narrative modality of knowledge. Narration relates the story, but it does not accept the mark of truth, which is to say that the story does not become necessarily relative but that it recognizes the limits of the subject's knowledge and experiences. When teaching teenagers – who are grappling with identity and their place in the world and are impressionable and sensitive and at different stages of maturation – the ethical appeal seems *that* much more important. Is it reproducing a Western-



dominant narrative as Mignolo and Hesford suggest? Is it appealing to the Western audience who expects a happy ending? Is it exploiting the death of genocide victims for the sake of reader engagement? The attention that artists pay to their selection of characters and characterization is a tribute to the continuing importance of the ethical appeal in fiction, specifically fiction that explores the darker side of modernity such as genocide literature.

Written by Patricia McCormick, *Never Fall Down* (2012) is a novel, or *fictional* account, about Arn Chorn-Pond's experiences as a child soldier in the killing fields of Cambodia, . Here, I would like to consider how McCormick negotiates fictionalizing a historical account of the Cambodian genocide (1975-1979) and the rhetorical effect. Of concern to middle and high school English teachers is how authors writing for a young adult audience provide a literary and educative experience while not overwhelming. If the author is not a witness of genocide, the ethical appeal must come through the characters and landscape created by the author. When writing a novel about genocide, the author is likely attempting to move the reader to change an opinion or take some social action. At minimum, the change might simply be a kinder disposition toward our fellow human being, but ideally, a young reader might go on to be an activist. The content, however, is incredibly sensitive, and not all students are ready to face human rights atrocities either because of maturity levels or because they, too, experienced trauma in their lives. In writing young adult novels about genocide, then, what authorial strategies does Patricia McCormick use to create ethical appeal and what are the ethical implications of her authorial choices?

One strategy for writing about genocide for young audiences is to write a fictionalized account from a child's point of view. According to Sarah Jordan in "Educating Without Overwhelming: Authorial Strategies in Children's Holocaust Literature" (2005), the young

reader will be able to take on "for a moment, the perspective of a child who lived during the Holocaust and perhaps begin to address their own question of what it was like and how it could have happened" (200). While narrating the story from a child's point of view is powerful, it offers a subject for critical review. At one point, Jordan cites Totten, a leading genocide education scholar, as saying that literature can help personalize history as way of facing inhumanity in a human way; however, she neglects to note that Totten also says that it is insufficient to seek empathy for that which is impossible to imagine let alone experience vicariously. Perhaps for this reason Jordan suggests that effective literature about genocide should do much more than edit the graphic details or tell about what happened. Indeed, Nussbaum agrees, as indicated above, that the novel defies such economy.

If an objective of young adult literature is for today's children to identify with children of the past, child-narrated stories that show the similarities in growing up (e.g., interest in ice cream, love of games, being sweet on the cute girl in class, sibling rivalry) personalize history and make the events more believable. For Gallagher, the aesthetic of fiction is perhaps less about believability and more about plausibility. Because child narrators often do not know much about what is happening or why beyond what they see and experience, the reader can at once find the child's observations plausible while recognizing the child's understanding of the history or events as provisional. For example, in *Never Fall Down*, Arn, the narrator/protagonist, talks to us about how he sells ice cream for extra money and how he spies on his rich neighbor: "But one girl in the window, the same age as me, the one with eyeglass, sometime she stick her tongue at me. And now I think maybe I love her a little bit" (16). Young readers identify with Arn, and perhaps they are enlightened by how a distant other experiences childhood, how the innocence of childhood defies geography.

Children are also quite perceptive; they have agency even though some human rights narratives depict children as wholly naïve. Arn has some sense of the political unrest in Cambodia at the beginning of the novel: "Truck full of soldier ride down the street shouting in a bullhorn.' We are Khmer Rouge,' they say. 'We are Red Cambodia.' Also they say the prince is coming back, that all government soldier [sic] should come meet him at the airport"(12). Young readers are confused and left wondering what this all means as is Arn; McCormick elicits this tension in her readers through her narrator. Both the characters and the readers are in the dark, so there is some equal footing and a sympathetic alignment. Like most of the people in Cambodia at the time, Arn has no idea what the Khmer Rouge is planning, but as the plan unfolds, Arn learns the rules for survival, and his readers learn, too – alongside him. Arn begins to piece together what he has heard and what he sees as his readers do. There is no adult or omniscient narrator to help Arn tell the "truth" of what is happening; he is experiencing and telling at the same time. In other words, there is no narratorial or experiential distance in this novel with this child-narrator.

The lack of narratorial distance, in my view, poses an ethical problem for some educators who might be considering *Never Fall Down* as a novel to read with all her students (i.e., whole class). While the protagonist has strong ethical appeal, and while it is realistic *fiction*, the present-tense narration of the most unimaginable circumstances might overwhelm young readers, a key criticism in young adult genocide novels. The argument for violence in young adult novels more generally is to mirror teens' lives or gives a voice to traumatized teens or voiceless victims. Reading about other teens can be validating or comforting. On the other hand, there is a danger in normalizing certain behaviors and experiences making what Gallagher calls "plausibility" appear as reality. I do not think these arguments necessarily apply to young adult genocide novels because fiction, as a medium, explicitly invites deliberation between fact and deception. I

think that the fictional narrator, Arn, invites his reader to *imagine* she is his secondhand witness to the child soldier experience; the reader is not asked to experience it or to completely grasp it.

Because the narrator is so matter-of-fact, even detached at times, the reader is always uncomfortable and thus aware of the imaginative nature of the text. For example, Arn, the narrator, does not edit what he sees for his listener nor does he make any apologies as if unaware of the age or culture of his imagined listeners. We know that adolescents mature at different times and different ways, and so while some novels hint at the truth behind details, Arn tells his listener exactly what he witnesses, thus allowing his listener to also bear witness from a distance (Felman and Laub):

In the square I see this new guy, white shorts, no shirt, and six soldier. Also ten guys down on knees, hands tied, all naked, in a row. The guy in the white shorts, he has a gun with a knife attach, a bayonet. He point the bayonet at the chest of one guy in the row. Then very quick, he slice the skin and pull out the liver. So quick, so neat, the liver, it stick on the end of the knife. The kneeling guy, he's still living; his liver not inside him anymore -- in front of his face. Crying, only saying, "No, no, no," Then he fall down. (76)

To fall down is not to get up. McCormick is not allowing Arn to be ignorant here nor veiling the event as some authors of Holocaust literature do to make it age-appropriate (as Jordan notes).

The narrator, Arn, is not unaware nor is there an adult to filter or interpret the details; he presents the event as an eyewitness to the atrocities without interpretation. This seems like an authorial risk for McCormick. Jordan's selections for age-appropriate Holocaust literature celebrate texts that do not quite engage with the "harsh reality outside the imagined adventure" (204) keeping the child hidden physically and emotionally from the events to teach about life, death, and survival by resisting graphic images. I think those strategies weaken the character's ethical appeal and insult the reader. Arn's narratorial voice, one that is somewhat detached emotionally, is McCormick's strategy for representing survival, how Arn managed to "never fall down" by recounting what was visible yet still incomprehensible.

In chapter six of *Never Fall Down*, readers go deeper into the landscape of the Khmer Rouge's "Year Zero," four years into methodical murder, and four years of Arn trying to "never fall down." Arn reports this scene about a "wandering boy" who leaves the hut at night:

I look for him everywhere. By the side of the hut, in the kitchen. I see a light, a small light, in the mango grove. A bad smell there, and sometimes the bodies get bloat and blow up and pop out of the ground. I'm scared of that place, scared of ghost, but I go anyway. And I see the wandering boy. I see him crouching, holding arm of a dead guy, chewing. I don't know how long he been doing that, eating the flesh, the human flesh; but now I know why he always asleep in the morning. (87)

While this scene is of the graphic nature that Jordan considers overwhelming for young readers, it is essential in moving the protagonist to a realization. It places the personality of the character and his ethical appeal at the heart of the literary experience. Up until this point in the novel, Arn has slowly become "famous" in the camp for his ability to sing, play the *khim* and lead a group of musicians in Angkar songs. He has gained some power in the camp to be allowed out at night because of his "fame," a power of voice to speak up and even save his fellow musicians who would otherwise be killed because of their poor musical skills. But even though he sees this wandering boy near the mangrove trees, Arn cannot use his "power" to save; the image unveiled some truth of humanity for Arn, a hopelessness, maybe a reality that he had compartmentalized in order to survive. He says, after witnessing the above scene: "Now I am a ghost"(87).

What is this novel doing, then, that an informational text cannot? Arn Chorn-Pond has written autobiographical accounts of his experiences as a child soldier in the killing fields, yet he permitted McCormick to mediate his story and render it as a novel. The aesthetic of fiction is its plausibility which holds at bay notions of reality and creates, what Gallagher calls "cognitive provisionality." We cannot imagine the suffering of the distant other and yet we must if we are to recognize that genocide is not an accident of history but mass murder made possible because of

choices individuals, organizations, and governments made. There is nothing “realistic” about the following images, and yet readers know (cognitively) they are being confronted with the darkness of humanity:

New prisoner coming to the camp all the time. No hiding them anymore. Now the Khmer Rouge take them right through the square. Tie together, head low. They beat them in front of us so we can see what happens to people with bad character. Always the Khmer Rouge watch us, all the time. They watch to see if you show any emotion to the victim. You do, they will kill you. (90)

"These people, they no good," says one Khmer Rouge. "They old; they don't work so hard. They gonna die soon anyway." Then, very quick, he take the ax and hit them in the back of the head. Blood fly everywhere. The wall of the temple, beautiful tile, beautiful painting, now all dripping with blood....Then the Khmer Rouge says to us, "It's time for your job. You pee on them. You pee on their head." I think: I will not do this terrible thing, I will not do this...But then I look down, and I see the urine coming out of me. (101)

It is gut-wrenching for any reader. In my view, the text resists sentimentality in its abrupt phrasing, declarative sentence structure, and present tense, mimicking the way that the survivors had to act swiftly and resist emotion in order to survive. The effect is a body detached from the mind as though Arn is a ghost detached from his Khmer body.

But Arn is not a ghost, and while he has "acted tough" to survive, McCormick's authorial strategy is to then juxtapose the haunting automaticity of terror with Arn's humanity. Arn is called to a leader's home to play music and later asked to ride a horse to deliver a letter:

Strange thing is happening now. Nice thing. But very strange. Smile on my face. Not fake smile like when we sing song about Angkar, but real smile, and laughing. Also wetness on my cheek like rain, but it's tear. For three years, laughing not allowed, crying not allowed. Now, on this horse, I am laughing so much I am also crying. (106)

This juxtaposition of images and McCormick's attention to syntax is something that only an artist can do. In "Author's Note," McCormick talks about her in-depth interviews with the people for whom the characters were named and from whom the novel derived. She says that she crafted a novel from her interviews because of the gaps in the memories of the participants in her

research. And explains that she wrote the character using Arn's "own distinct and beautiful voice" to make up for the "light" lost with grammar and syntax. McCormick's recreation of Arn's voice is unfamiliar syntactically and immediate temporally because it is in present-tense. I think this shows what Gallagher finds compelling about the novel, that the novel considers the reader "external to the fiction and capable of speculating on the action" and in doing so "the novel seeks to suspend such disbelief" yet not going so far as to ask the reader to believe (348).

As a fiction writer, McCormick could have wrapped up this novel with a happy ending where Arn makes it to Thailand safely and finds the American dream awaiting him; she doesn't, and I think this authorial decision is an ethical appeal. Yes, it is a miracle that Arn made it to the Thailand refugee camp (as did other survivors), but his story of genocide did not end there. McCormick further complicates the "neat" storytelling of children's literature (i.e., happy endings). Surviving mass murder was not the end of the story for McCormick's protagonist or for survivors of genocide. They must survive their survival. In some novels about genocide, the character survives, the reader experiences relief, and the book is closed. Instead, Arn's ethical appeal is strengthened by troubling the reader's understanding of survival and genocide – neither is an event that ends. The day-to-day struggle of coping with the past, facing the present, and imagining a future is complex, and to represent it otherwise is unjust and an insult to the reader.

Arn makes it to America – New Hampshire – with Reverend Peter Pond (who later adopted him and sixteen other Cambodian children) and begins high school only to face the challenges of learning a new culture and language and unlearning the "tough act" that became his best survival tool. Here Arn is telling his readers about learning English with his "special teacher":

Very important sound this th. But we don't have this sound in Khmer. So my tongue can't do it. But Pat, she say it over and over and over. Get close to my face, closer and closer

she get; her tongue, she show it to me, pushing on her teeth, like she gonna eat me. And I spit her. Right in the face, I spit....And I think: why I spit at this person, only one trying to help me? Why I'm so bad? Why? (196)

I am not sure what Wendy Hesford would say about this humanitarian narrative – that Arn was “saved” by a Western figure. It does not weaken the novel, however; indeed, it is plausible (and true in some cases). While humanitarian interventions perhaps save the body, they cannot save the mind or the mind imagines its existence. In the end, Arn says:

My heart like, like a tiger inside, clawing my rib to get out. So much hate in there it hurt. Hate for the people who kill my family, hate for the people who kill my friend, hate for myself.... "Why I live?" I ask Peter. "Why I live and so many people die?" (207)

In sum, the aesthetic of fiction is its plausibility, but in order to draw readers into the imaginary plane of the novel, the author must establish credibility. For McCormick, this meant making an ethical appeal to readers through and with her narrator. The rhetorical effect of Arn's child narratorial voice aligned the reader much like a witness in testimonial literature uncovering the context as he observed it and unveiling the darkest deeds of humanity as he experienced it. At no point does the narrator comfort his readers or attempt to offer any rationale for that which he witnessed; to do so would undermine his ethical appeal as an observant, bewildered child. And yet the aesthetic of fiction cannot position readers as witnesses; its task is to make conscious in the readers' imagination a world where this can and did happen.

## **2. Emotional Appeal: *The Hunger* and Split-Subjectivity**

I talked about the importance of emotional response during the reading process and how it engages a reader's sympathies (chapter three). Indeed, most theories of literary criticism maintain that at least part of the purpose of literature is the stimulation of pleasure. And while the source and the importance of this pleasure varies, the insistence on the pleasurable emotion seems universal. According to Patrick Mannix, author of *The Rhetoric of Antinuclear Fiction*:



*Persuasive Strategies in Novels and Films*, what the rhetoricality of fiction does is to attempt to use the aesthetic “pleasure” of the work to help cultivate the reader’s allegiance to some thematic point (118). Emotional appeals persuade the audience by arousing emotions and passions within the audience to move them to act (Corbett 319). Emotional appeals, then, endeavor to produce an aesthetic “pleasure” in the reader that is as enlivening and enlightening.

Such a word “pleasure” in a dissertation about genocide seems grotesque, as I indicated when a student said “I love genocide” (chapter three). As a reader of genocide literature, we might feel it is wrong to find pleasure in an image of suffering; it should feel wrong to want to look at the “gorgon” (Clendinnen) such as the example of image in *Never Fall Down* of a child soldier feeding on a corpse. Such pleasure is “unwanted,” yet it is an essential element of aesthetic genres. The “unwanted beauty,” as discussed in Brett Kaplan’s *Unwanted Beauty: Aesthetic Pleasure in Holocaust Representation* and referenced in chapter three, is a beauty that is also mournful ; it entices our “reflection, our attention, and our questioning” (1). Indeed, pleasure and ethics are entwined, yet pleasure is more subjective, transactional (i.e., dependent on the reader-text transaction). In the aesthetic transaction, what is this pleasure a reader experiences? A catharsis? An “illicit pleasure”? Is it exploitative? Whether or not one agrees that persuasion is a valid *purpose* of fiction, authors of aesthetic genres like novels *do* persuade, *do* move their readers, and they do so by attending to aesthetic pleasure (Mannix). By entering into this persuasive process, fiction facilitates the communication of history to mass audiences perhaps tempering the lessons with the aesthetic pleasure.

In my view, the emotional appeal of beauty comes from evoking the ambiguity, complexity, nuance, and even incompleteness in the subject, characters, or landscape. The aesthetic of fiction, again its plausibility, moves the reader to rethink, reflect, and ponder.

Readers walk away from the text with more questions than answers prompting some transformation or agency (thus, the rhetorical nature of aesthetics). A large part of the artist's purpose, then, is to communicate some point about human life in the hopes of winning or reinforcing the audience's allegiance to the point; at the same time each work attempts to give the audience the aesthetic pleasure that distinguishes literature from other forms of communication like informational texts.

Artists represent subjects so as to evoke an emotional response and thus allegiance to a conceptual idea. Technologically, the writer is bringing the reader into a position to bear witness (as discussed in chapter five). Unlike social media and television (and some informational texts), young adult genocide novels call attention to fictionality, which makes clear to the reader that the events depicted are, indeed, representations. The artist-author, however, does not merely reproduce events to "tell" a young reader what happened; they must imagine it so that their readers can also imagine. The literature, as a work of art, supports the realization of the events in our consciousness. The imaginative medium of the novel (not the testimony of an actual genocide survivor but an artist rendering the experience) has the task of opening up in the reader the "imaginative capability of perceiving history – what is happening to others – *in one's own body*, with the power of sight (of insight) usually afforded only by one's own immediate physical involvement" (Felman 108). It is the task of the young adult author to make this experience accessible to her teen readers without losing the aesthetic; otherwise, the account would be in a textbook and the "lived through" experience would be lost (Rosenblatt). Young adult authors make emotional appeals to their readers all the time, but in genocide novels, there are ethical implications for attempting to get young readers to embody what is happening to others in

genocide. Let us now consider how one author negotiated the dilemma of making emotional appeals in genocide fiction.

Published in 1999, *The Hunger* by Marsha Forchuk Skrypuch is a novel about the Turkish massacre of Armenians that is still not publicly defined as genocide in Turkey. *The Hunger* is a story of personal trauma and historical trauma; however, Skrypuch creates an element of “split-subjectivity” when Paula, the protagonist living in the early twentieth century and suffering from anorexia, enters a comatose state. While in a coma, Paula embodies her own great-grandmother Marta in the year 1915 as she (Paula-Marta) is being deported into the Syrian Desert. Having done some research on the Armenian deportations for a school project prior to her coma, Paula’s altered consciousness permits her to invent the deportation scene, but the story-teller, Skrypuch, imagines for Paula what which is unimaginable. Paula witnesses, firsthand, Marta’s escape from deportation and years living in a harem, experiences that include rape by her “husband” (though not depicted) and enslavement by the first wife.

In the following passage, Paula is coming out of her coma as the split subject of Marta/Paula unified. What Marta sees in the future is an image of emaciation, but the scarred knuckles indicate evidence of her (Paula’s) trauma of self-imposed starvation:

There stood an emaciated woman [Paula] wrapped in a stiff white sheet. Marta's throat filled with tears when she regarded the woman's hollow eyes and sunken cheeks. This woman had suffered through famine and ravages too. Marta reached out to touch the woman's hand -- to give comfort. Then she noticed the scars on the knuckles and the needle marks on her arm. With a start, she understood that this was Paula. Marta's heart was filled with sorrow...And then Marta no longer existed. She had stepped inside Paula. (*The Hunger* 157)

The split-subjectivity positions Paula as the secondhand witness (the body is Paula’s) *and* Marta the firsthand witness (the memory is Marta’s) simultaneously. The images of “scars on the knuckles” and “needle marks on the arm” are emotional appeals to the teen reader with

potentially familiar markers of anorexia (which begins with personal agency for the victim), yet the self-inflicted starvation is represented as analogous to the “hollow eyes” and “sunken cheeks” of state-inflicted starvation (that which is perpetrated). In my view, as a testimony to the personal trauma of anorexia, *The Hunger* works; literature is a mode of “truth's realization beyond what is available as statement, beyond what is known” (Felman 15-16). However, Skrypuch’s representation of Marta’s trauma is problematic; the emotional appeal to readers is *for* Paula and not Marta, a human rights subject. The human rights violation, the historical trauma of the Turkish genocide of Armenians from 1915 to 1923, is minimized in an attempt to align the teenaged Paula to the teenaged reader.

*The Hunger* is a novel that an English teacher might teach in a middle or high school class for the purpose of meeting the genocide education mandate or “covering” a topic like anorexia or war. A teacher might recognize that identity and body image are relevant to adolescents’ lives and that this novel might work on personal, familial, and perhaps international levels. However, it is also important to consider how the text imagines genocide and how it implicates the reader in the spectacle of analogous traumas (anorexia and genocide-induced starvation)? In my view, the split-subjectivity in *The Hunger* illuminates the important limitation of the secondhand witness. Bearing witness is a critical stance wherein the witness *does not* take the place of the other. According to Hesford, the risk in representing trauma and violence is “the impossibility of empathetic merging” (99). Skrypuch’s authorial strategy of split-subjectivity illuminates this risk by making anorexia analogous to forced starvation. On one hand, this can be read as the possibility of empathic merging. Readers might be manipulated into thinking they can imaginatively embody another person’s trauma. On the other hand, readers may see Skrypuch as attempting to show the failed merging of Paulina’s scarred hands with Marta’s hollowed eyes;

the rhetorical effect is an emotional appeal to personal and historical trauma that cannot reach empathy. In my view, sympathy is the best we can do as readers and witnesses to one another's lives. In this way, *The Hunger* undermines easy notions of empathy. The empathy a teen reader might feel when identifying with the teen protagonist's struggle for self-worth cannot be transferred so easily to a human rights subject. How can one imagine or empathize with the trauma of genocide having not lived through it? (While I believe literature can cultivate a capacity for empathy, in my view and with regard to genocide literature, I find empathy perhaps too presumptuous.)

The emotional appeal can have varied consequences in young adult genocide novels: from pity, to responsibility, to rejection. If the reader is moved to feel pity, she may experience what Arabella Lyon identifies in "Misrepresentations of Missing Women in the U.S. Press: The Rhetorical Uses of Disgust, Pity, and Compassion" as Aristotelian pity: "They come to feel the character's pain, see the characters' conditions as possible for them, and achieve the closeness of time and space that is required for an educated emotional response" (188). Nevertheless, Lyon would suggest this response could be seen as a sort of failure in recognition in that the reader's response to the novel is "isolated from spaces that would allow a productive discussion of human rights" (188). Lyon explains that the reader is caught up in pity and does not recognize the larger political and global processes that made genocide and human rights violations possible (see the discussion of ethical sympathy in chapter three).

Perhaps at minimum, what we can hope from the ethical appeal in a young adult genocide novel is that it frames one way of understanding genocide and give readers a situation for deliberation, but at best, we can hope that the reader understands the human rights subject as having agency, as being part of what Hesford describes as "a heterogeneous and [as] a

rhetorically dialogic process,” and the reader, as an actor in the process, will act more justly (19).

In this sense, the character in the novel becomes a rights bearing subject whose life has been shaped by social and economic conditions and who possesses agency (57). Perhaps the narrative can resist victimizing the victim by complicating rescue narratives or transformation narratives. A clever author can help teen readers be skeptical of images and to see human rights subjects as “complex subjects whose subjectivity is not grounded in a struggle for recognition but in their ability to respond to impoverished, social and economic circumstances”(182). Even if the authors of young adult genocide novels cannot achieve this, readers can learn to recognize emotional appeals and deliberate, together, the ethics of such appeals.

### **3. Rational Appeal: *Daughter of War* and Didacticism**

For the ancient Greeks, rational appeal or *logos* means “thought plus action” (Covino and Jolliffe 17). The ideas are the “thought,” and the way those ideas are presented to the audience is the “action.” When I talk about rational appeal in genocide fiction, I am not only referring to the logic of the plot but to the methods of presentation so that readers are more likely to accept the plausibility of the narrative; thus, I am referring to *how* the information about genocide is presented. We tend to think of fiction as a representation of imaginary actions that exist in their own self-contained world. We do not normally expect the author to stop in the middle of relating a story to tell us historical information or explain the context. And yet if the action of the novel, play, or film revolves around some complex issue like genocide, the author will find a way to include in her fictional action a representation of the precipitating events, social and cultural issues, motives, consequences and lessons (Mannix 73). When the “information” of it all is too obvious, however, novels can be accused of being too didactic, and so our consideration as

English teachers reading genocide novels alongside our students is how authors maintain the aesthetic of fiction *and* make rational appeals.

Didacticism is the instructional quality of something, but extreme forms of intellectually controlled fiction related to the real world can be called “didactic.” Allegory and satire are didactic forms of texts; in these genres, readers accept that there is some sort of lesson to be gleaned from the story. Scholes et al., in *The Nature of Narrative*, explain that the word “didactic” tends to inhibit discussions of fictional works in which intellectual considerations influence narrative structure. “Didactic” is typically used in a pejorative sense: “We are likely to think of a ‘didactic’ narrative as one in which a feeble attempt is made to clothe ethical chestnuts in fictional form, resulting at best in a spoiled story” (106). They suggest that we “strip the word of its negative connotations” and allow the word to refer to a work “which emphasizes the intellectual and instructional potential of narrative” (106). Scholes et al. note many didactic authors – Aesop, Dante, Milton, Swift, George Eliot, Lawrence, and Proust – whose works “put to the most strenuous kind of examination the most problematic and profound ethical and metaphysical questions” (106). When it comes to genocide fiction for young adults, authors must examine the complexity of the genocide process, which includes historical, social, political, economic, and environmental tensions of the context and the ethical questions among these transactions.

According to Patrick Mannix, who considers the persuasive strategies in antinuclear fiction, there are at least two strategies authors can use to insert factual information into fiction. The narrator can introduce the facts as needed, or characters can include specifics as part of the dialogue. “In the first instance,” Mannix suggests, “he must be careful not to let his novel degenerate into a contrived fact book” (74). Indeed, such is considered didactic literature (of

which students are suspicious). Mannix seems to prefer the second as it makes “the exposition flow naturally or at least as naturally as exposition normally flows” (74). Wayne Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* suggests this is the difference between direct and authoritative rhetoric inasmuch as if the story is presented without comment, it leaves the reader without guidance of explicit evaluation, but the author’s voice in fiction if engaged fully within a work of fiction has aesthetic implications. Of course, it is economical for the author to impose virtues on the reader, to simply tell and then support the telling with virtues, but this would result in an aesthetic failure. However, Booth suggests that everything the author *shows* will serve to tell; the author’s judgment is always present, always evident to anyone who knows to look for it (17). Fiction writers make rational appeals by going “behind” to reveal true workings of the character’s mind and heart or through overt action (Booth); those are rational appeals, mechanisms for telling information. To avoid aesthetic failure, then, the author must manipulate the tale in such a way as to make the reader desire such an effect (e.g., an inner monologue, another point of view, a description of such and such a place, a little historical note, etc.). Didacticism, then, is less didactic when the reader is left wanting.

To consider rational appeals and the art of didacticism, I want to take a look at one of Marsha Forchuk Skrypuch’s follow-up novels to *The Hunger: Daughter of War* (2008). First, unlike *The Hunger*, Skrypuch introduces factual information about the Armenian genocide through textual features that are external to the narrative: maps with descriptors that provide a chronology of events and a historical note. Readers will see the helpful map with the routes of several characters carefully indicated along with the various concentration camps in Turkey and Syria. Skrypuch also includes a helpful “Historical Note” to tell readers about the Muslims and Arabs who rescued Armenians (e.g., raising child survivors as Muslims, taking women in as



concubines or slaves, and disguising some survivors as nomadic Arabs). Elizabeth Baer, in “A New Algorithm in Evil: Children’s Literature in a Post-Holocaust World,” suggests such features like maps and historical notes provide a wider context for readers that is not intrusive or disruptive to the narrative thus preserving the novel’s aesthetic. However, Mannix and Booth would likely say such addendums are overtly didactic and compromise the aesthetic value of the text as a whole. In other words, while maps, notes, and other external features like glossaries and pictures may function as rational appeals, they may detract from the aesthetic of fiction. In borrowing informational text features, the imaginative appeal of fiction might be compromised.

Next, when including information about victims, perpetrators, bystanders, and rescuers, authors must attend to the circumstances that encouraged or discouraged individuals’ choices and actions. Fiction authors provide an imaginative opportunity for readers to grapple with the challenge of thinking about the interiority and motivations of historical actors. If the novel can capture the complexity of the human conscience, then readers just might be less likely to build stereotypical views of human rights actors (e.g., victim, bystander, perpetrator, and rescuer). In *Daughter of War*, Skrypuch makes central the choices and experience of different Armenian and Muslim characters to illustrate that the disparate motives and values of individuals living in the Ottoman Empire. As indicated in “Historical Note” and depicted in the novel, in 1915, as Armenians were marched into the Syrian Desert without food or water under the guise of “relocation,” Muslim families rescued many Armenian children and raised them as Muslims. Still, some young Armenian women were “rescued” from death marches to serve as concubines or slaves. And still, other Armenians were rescued by nomadic Arabs and taught an Arab way of life to survive persecution. In the novel, Marta and Mariam are Armenian sisters rescued by Turks, and Kevork is an Armenian rescued by an Arab clan. Now rescued, Marta, Mariam, and

Kevork have to learn how to live in duplicity. Skrypuch's task is to invite readers into the conscience of these characters as their circumstances pose ethical dilemmas. Skrypuch's omniscient narrator makes readers privy to the minds and actions of these characters, and as they negotiate their mental and physical survival, readers contemplate the meaning of *good* and *right* when it comes to survival. For example, Marta, rescued to serve as a concubine, becomes pregnant by her captor. The captor's first wife, Idris, has not been able to give her husband a son and worries that Marta will give birth to a son and replace her as first wife. Both Marta and Idris have to negotiate the dynamics of their complex relationship. Once rescued, how does one survive as the rescued and the rescuer? There are no clear answers or easy logic to negotiate such complexity. Thus, Skrypuch crafts an imaginative truth in this passage as Idris helps Marta off the back of the cart:

Marta was struck by her [Idris] demeanor..., but there was no need for duplicity here. Did this mean that Idris was actually starting to miss her? More than likely, it was all the housecleaning Idris would miss. No, Marta thought again, that was being unfair. Idris did not have to go through so much trouble to get rid of her. Marta owed this woman her life. (*Daughter of War* 28)

In this short passage, young readers will not see an overly optimistic view of human nature but rather a framework for response. Reading ethically here, as with witnessing, means considering multiple points of view, including the circumstances, choices, and logic that guide the actions of others. What is *right* and who is *good* can often be quite ambiguous. The rhetorical effect of self-disguise, in my view, is that the novel explores what it might have been like to live with this uncertainty of discovery and ambivalence of identity. At the center of the plot, then, is the complexity of individual agency within the site of genocide. However, Skrypuch does address international actors.

In a novel that commemorates the resilience of Armenians, Western readers may be left wondering about the international community, international rescuers: *Didn't anyone try to stop it?* In this sense, Skrypuch's novel functions as agent of memory taking up the task of remembering and accounting for "what happened." What *Daughter of War* does well, in my view, and this speaks to its rational appeal in providing a wider context, is how it captures the trans-national nature of genocide. In most instances of genocide, actors within the international community can be identified within genocidal processes. For example, in Rwanda, China sold the Hutus machetes used to massacre Hutus, and French troops helped the Hutu regime flee the country. In the case of Armenia, in 1915, Great Britain, France, and Russia identified the Young Turks as responsible for crimes against humanity. Allied forces sent humanitarian aid to save the starving Armenians, and American, British, and German governments sponsored efforts to report the atrocities. Nevertheless, according to the Armenian National Institute, "no actions were taken against the Ottoman Empire either to sanction its brutal policies or to salvage the Armenian people from the grip of extermination."

In *Daughter of War*, Skrypuch had to find a way to include the failure of the international community without "degenerating into a contrived fact book" (Mannix). While Skrypuch's main characters are fictional, she makes one exception, and, in my view, her authorial choice works to represent and implicate the international community in genocide. Skrypuch's novel breaks the imaginative plane by including an actual historical actor. In the Historical Note, she writes: "The characters are fictionalized with the exception of Leslie A. Davis, who was an American consul. His observations were published in 1989 in his firsthand observations of the Armenian genocide in *The Slaughterhouse Province: An American Diplomat's Report on the Armenian Genocide: 1915-1917*." In the novel, Davis's character offers a glimpse of the international context and

international response to the atrocities, which suggests that Turkey's crimes were systematic, transnational, and not strictly ethnically motivated. While this novel does not explicitly uncover the Young Turks' political or economic motives, readers note America's awareness of the atrocities and its attempts to *furtively* organize humanitarian aid for the camps and provide safe houses to organize deportations. (To be clear, there was no public, organized effort to intervene.) The covert efforts, however, put some Armenians in further danger. This "information" is embedded in the plot and Kevork's character illustrates the reasoning and choice of one Armenian to help the Americans. After a forced march into the desert, Kevork was rescued by an Arab clan and taught to live as an Arab to hide from the Turks. Readers meet Kevork at the beginning of the novel in Aleppo, Syria working as an Arab shoemaker, and he later accepts work as a courier for the Americans. As an Armenian, the Americans can trust him, and because he looks like an Arab, he can safely transport payments for safe houses and deportations. Kevork's motivation to help the Americans, however, is not cultural pride; it is to look for his betrothed, Marta, in the camps. The Americans, however, intentionally foil his labors because as a courier, he is valuable to their refugee mission. For example, Kevork wants the Americans to send a message to the orphanage to see if Marta is alive, but the Americans are faced with a dilemma:

In her [Miss Schultz's] heart, she knew that the right thing to do was to send this telegraph. But John Coren had warned her that Kevork might ask this of her. He told her that under no circumstances should she send the message on. He explained that they needed Kevork's talent as a courier. What would happen to the thousands of starving Armenians if Kevork ran off to find his Marta? Wasn't humanity best served if he thought her dead? (73)

In this passage, we can see the ethical, emotional, and rational appeals of the narrative. The rescue narrative, so familiar to young readers, presents the humanitarian logic of the powerful West saving victims while inducing the reader to feel pity for Kevork and also Miss Schultz

(Davis's assistant). There is even this sense that we are witnessing a mode of modernity as Coren (Davis's courier) has to covertly provide humanitarian aid because the international community is not publicly intervening.

Authorial technique is rhetorical in that readers can see what an author is willing to do in order to do justice to reality, be true to life, and be intensely alive (Booth 37). More importantly, and this is why young adult genocide fiction is our subject, "accurate transcription of actuality does not easily produce a work of any real truth" (41). The rhetoricality of the fiction, then, is in service of realism. Nevertheless, as Gallagher points out, once the novelist has done his job, the reader pulls together what the novelist presents: the scenes, gestures, dramatized comments, and omniscient judgment. The texts works upon the reader and the reader works upon the text in a transactional process to make meaning, but at no point, and this is reiterated by Booth, does the reader pretend that he is not reading a novel (53). The reader cannot overlook the construction of that text, of that realist *fiction* (Gallagher).

#### **E. Conclusion: Moving Toward a Conscious Imagination**

While I do think a novel is a form of art to be appreciated for its aesthetic value, I also think that this art has pedagogical potential to not only teach about something but enact the problematic of trying to teach about something. In other words, the novel cultivates in readers a consciousness of language as a representation of what is real rather than some absolute truth or fact. The novel is a narrative that accounts for voices and experiences while inevitably leaving gaps for the reader – spaces that cannot actually be known or accounted but invite deliberation and wonder. I would like to emphasize that certain teaching practices – that is, ones that recognize and underscore that our knowledge is always partial, ones that embrace ambiguity and

explore questions rather than try to find definite answers – are consistent with the way in which the novel embodies the fluidity of language.

Still, English teachers unfamiliar with genocide may wonder how to go about selecting “good” genocide novels. Ruth Gilbert, in “Grasping the Unimaginable” (2010) argues that overtly didactic novels can close down a “child reader’s imaginative engagement with the ungraspable nature” of the Holocaust, specifically (355). Her recommendation is to select novels for the classroom that confront the reader with a “complex set of ideas about the relationship between narrative and subjectivity” (357); she argues experiencing this confrontation as a reader is actually more educative than novels that attempt to “impose order on chaos by presenting neat seamless narrative structures” (357). According to Gilbert, then, teachers should select novels that offer a representation of ambiguity and uncertainty in life. I think this approach to selecting curriculum respects not only the complexity of genocide but the nature of adolescence, which is wrought with the discomfort of uncertainty. If literary writing can draw young readers into this representation rather than being a conduit of information, the novel will actually be doing something quite remarkable; it will “capture the fractured nature” of not only global atrocities like genocide but modern life (Gilbert 355). However, in light of this chapter’s discussion, I think it is important for students to read texts that represent genocide in a variety of ways; reading “neat” representations of humanity with students offer an opportunity to call attention to the rhetoricality of texts and contemplate the ethics of representation include the aesthetic value of the novel as an art object. In my view (and that of Booth), whether the author is attempting a complex representation of humanity or a simple representation, the scene of address is manipulated for the audience and is, thus, an opportunity for the audience to become conscious of the transactions that create such a scene.

Transactional consciousness theory as a framework for reading, therefore, attempts to make visible the transactional nature of texts (chapter three) and the rhetoricality of the human condition (chapter four). To grasp that language is never real but a representation of the real requires a conscious imagination. The practice of reading novels promotes habits of mind that have the potential to dismantle oppressive institutions and beliefs that perpetuate injustice and violence in the world. In this chapter, I have analyzed genocide novels to illuminate the ethics, aesthetic, and rhetoric of representing human rights violations and the choices authors make in creating objects of memory. In my view, the fictionality of novels offers the English classroom a framework for ethical reasoning that can be expanded to subjects and mediums.

## VII. CONCLUSION: TRANSACTIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

Reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world... [W]e can go further and say that reading the word is not preceded by merely reading the world, but by a certain form of *writing* it or *rewriting* it, that is, of transforming it by means of conscious, practical work.

--Paulo Freire, *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*

I became an English teacher because I believe literature has the potential to enrich the lives of human beings, to build a capacity of sympathy for others, to invite inquiry into dimensions of society that we may overlook in our day to day lives, and ultimately to move us to be more ethical members of society. Thus, in developing a project on what *ought* to happen in the modern English classroom, I could not limit the scope of inquiry to reading skills or standards any more than I could constrain discussions of literature to analysis of it as a static or neutral artifact. I have, instead, offered transactional consciousness theory as a framework for ethical reading and teaching in the modern English classrooms of middle schools and high schools, and I have shared a few of my own experiences of reading genocide literature out of which this theory has emerged.

In pursuing transactional consciousness in my own practice, the rhetoric of progress in education – that new standards and new testing will close the achievement gap and make students college and career ready – and its mechanisms of accountability continue to coax me into data analysis and interrupt our reading with hours of testing. I am tempted by the teaching guides administrators put in my mailbox that promise Common Core State Standards alignment. However, such challenges have proven to be opportunities to illuminate in the classroom the darker side of progress and the way institutions and policies perpetuate certain values, marginalize certain experiences, and ultimately attempt to constrain innovation. In other words,



as Paulo Freire suggests, teachers and students can “rewrite” the world, can transform it “by means of conscious, practical work.” And every day, in room H103, this is what I *try* to do as an eighth grade teacher in my six classes and with my one hundred and sixty students.

Transactional consciousness is fundamentally a reading theory that sees the process of meaning-making in the spaces where the story of a text’s creation and publication transacts with the story of the reader and her community of readers; meaning making is, therefore, a dynamic process that resists measurement. In transactional consciousness, readers practice becoming conscious of the multitude of transactions that shape or attempt to color our students’ understanding of the world and their place in it. The “becoming” is not a finite state of being ,or something observable in the classroom, or quantifiable at some fixed point in time. As Bakhtin suggests, the self like language is in a constant state of becoming (326).

Transactional consciousness argues that teachers have an ethical responsibility to teach reading in such a way that students can saturate their consciousness in opportunities to learn their epistemological and ethical responsibility to the text and, in the case of testimonial literature, the witness. I have argued that teaching genocide literature, in particular, illuminates some ethical issues with reading practices that suggest there is a “right” reading or that a “good” reader is someone who earns a certain score on high-stakes tests. Did Elie Wiesel write *Night* as a tool for teaching symbolism? No. He wrote it to justify his own survival and to initiate as many encounters as possible with his readers, those who bear witness to his testimony. I used genocide literature to emphasize the importance of ethical reading and teaching because texts that represent genocide ask us, as human beings who share this world, to face *the* Gorgon: genocide (Adorno and Clendinnen). The word “gorgon” derives from the Greek *gorgós*, meaning dreadful. In Greek literature, Gorgons were female dragonlike creatures with wings whose hair was made

of living, venomous snakes. In modern times, fantasy books depict Gorgons as “evil monsters whose biggest weapon is their appearance of normalcy and beauty”; Medusa, the queen of the Gorgons, could “turn people to stone with a stare” (Sjoberg 38). To face the Gorgon of genocide means to look at it, to attempt some understanding of the conditions that perpetuate it, and to ultimately cut off the oppression and injustice that numbs society to the distant suffering of others.

As teachers of the word and the world, we are teaching our students to confront the many gorgons they will face in their lives, and we want them to do so with consciousness, with a strong sense of ethics, and with courage.. Any teacher who has read Mikaelson’s *Tree Girl* or Ung’s *First They Killed My Father* alongside her students knows that students even as young as middle school are not only curious about the violence in the world but have a deep desire to understand how genocide is possible in our world. They also have very strong ideas for how society *ought* to be. Our students want to face the gorgons of our world, but they need our support in resisting the urge to turn away or, perhaps worse, staving off apathy. As teachers, this means that we have to lead the way first by facing the gorgons of twenty-first century education. We have to take a look at the rhetoric of public education and ask questions about the way these new standards and high-stakes tests are infiltrating our curriculum and pedagogy. Our classrooms must be a place to uncover what is and imagine what can be. And for these reason, I regard this research as an important academic accomplishment. In many ways, this dissertation has been my way of facing the gorgons that threaten public education and English curriculum and pedagogy, but ultimately it is about becoming a better human being

As I discussed in “The Ethics of Reading: Transactional Theory” (chapter three) and “Rhetorality: Reading ‘Genocide’ Beyond the Classroom” (chapter four), we and our students

are agents of memory who will take the memories of our lives and the memories we create alongside one another in our classrooms out into the world. If students consider the purpose of education as preparing them for college and careers without some framework of consciousness, they may go out into the world and perpetuate the structures that foster oppression and violence in the world. English teachers have an important role in guiding young readers through the transactions that inform their life experience, teaching habits of mind that are aware of rhetoricality, cultivating a way of being with others that sees listening to lived lives as witnessing, and encouraging a conscious imagination for perspectives and how things *ought* to be.

For over a decade, I have witnessed teachers doing this *good* work often closing their doors on the latest school initiative for the sake of their students. And I have worked with principals who have innovative ways for working within otherwise restrictive mandates for the sake of their teachers and students. I have been fortunate in recent years to work with principals who have encouraged me develop this theory because despite reform efforts we haven't seen the achievement gap close and because what Lincoln's community needs cannot be measured by data or found in some new, aligned textbook. They've supported my efforts to get more books about global issues, to teach about human rights, and to read without bubbles to shade or blanks to fill. For me, it has been a privilege to sit alongside Lincoln's students as they feel, ponder, deliberate, question and even judge the art and ethics of genocide literature specifically, but literature more broadly.

Unfortunately, I know that my experiences are not necessarily shared by other teachers at Lincoln and perhaps in other schools. Some English teachers at Lincoln do not think that teaching about genocide is their job, and while they complied with the district's decision for the

English and History departments to share the responsibility of meeting the Illinois Genocide Education Mandate (to different extents) in 2005, the new Common Core State Standards (CCSS) have teachers looking for curriculum to cut in order to meet the demands of the new standards and state test.

As recent as the spring of 2013 (eight years after the Illinois Genocide Education Mandate), I was copied on an email sent to the principal from the seventh grade English teachers at Lincoln. They essentially said that because of the new Common Core State Standards (CCSS) that they would no longer have time to teach a genocide unit *and* cover all the new state standards; therefore, it was up to the History teachers to cover genocide. Just like that. After a decade of shifting to a more globally conscious curriculum and developing a library of genocide literature, the CCSS undid it all. Thoughtfully, the English teachers suggested some novels that the History teachers might want to include in *their* unit. While the principal did not accept this email as the final word on the issue, two issues became apparent: first, it seemed that anxiety over the CCSS and teacher accountability measures may have led some English teachers to interpret (misinterpret) the standards *as* curriculum, and second, the debate over which discipline should have the burden (or privilege) of meeting the state mandate, which began in 2005, was never fully resolved (see chapter two).

To respond to the first, the CCSS do not indicate what students should read at which grade level but rather outline learning objectives; for example, according to Common Core State Standards' website, two seventh grade standards in reading literature include the following: "cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text" (7.1) and "compare and contrast a fictional portrayal of a time, place, or character and a historical account of the same period as a means of understanding how

authors of fiction use or alter history” (7.9). Reading any number of novels about genocide would support these standards while also meeting the genocide mandate, at minimum. However, the rhetoric of CCSS is such that some teachers are interpreting them as curriculum. In an article on perspectives of CCSS, Jory Brass argues, “the CCSS normalize certain curricular aims (global economic competition, college and career readiness), encourage certain kinds of educational experiences (text-dependent questions, behavioral objectives, high-stakes testing), and name standards as ordering principles to legitimate, discipline, and control classroom practice” (23-4). The teaching guides distributed widely by school districts alongside new teacher evaluation procedures have moved teachers to drastically change curriculum and methods without understanding the implications of the standards or validity of the new tests, which may take up to eleven hours to complete (Gewertz). In just its first year, the CCSS are disciplining practices of curriculum and pedagogy (Brass). However, in my view English teachers concerned about the new standards, high-stakes testing, and teacher evaluations, can read testimonial literature, genocide novels, photographs, and films with students and still address the learning objectives stated in the CCSS. The CCSS calls for complex texts and primary source documents that promote “rigorous conversations” and for assessments with “text-dependent questions.” English teachers can do all this without the new CCSS-aligned guides and textbooks. In other words, I think there is space in the transactional consciousness framework for the CCSS not I am arguing that we also need to make space for students’ aesthetic responses, for conversations that elicit multiple, valid interpretations, for inquiry into the rhetoricality of these texts (including CCSS), for opportunities to bear witness, and for imagining what *ought* to be.

To respond to the second, it seems to me that the English teachers in my school, and perhaps elsewhere, still – after nearly twenty-five years since the Holocaust education mandate

and a decade since the genocide education mandate – consider genocide education as a strictly historical project, not a literacy project, not a literary project. I think “Witnessing Rhetoricity, Reading Testimonial Literature” (chapter five) illustrates the value of reading testimonial literature with English students, and “The Conscious Imagination: Aesthetic, Ethics, and Rhetoric in Genocide Novels” (chapter six) offers an argument for reading genocide novels with English students, but ideally, English teachers and History teachers would collaborate as a way of investigating the nature of historical knowledge and the function of historical writing. I hope that my work thus far has demonstrated how my own study has been enriched by many transactions not only among literary and historical texts but within and across conversations with teachers, students, and witnesses. In my view, uncovering and preventing genocidal processes is not an endeavor for English or History, it is or should be an Education endeavor.

While elevating the academic concern of reading theories and genocide literature with good intention, I maintain a critical perspective to detect the issues and ruptures in this particular approach. As I have been discussing the ethics of teaching and learning in a progress, systems-oriented, measurement-focused society, and as I have put forth a theory of pedagogy with transactional consciousness to encourage all readers to be conscious of the transactions that shape and transform our world, some may see this theory as a sort of pedagogical mandate. I want to note that I have not suggested we abandon altogether an inquiry into the methods and systems that have constrained reading practices and thus learning nor have I suggested we replace the new reading standards with transactional consciousness theory. Instead, I have been suggesting that the English classroom read in such a way as to illuminate all transactions and to be conscious of how all texts teach us to see others, the world, and our place in it.

While I have argued the importance of transactional consciousness when reading genocide literature, I imagine some readers will see transactional consciousness as a theory limited to reading genocide literature and, perhaps, disregard it when reading other genres. However, I hope my readers will see the potential of this approach in reading more broadly including nontextual mediums such as images and films. Transactional reading, rhetoricality, witnessing, and conscious imagination are, to varying degrees, compatible with other genres and representations of humanity.

While making a conclusion at this point, I realize that this project has been primarily theoretical and that some issues of practical application remain unresolved. For example, I realize that some teachers are looking for a lesson plan or a step-by-step approach to how to teach “rhetoricality” or “witnessing.” I hesitate to offer such guides because I see transactional consciousness as a philosophy of teaching and want to resist constraining how other teachers may interpret my ideas in their own practice. That said, the few stories from my practice that I have included in this dissertation offer readers some insight into how I am working toward transactional consciousness. Perhaps my stories may serve as inspiration for other English teachers who are reimagining what the English classroom can do and be for our students.

Regretfully, I am unable to enclose discussions from all the texts I’ve read alongside students. I had to select literature to include in this dissertation out of many that I’ve read with eighth grade students and pre-service English teachers at UIC: Adam Bagdasarian’s *The Forgotten Fire* (Armenia); David Kherdian’s *The Road from Home* (Armenia); Alice Mead’s *Girl of Kosovo*; Minfong Ho’s *The Stone Goddess* and *The Clay Marble* (Cambodia); Jean-Phillip Stassen’s *Deogratias, a Tale of Rwanda*; Elizabeth Combres’ *Broken Memory: A Novel of Rwanda*; and Hanna Jensen’s *Over a Thousand Hills I Walk With You*. In choosing to feature

Ben Mikaelson's *Tree Girl* and Loung Ung's *First They Killed My Father*, I intended to illustrate how reading genocide fiction and testimonial literature have helped me to realize this theoretical approach of transactional consciousness. Indeed, a multitude of articles, poems, photographs, and films have transacted with this literature to shape my theory, and still my understanding of this theory in practice continues to evolve. This means that there will be many exhilarating research projects awaiting transactional consciousness and genocide literature scholars.

As a practitioner, I plan to extend this theoretical work here to action research, documenting and reflecting on the practice and pedagogy of transactional reading, rhetoricality, witnessing, and the conscious imagination. A future project will be to write about a year in the classroom teaching within the framework of transactional consciousness with other teachers: co-teaching. The dynamics of co-teaching enrich the transactional nature of this framework in ways that I am only beginning to experience and see as this is just my second year co-teaching with reading specialists, English language specialists, and special education teachers. In my view, teaching is incredibly challenging and lonely, and collaboration (done well) has the potential to not only support students but support and retain teachers.

This ending note is in essence not a conclusion. Instead, it is rather an ongoing statement that proclaims an inchoate phase of transactional consciousness and genocide literature studies. By completing this work, I am looking forward to seeing more scholars and teachers participate in the development of transactional consciousness. After a decade of teaching, I have come to realize that while students enjoy and benefit from reading literature that might mirror their lives to some degree, I think they also want literature that asks them to transact with distant others. I think students want to understand how texts and images move them, to practice their epistemological and ethical responsibilities, and to imagine what their world, our world, *ought* to



be. In my view, ethical teaching is beyond making students college and career ready; ethical teaching is about developing transactional consciousness for world readiness, a world that can use innovative, ethical thinkers who embrace their responsibility to face the gorgons that attempt to turn our hearts to stone and who have the courage to make our world more just. As Maxine Greene reminds me and my fellow teachers, “We must have in mind a quest for a better state of things for those we teach and for the world we all teach. It is simply not enough to reproduce the way things are” (1).

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Conference on English Education (CEE)

SELECTED PRESENTATIONS: “Re-Making Citizen Teachers: New Possibilities for Democracy and Social Justice in Teacher Education.” NCTE Annual Conference, Boston, November 2013.  
  
“Confronting Modernity: Re-Imagining the Teaching of English and Democracy with Transnational Literature.” AUDEM Annual Conference, Democracy and the University of a Turbulent World. Sarajevo, Bosnia Herzegovina, October 2013.  
  
“Learning As Way of Teaching: Developing Perspectives on Teaching Methods.”  
Conference on English Education, Fort Collins, July 2013.  
  
“Maya Past and Present: Globalization, Resilience, and What the Maya Can Teach Us About Democratic Living.” Tulane Maya Symposium, New Orleans, February 2013.



### **VITA (continued)**

**SELECTED  
PRESENTATIONS**  
(continued):

“Co-ops and Cooperation: Reaching Out to the Modern Maya.” Chicago Youth

Development Summit: Youth Voice in Action, Chicago, November 2013.

“Honoring Experience, Imagining Alternatives: Pedagogical Possibilities in

English Education.” NCTE Annual Conference, Las Vegas, November 2012.

“Troubling Pre-Service Intersections: Uncertainty and Anxiety in English Education. NAME Conference, Chicago, November 2011.