

# Art Education Research No. 13/2017

Fouad Asfour

## Unwriting the Body<sup>1</sup>

Sitting at a table, my hands on the smooth black surface, spotlight in my eyes, the cold metal of the microphone reaches for my lips to trigger an undecided sound between clearing my throat and testing the microphone. There's always one face in the audience that looks back and smiles. The one who knows. Who is complicit. There's no evidence though. A witness, lips closed in a gesture of silence. This face in the crowd knows. Knows that, in fact, this conversation is performed for another audience, hiding outside, squatting under the window ledge, listening. They must not be noticed at any cost, as they won't last two hours without an ID. Nobody is aware of it but this one person. What I say is not important, for it is in the silences, the pauses and breaks between words and sentences. The high pitched singing of train tracks that precede a train. The tinkle of a bottle tipped over around the street corner.

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I start the lecture spelling out something that usually would go without saying. Stating the obvious, an intervention to exemplify what deschooling could mean: *Why am I here? A White, cis-gender, heterosexual, 'middle class' person talking about deschooling and decolonial options? Is it knowledge I am interested in it? Do I have access to a lived experience? Why do I want to ask these questions at all?*

Things are more complex, though. Having learnt what it means to grow up in Germany with an Arab name, I read again Audre Lorde's lecture 'Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference':<sup>2</sup>

*'Much of Western European history conditions us to see human differences in simplistic opposition to each other: dominant/subordinate, good/bad, up/down, superior/inferior. In a society where the good is defined in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need, there must always be some group of people who, through systematized oppression, can be made to feel surplus, to occupy the place of the dehumanized inferior. Within this society, that group is made up of Black and Third World people, working-class people, older people, and women.'* (Lorde 1984: 114).

Lorde shares the experience of a 'Black lesbian feminist socialist mother of two' who finds herself usually as 'part of some group defined as other, deviant, inferior, or just plain wrong' (*ibid*). In the US American society, members of these groups are expected to 'bridge the gap between the actualities of our lives and the consciousness of our oppressor' and to 'teach the oppressors their mistakes' (*ibid*). However, Lorde moves on to famously point out that those who are identified as 'other' need to stay aware that 'blueprints of expectation and response' are ingrained in one's behaviour and reproduce differences (see *ibid*: 123):

*'As Paulo Freire shows so well in The Pedagogy of the Oppressed, the true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations which we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us, and which knows only the oppressors' tactics, the oppressors' relationships.'* (*ibid*).

I find myself lapsing into habitual routines of writing which are shaped by these 'pieces', which have planted 'No Trespassing' signs to keep the bodily out. Here, I find Belinda Kazeem's pointer to the potential of sharing for un/learning helpful: 'For centuries, Black people—and Black women in particular—have been compiling knowledge about white people and white power structures. All over the world, this reservoir serves us as the basis for creating instruments of resistance' (Kazeem 2011: 113).

<sup>1</sup> This title is inspired by, and this text written in conversation with Trinh T. Minh-ha's chapter 'L'Innécriture: Un-writing/Inmost Writing' in: Minh-ha, Trinh T. (1991): *When the Moon Waxes Red*. Originally published in 1983 as 'L'Innécriture: Féminisme et littérature'.

<sup>2</sup> Held at the Copeland Colloquium at Amherst College in April 1980 and re-printed in: Lorde, Audre (1984): *Sister Outsider*.

Raising the issue of how 'Whiteness as Property'<sup>3</sup> continues to operate in the arts,<sup>4</sup> for instance, ties in the relation of private and public, and demands for theory to turn into practice, as bell hooks elaborates in the chapter on 'Theory as Liberatory Practice': 'Theory is not inherently healing, liberatory, or revolutionary. It fulfills this function only when we ask that it do so and direct our theorizing towards this end' (hooks 1994: 61).

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In Damascus, about 50 degrees in the shade and fifteen years ago, a slow and steady current of air travels through the open window. Thinking ceases, interrupted by sipping sweet black tea. Waiting for the heat to pass and then to gather outside, to talk and to work until the early blue of the 4 a.m. Adhan. In my mind, I keep moving back and forth within a fracture of time separating the moment of thinking a thought and writing it down. I try and make it stay a bit longer, coax some more time from it, although it does not seem to occupy real time. How long does the wink of an eye take, the flick of a switch? Does a turn take the same time as a change of mind? I focus to work in-between these shifts. It's in a prick of a needle, the snap of a match.

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In the 1931 text 'A Small History of Photography' Walter Benjamin looks at Eugene Atget's photographs to ask about the relation between image and text:

'Not for nothing have Atget's photographs been likened to those of the scene of a crime. But is not every square inch of our cities the scene of a crime? Every passer-by a culprit? Is it not the task of the photographer – descendant of the augurs and haruspices – to reveal guilt and to point out the guilty in his pictures? "The illiteracy of the future", someone has said, "will be ignorance not of reading or writing, but of photography." But must not a photographer who cannot read his own pictures be no less accounted an illiterate? Will not the caption become the most important part of the photograph?' (Benjamin 1931/1979: 256).

The invisible traces of a crime scene require a skilled reader, and Benjamin asks, what if the photographers can't read their own pictures? Are exhibition visitors assembling against the backdrop of art works or the other way round? Who has masterminded the crime scene of a gallery space? Who will step forward to testify, or will perpetrators and benefactors collude?

And what about the role of the writers? Will they remember to dust the gallery's glass doors and handrails for fingerprints in time, peek behind framed works, crawl under

scaffolding and unlock invisible trapdoors to gather evidence and to build a case? Will art historians obfuscate traces or crack the case? With time, relevant evidence becomes clouded and contradictory testimonies fill up the file.

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As a child, I read a book by Jürg Schubiger many times, *Dieser Hund heißt Himmel* (This Dog is Called Sky). It instructs children how to annoy their parents, for instance, by lying down on the floor and turning into a tree trunk, motion- and soundless. And if someone tried to move you, to respond with creaking sounds as a log would do. In another story, a girl is on a quest to find her luck by repeating the sentence 'Glück mein Glück, rück näher noch ein Stück' (Luck, my luck, move a bit closer). But each time, a different decision would have brought her closer. How much time passes between deciding and doing?

There was also the book *Dr. Kwekkeltee findet ein Pferd*<sup>5</sup> (Dr. Kwekkeltee Finds a Horse) which is about a rather absent-minded man wearing a black bowler hat who finds that a horse has moved into his house. The author Maurits Mok, born Moses Mok in 1907 in Haarlem, was forced to go into hiding during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands and helped establish the resistance publishing house De Bezige Bij (The Busy Bee).

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In her 2006 text "'Smuggling' – An Embodied Criticality", Irit Rogoff interrogates 'modes by which we have inhabited the critical and the theoretical over the recent past' and observes changes in the way art works are spoken about: from judging and evaluating in 'criticism' which is based on a 'consensus of values' – to 'critique', where the consensus is examined using post-structuralist theory and studies of difference, and from there to realise that it's the wish to know the truth, the desire for acquiring knowledge which needs to be interrogated. In 'criticality', 'it is not possible to stand outside of the problematic and objectify it as a disinterested mode of learning':

'Therefore, criticality, is a state of duality in which one is at one and the same time, both empowered and disempowered, knowing and unknowing, thus giving a slightly different meaning to Hannah Arendt's notion of "we, fellow sufferers". So it would seem that criticality is in itself a mode of embodiment, a state from which one cannot exit or gain a critical distance but which rather marries our knowledge and our experience in ways that are not complimentary.' (Rogoff 2006).

Can there be unlearning without doing it? Is unlearning a bodily move? Are there choices in un/learning, a prior-

<sup>3</sup> See Harris, Cheryl I. (1993): *Whiteness as Property*.

<sup>4</sup> See Pinder, Kimberly N. (2002): *Race-ing Art History* or Kraehe, A./Gaztambide-Fernandez, R./Carpenter, B. (eds.) (forthcoming): *The Palgrave Handbook on Race and the Arts in Education*.

<sup>5</sup> Originally published in 1962 as *Dr. Kwekkeltee vindt een paard*.

itised set of 'urgent questions' what to unlearn first? A forensic manual for contemporary art production is yet to be written.

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A ticking sound on a hot summer noon. In school holidays the town is empty, and life continues as usual in the township. The spatial separations of apartheid South Africa continue, electric fences are part of the normalised atrocities of everyday life here. The sound grows louder. Something must have gotten stuck. Moving closer, it looks like a dry leaf, but it's a gecko electrocuted while crossing the charged wire. Paralyzed and unable to move, the current builds up and is discharged through its body, again and again.

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Time is a medium of learning. The book *Critical Fictions*, edited by Philomena Mariani, is a collection of essays which speak to the potential of fiction writing as criticality. By tapping into lived experiences of oppression, critical fiction not only communicates the complex realities of post-colonial spaces, but also lived resistance, as bell hooks states in her essay 'Narratives of Struggle':

*'Thinking about the imagination in a subversive way, not seeing it as a pure, uncorrupted terrain, we can ask ourselves under what conditions and in what ways can the imagination be decolonized. Globally, literature that enriches resistance struggles speaks about the way the individuals in repressive, dehumanizing situations use imagination to sustain life and maintain critical awareness.'* (hooks in Mariani 1991: 55).

And because there's no eraser with 'unlearning' written on it, one can't undo what has been learnt, just like that. Here, it may help to listen to the text 'Eating the Other. Desire and Resistance', where bell hooks exposes how the desire for the 'other' forms part of the White European identity: 'Cultural appropriation of the Other assuages feelings of deprivation and lack that assault the psyches of radical white youth who choose to be disloyal to western civilization' (hooks 1992: 25). As a living practice, to decolonise imagination means also to dare to imagine the decolonised.<sup>6</sup> There's no handbook on how to imagine oneself differently, there's only the realisation that difference is structured along (intersecting) lines of oppression and power.

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I'm missing something, for sure. How can something experienced become more real when represented in

<sup>6</sup> See Sharlene Khan's presentation at the *Black Artists/White Labels* panel discussion (organized by the Black Mark Collective in collaboration with The Point of Order) on 6 June 2016: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jL2kN43tcwo> (12.02.17).

fiction? This lecture is recorded, but where must I search if I don't know what I'm missing? Nothing out of the ordinary is happening, apart from a sudden burst of noise as the bass speaker is unplugged from the sound system, punches the air, bounces off the spotlight to hit me with a feeling I can't understand now, but maybe another time.

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In the book *Globalization and the Manufacture of Transient Events*, Lebanese philosopher Bilal Khbeiz writes in the chapter 'The Body Manufactured with Letters':

*'The practice of modern living is toilsome. It requires spending a substantial part of what is perhaps a short existence in preparation before commencing it. This living requires nothing short of long and unavoidably exhausting years in educating the mind and acquiring a variety of techniques for caring and hiding, whilst in contact with others, the persistent and cumbersome traces of the body. According to G. Canguilhem, a proper, healthy and therefore viable body is a silent body. One which is absent, forgettable, showing no signs of hunger, thirst, illness or symptoms of sexual excitement; a body which is maintained and schooled in the repetition of standard behaviors and kept at bay from all digressions.'* (Khbeiz 2003: 11).

I want to ask with Khbeiz, how can un/learning happen when learning has taken place in a body that also learnt to be hidden away, made invisible? How to un-spend time of learning the required regime of appearance: teeth kept white, avoiding eye rings or other signs of fatigue? And how can a body which itself is conditioned by being prepared for 'disappearance, for an obedient silence' become a vessel to enact disobedience? (*ibid*: 12). What exercises could bring (un)learning processes about which take place from within a body, changing the way it houses our senses and reclaims physical space?

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Writing a text, I find myself often deleting passages which position the body in relation to what is taking place, for instance: 'We were sitting and talking', 'We were standing there discussing'. It seems redundant, and so I keep deleting these parts. I can't imagine where these reappearing bits come from. Might be a bootstrap though, to find ways to self-translate, to un-edit.

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Some of the participants end up sitting in the bar of Magda's Hotel in Vienna the day after the symposium, discussing the role of the body in artistic practices, how to trace the inscription of habitual thought in patterns of speech. Asking whether figures of speech and metaphors can be thought of as rehearsed body movements, reproducing un-deconstructed ways of speaking, repeating pre-linguistic, embodied differences. A performer would exaggerate habitual behaviour, repeat what seemed

unintended, accumulate errors and echo slippages. For unlearning writing, I use Victor Shklovsky's concept of defamiliarisation and George Perec's spectacle of the everyday, writing myself in and out of estrangement, slipping in and out of identities. Other exercises can be found in Sara Ahmed's book *Willful Subjects*, to refuse to 'be

seated at the table of happiness' (Ahmed 2014: 2) and to practice unlearning happiness by asking if 'happiness lead[s] us "willingly" in a certain direction?' (ibid: 4). There is no curriculum for unlearning but to follow desire and to listen to silences.

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