"Not to Arouse Your Pity": Situated Engagement and Human Rights in Dangarembga's "The Letter"

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ABSTRACT

This essay reads Tsitsi Dangarembga's short story, "The Letter," for the ways in which its play with epistolary form challenges normative human rights discourse and literary expectations. I develop the concept of situated engagement to examine how the text at once locates itself in the context of the Apartheid state's repressive apparatus and refuses the reader's empathic identification. Instead of a narrative of personal suffering, the story demands recognition of the right to stake a political claim to self-representation, a conclusion with implications within the South African context as well as in terms of reading human rights literature more generally.

In her short story "The Letter," Tsitsi Dangarembga concludes her portrayal of a black South African woman's arrest during Apartheid with an unsettling statement: "I have told you my story, not to arouse

your pity, but only so that you may know that these things are happening to us in our country" (396). The story is propelled by a tension between its own epistolary form and the letter the narrator receives from her husband in exile that marks her as suspect and worthy of arrest and torture by the South African Defence Force. The play with form and double meaning of the title—the address to the reader and the letter from the narrator's husband—work on multiple levels to demarcate and transgress boundaries: form and content focus attention on forced detention at the police station as an ambivalent site between public and private as well as local and transnational spaces, dichotomous gender roles, full and flawed citizenship, security and violence. Dangarembga's conclusion, proffered as a gift from the imprisoned narrator, one that the reader cannot refuse, at once demands a role for transnational fiction in writing human rights and asks what that role might be. What does it mean to "*know* these things are happening" (396)? What kinds of responsibilities, if any, accompany that knowledge? How does one measure the distance between "you" and "us"? How are the answers to such questions different when generated by fiction as opposed to the more conventional human rights narrative forms of witnessing, reportage, and legal evidence? In this essay, I will develop the concept of situated engagement to investigate the ways in which the short story at once demarcates the oppressive securitization of the Apartheid state and invites reader's imaginative encounter and involvement with the text. I will argue that as opposed to processes of identification, which ideally work to mask the distance between reader and text, situated engagement foregrounds the context of each.

Both fiction and non-fiction accounts of human rights violations, when they take the form of testimony, wrestle with political and ethical questions of representation and disclosure. There is an inherent friction within testimony between respect for the testifier's privacy versus another's need to know, as well as between testimony's narrow and broad evidentiary claims. Those frictions manifest first in concerns over authorship for both the testifier and the recipient: the ethics of the appropriation of others' stories as well as the question of reading one

experience as representative of many. Secondly, there are questions about the role of the aesthetic and emotion in describing historical and personal trauma that have bearing on testimony's rhetorical effectiveness as well as generic classification and, thus, material and ethical standing. To put it more broadly, questions of voice, representation, and response become central as victims' stories animate human rights legal instruments and discourses. But what of fiction in particular? Can it offer anything other than an imaginative foray into another's suffering from a safe distance or a false knowledge of historical circumstance? And would such imaginative travelling necessarily project or seek out the bounded liberal subject with whom the reader seeks to identify and, with it, the legal person recognizable within the law, as opposed to other modes of subjectivity and claiming rights? Whereas non-fiction narratives are often mobilized as or in support of evidence, human rights fiction can draw power from a willingness to embrace ambiguity or paradox and to imagine possibilities that may lie outside of the real. On the one hand, they can exploit suffering if its depiction reifies the distance between the ostensibly secure reader and the vulnerable subject or elides distance through sympathetic (mis)identification with a subject who suffers; on the other hand, they can help to imagine a more capacious politics of human rights when literary form and aesthetic investment shift readerly expectations. Dangarembga's short story juxtaposes these two alternatives in its play with form, in that "the letter," in both of its forms in/as the story, functions at once as literary testimony, material evidence, and transnational cathexis. "The Letter" mediates between the state's repressive apparatus and a transnational reader. I turn to what I term *situated engagement* to understand the interrelationship between the site of detention, the transnational address, and human rights as a mode of framing and reception of the text.

Situated engagement demarcates and defies prison walls: it is bound to the conditions of detention, yet harkens beyond them. It describes the text's address to the reader, as well as insists on an acknowledgment of the many distances between them. It underscores the limits of

representation of torture and imprisonment, and, most significantly for my argument here, it describes the ways in which literary form challenges two staples of human rights discourse: first, the division between public and private in human rights law and, second, human rights literature as a catalyst for humanitarian action. Because situated engagement negotiates the line between public and private, a division that is often gendered in human rights instruments, it also brings gender to the forefront of analysis. At the same time, unlike responsibility, which seems to compel a specific reaction from the reader to the context at hand and is potentially complicit with a militarization (such as in militarized humanitarian intervention) it claims to protest, situated engagement has no predetermined outcome. Rather, it describes the multiple ways in which the text defines its own set of concerns as well as engages an active readership, whose responses may vary.

In general, fictional prison narratives, whose story and discourse delineate the biopower of the state, underscore the stakes of divisions between public and private and, in the text at hand here, the local and transnational. The interior act of reading structures the imaginative connection outward with the world of the text; however, that process takes shape through the prism of detention and torture, through the very spaces that contain the political elements most threatening to the state. Reading through the walls of detention exposes the punitive structures used to maintain state power as well as its constructions of identity (predominantly in racial and gendered terms in "The Letter"). Thus, the reader imagines a world through a lens of what it has barred and from the perspectives of those who have been denied basic rights, including the right to express publicly their opposition to the state. *Situated engagement* points toward the ways in which that perspective is constructed and what it yields. Distinct from raised consciousness, in "The Letter" situated engagement demands a careful accounting of how the story defines its own context as well as the way distances between reader and text are calibrated. Building on Kimberly A. Nance's argument for the Bakhtinian concept of exotopy, or of the reader returning to her "own place" ("Reading Human Rights Literature"

171, fn 2) in order to respond ethically to narratives of suffering, I turn to how the story destabilizes any fixed distance between itself and its readers, mediating that space with the poetics of knowledge as opposed to identification.

Dangarembga's last line—"I have told you my story, not to arouse your pity, but only so that you may know that these things are happening to us in our country"—casts a web of reciprocities around author, reader, text, and its referent: the Apartheid-era human rights abuses in South Africa from the late 1970s to the early 1990s of forced relocations; political, economic, and social disenfranchisement; censorship; summary arrest, torture, and abuse; and lack of due process. Although as formal statement, the sentence echoes the familiar rhetoric of exposing rights violations (of raising awareness, with the assumption that awareness will lead to outrage and action), this alone offers an insufficient explanation of the story's "work." By rebuffing the reader's "pity," particularly with a tone that insists on emotional and geographic distance between the story's narrator and addressee, "The Letter" evinces deep skepticism of humanism borne from the shared European history of literature and rights and fostered by emotional ties. In *Inventing Human Rights*, Lynn Hunt discusses the parallel rise of the novel and human rights in terms of the novel's capacity to generate sympathy for a distant other, a sympathy that ascribes to the novel a tutelary role in nascent human rights (emotional) literacy. According to Hunt (and others), the private act of reading can produce the emotional and affective grounds for a fuller, more protective understanding of public citizenship, and the novel serves as an effective bridge between private and public lives. Although I read Hunt's argument as a stronger indication of how readers sometimes wish fiction could act, than how it necessarily functions, the narrator of "The Letter" pushes against this readerly desire for empathic connection by refusing to present herself as virtuous and, therefore, worthy of sentimental attachment. The story also draws attention to its own gaps, refusing full disclosure and, thus, a reader's ability to claim the imaginative experience of another for her own emotional growth or satisfaction. This is most evident in the story's

withholding of the full content of the letter the narrator receives, telling readers only that it begins, "My dear wife, I am in Botswana at present" (395).

As opposed to Hunt's analysis of how the novel fosters imaginative sympathy for distant suffering, Julie Stone Peters emphasizes the shared material history of rights and literature developed in a Western context. She emphasizes that the early "culture of stories created foundational narratives for the culture of rights" (263) in their simultaneous institutionalization, and, crucially, that both rights and literature "enacted a double and contradictory move: born of the market, they identified themselves as autonomous from the market" (267). The bourgeois, liberal subject emerging from that shared history is legible in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in, among other articles, number twelve: "No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honour and reputation." One function of human rights literatures and laws, then, is at once to produce and to protect a division between public and private life; yet, as "The Letter" reveals, both rights and letters must be negotiated across that division and through the market of transnational exchange. The story brings readers into proximity with various levels of secured space: the narrator's domestic space (which both the reader and the South African Defence Force enter), the homeland (a geographical and political segregation which stripped South Africans of their citizenship and whose access and egress were by permit only), and the detention center (whose proceedings were censored). Moreover, these variously South African and private spaces are imagined by a Zimbabwean author for a transnational audience. The scope of the story's negotiation of public and private, domestic and transnational, underscores and complicates Solzhenitsyn's "claim in his smuggled Nobel Prize lecture in 1970 that 'no such thing as INTERNAL AFFAIRS remains on our crowded earth'" (qtd. in Moyn 138).

Modern human rights conceptualized in the UDHR have been criticized extensively for being, in Jacques Rancière's words, "the rights

of those who have no rights" (302). As Greg Mullins asks rhetorically, "if human beings have universal and inalienable rights, why do human beings need to be protected from the state, and more pointedly, why must they be protected *by* the very state they are being protected *from*?" (121). The UDHR by itself offers a transnational pledge of protection, without an enforcement mechanism beyond the power of public shaming. When the prison or police station, marking what Barbara Harlow calls a "border of dissent within [the state's] territorial domain" (109), becomes an instrument of human rights abuse, societal protection and regulation are re-scripted upon the prisoner's body, psyche, and daily life as violation, circumscription, and sometimes torture. Prison and detention narratives, as border crossings, can bring the multivalent paradoxes of prison or police torture (as state-sponsored, yet covert) and the prisoner's voice (as silenced nationally, yet calling out transnationally) to the forefront, and these narratives are coded by both the ideological bars and spaces in between that frame their subjects.

Joseph Slaughter and Jennifer Wenzel demonstrate the crucial gendering of that divide between public and private in rights documents, from the UDHR and its two covenants, which "assume and fortify a gendered public-private split," to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which both dovetails with the timeframe of "The Letter" and, like the story, locates "women in a mediatory role between the public and the private" (291). As many feminist scholars have shown, when the law divides public and private spaces and guarantees protection of the latter from state interference, it tacitly places often gendered, domestic human rights abuses beyond the purview of the human rights law itself. "The Letter" exposes the pernicious effects of that division by illustrating how the protection and separation of public and private is unequally available to black and white South Africans during Apartheid as well as how those divisions are scripted more broadly on the geographical separation of homelands within a larger South Africa. In addition, the story underscores ways in which effects of the regulation of black South

Africans' material life played out in gendered terms, particularly in its depiction of the homeland as a feminized space. As the narrator notes, "there are many families here in the village who have a father, a son, an uncle or a nephew who has not been heard from for many years" (393). The production and regulation of race and gender—through marriage, residency, pass, and labor laws—collapse ostensible distinctions between public and private spheres of those disenfranchised by the state. The conceptual problem supersedes the unequal distribution of rights during the Apartheid era, although of course unequal distribution was at the center of Apartheid itself. Rather, "The Letter" makes visible the means by which the normative divide between public and private within human rights discourses elides potential human rights claims, particularly those made by women from within an ostensibly private sphere as well as from the homeland and the detention center as spaces of restricted access to the rights of citizenship. As the narrator asks the reader to "imagine" (392, 394) her journey from the post office to the home she shares with her mother and children, into her bedroom, and finally to the police station from which she narrates her circumstances, she documents the political consequences of every familial relationship and domestic decision. In a place where to speak of "political black people […] is to say black people" (394), there is no such thing as "a personal letter," no room in the house to offer safe haven from the state, and no clear distinction between political and personal significances. The story illuminates this problem within human rights in its attention to physical spaces and to voice or address.

In terms of its physical spaces, the story maps spheres that "should" be recognizable as either public or private within the state, in order to show the pervasive vulnerability of black South Africans to state violence. On an international level, the story's coordinates are the various possible locations of the reader, South Africa's border nations as potential loci of anti-Apartheid politics, and South Africa itself. On a national level, the narrator describes her move from Sebokeng township back to a village in the homeland. Whereas viability in the township depends on the support provided by her husband and brother,

in the homeland, the narrator writes, "we are quite a colony of women here but we are self-sufficient" (393). This self-sufficiency, in turn, has both economic and familial effects. For instance, the narrator wonders whether or not her husband will accept the child she has borne in his absence by "a man who comforted me during a few hours of solitude" (393). As the story telescopes in, self-sufficiency also signals the precariousness of black women across the boundaries between public and private life. In a key example, the narrator gets dressed up for her daily walk to the post office to check for a letter from her husband. When the postmaster is waiting for her at the door "with a letter in his hand" (394), it is difficult to tell if he is complicit in the government's attempt to entrap her or simply a concerned neighbor whose job as postmaster offers him a small window on her private life. His role in contravening the line between public and private is occluded by her focus on her husband's implied presence: "I did not see [the postmaster] or the Post Office or even the letter. All I saw was the writing…" (394).

The story travels next into her home and bedroom and finally under the mattress, spaces all marked as feminized and domestic by the narrator, her mother, and the narrator's two daughters. Although her mother recognizes that the division between public and private life does not exist and advises destruction of the letter, the narrator tries to convince herself, "It is a personal letter. There can be no danger" (396). That false hope is dispelled by the arrival of "an armed vehicle and six camouflaged soldiers to arrest one small woman in a remote homeland village!" (396). Thus, when the army moves across public and private spaces, invades her street, home, and bedroom, and arrests her on charges of subversion because of the letter in her possession, it confirms the earlier statement in the story that under the Apartheid regime, blackness in and of itself signifies political subversion and denies the possibility of a protected private sphere. This trajectory also evinces the state's power to exercise control over all South Africans, even as it denies those in the townships full claims to the national citizenship. The story's critique of state violence takes place on multiple levels. Perhaps most notably, the description of the narrator's arrest emphasizes issues

of proportionality. The relationship between six soldiers and "one small woman" not only makes the arrest seem absurd; it also underscores the ultimately unsustainable role of overwhelming force to forcibly control the majority, civilian population. Furthermore, the story emphasizes the distance between wherever the army jeep came from and this "remote homeland village" in both political and geographic terms. The ironic image of "camouflaged soldiers" arriving with "lights suddenly blazing into the room through the open window" (396) signals their role as an outside force. Indeed, the power of the state extends into the narrator's daily life beyond and before the soldiers themselves, thereby underscoring the institutionalization of the violence of the state. Such passages depict the reversal of violence and protection and of national belonging and usurpation under Apartheid.

In parallel with those reversals, Dangarembga reverses the valences of public and private in the way the story hovers between the carefully guarded privacy of the husband's letter (whose contents are never wholly recounted), as an empty space already deemed subversive by and to the state, and the narrator's "public" disclosure of marital infidelity and an illegitimate child. Yet the content of the letter confirms for the narrator "the contentment and satisfaction of my marriage" (396), whereas for the government its material existence alone provides proof of "terrorist activities" (396). This double valence of the letter opens up the story's possible interpretations, as the focus shifts from the text as a conduit for imaginative empathy, which would align the reader's and narrator's perspective on familial relationships, to the text as a transnational transaction about conditions under Apartheid as well as human rights discourses more generally. Reading metatextually, as it were, draws a parallel between the reader, narrator, and state's focus on the materiality of the letter, although importantly to different ends. What is evidence of the family for the narrator is evidence of complicity in terrorism to the state; while the story itself serves as evidence to the reader of the violent abrogation of rights.

When "The Letter" appeared in 1985, the violent conditions in South Africa had been well-known for decades, although that year

also brought new censorship measures which outlawed correspondence by detainees, such as the letter from the narrator to the reader that Dangarembga invents (Slaughter and Wenzel 302). Moreover, as Slaughter and Wenzel's careful historicization of the story indicates, the postmark of its letters was "for a day that didn't happen" (303): the story is staged and the narrator receives her husband's letter and writes her own twelve years after South African Defence Forces raided Sebokeng township in 1984. That event serves as the catalyst for the husband's flight in the story, and locates its fictional present in 1996. By 1996, however, historical and imagined worlds had sharply diverged, and Nelson Mandela had already served as South Africa's first democratically elected president for two and a half years. Slaughter and Wenzel credit the short story for having "participated in eliminating its own historical possibility" (303) by imagining and recounting what the censorship laws barred. In that sense, human rights fiction retains its testimonial function by substituting for evidence which otherwise could not be provided.

Whereas the letter from the narrator's husband, bearing the South African stamp, ultimately carries only greater hardship and acceptance of the impossibility of habitable, domestic space—read both familially and nationally—the story as a transnational missive insists on the importance of shared knowledge to craft an alternative space of engagement. In fact, the short story as a letter to the reader substitutes for the narrator's written response to her husband, which is only briefly mentioned. In effect, the reader takes the husband's place as her addressee, thereby confirming her role as a political agent as opposed to "simply" his wife. In these ways, Dangarembga, a Zimbabwean author and filmmaker who has lived and studied in Europe and is best known for her novels, *Nervous Conditions* and *The Book of Not*, offers a "cross-border text" (Tuzyline Jita Allen, in Dangarembga 392). Its moments of political hope come from the husband's escape "across one of our borders, which one I am not sure" (394), the re-scripting of the narrator as author of her own claims, and, in Slaughter and Wenzel's phrase, its "extraliterary demands" (310) on a

distant reader. In the U.S., for instance, the story appeared at a time when there were forceful campaigns for corporate divestiture from South Africa. Political hope can therefore be imagined in through various mechanisms to traverse, rather than to collapse, distance in the form of the husband's resistance or the reader's engagement from outside South Africa. The domestic figures complexly in this configuration. On the one hand, access to the narrator's concerns as a wife and mother may provide a point of proximity for some readers; however, the perverse violence of the Apartheid state, which produces and regulates those same familial dynamics, resists identification by those from outside its constraints. Whereas most scholarship on human rights stories focuses on the politics of voice in authenticating suffering, Dangarembga shifts the terms away from identification with another's story and toward a willingness to imagine both the distance that separates reader and subject as well as across that distance. The narrator says with obvious irony, "I will not tell you how they threatened to shoot my children to make me confess to my terrorist activities, nor will I tell you how they beat my mother when she pleaded for me" (396). As an alternative to the telling that she is *not telling*, Dangarembga's and the narrator's voices combine at key moments to demand that the reader "imagine," "feel," "see," and "consider." These operative verbs emphasize a limited evidentiary power of fiction. In conjunction with the epistolary form itself, they can constitute "know[ing] that these things are happening to us in our country." At the same time, the narrator takes care to note, "I do not know what is going to happen to me" (396), thereby underscoring the impossibility of imaginative closure for either fictional character or reader.

In place of providing avenues for reader's imaginative identification with her, the narrator insists that she has conveyed important knowledge beyond the walls of detention, beyond the bars of censorship, and beyond the nation's borders. This outward trajectory demands a careful accounting of the reader's geographic and political location, of what it might mean to engage with the text as its recipient. Kimberly Nance suggests that readerly responsibility is misplaced as such, and

she argues, "any poetics is fundamentally inadequate to the task of an engaged critique" ("Empirical Ethics"). The most literature can do is to "persuade its readers to act" (Ibid.) such that the reader must consider the material political responses possible from her own standpoint rather than from the illusion of responsibility toward a fictional character. "The Letter" evinces a similar skepticism of facile proximity or of the temptation of "overriding narratives of power struggle with narratives of suffering" (Peters 31); however, it also establishes a contingent site of situated engagement shared by reader and text. Situated engagement derives from the creative use of the epistolary which, rather than convey private, emotional content, delineates the oppressive structures of the authoritarian state from within. In addition, the epistolary form illuminates the limitations of human rights legal instruments in responding to the precarity of black South African women's lives during Apartheid.

Within the punitive bowels of the state, the narrator is subject to torture that she refuses to disclose fully. Article 1 of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, adopted by the United Nations in 1984, a significant year to the story, as noted above, defines torture as "severe" mental or physical "pain or suffering" inflicted intentionally by, at the behest of, or with the acquiescence of a public official for the purposes of punishment, intimidation, discrimination, or coercion.[1] In his exemplary study, *Torture and Democracy*, Darius Rejali examines the definition of torture as a "normative judgment" which "necessarily involves the use or abuse of public trust" (559). First person accounts of torture in

1. Torture is "any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity," United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, (adopted 1984, entered into force 1987).

prison or detention often describe how it destroys the expected rules shaping one's safe, social existence: bodily integrity, autonomy and a coherent identity, recognizable codes that govern interaction with other people and with the state. The crisis in the first-person is evident when survivor Jean Améry's writes, "I am certain that with the very first blow that descends on him [the victim] loses something we will perhaps temporarily call 'trust in the world'" (Améry 28), or when Charlotte Delbo insists, "I died at Auschwitz, but no one knows it" (qtd. in Brison 12). Elaine Scarry reads such accounts for the ways in which torture turns familiar objects and discourses into instruments of pain that cannot be expressed or shared. As Idelber Avelar explains in "Five Theses on Torture," "The tortured subject perceives that the experience has caused an implosion in language, has stained it irreversibly (…) One of the calculated effects of torture is to make experience into a non-experience, to deny it a place, an abode in language" (261). By asking the reader to acknowledge that torture "happened," as opposed to describing the experience of being tortured, the narrator again shares imagined knowledge as opposed to fosters empathic identification.

The process of "unmaking of the world" is predicated for Scarry on the separation of torture and civilization as well as on the importance of voice—on the artifact of expression—in reconstituting a livable world, a conclusion that creates a space for literary readings of human rights discourses but curiously seems to leave the body behind. In an important revision of Scarry's foundational argument, and one that demands the reading of affect and intensity in context, Rejali writes that "it would be a mistake to confuse the empirical inability to say or think when one is in pain with a philosophical claim that pain is a preverbal sensation, a sensation that has some quality that, in principle, makes it inexpressible"; instead, "the inexpressibility that matters politically is not the gap between the brain and the tongue, but between the victims and their communities" (31). Thus, when the narrator writes, "only so that you may know that these things are happening," she bridges that distance and makes a political claim.

Moreover, in keeping with Rejali's definition of torture as a normative judgment, Avelar argues that torture is not anomalous to the world or civilization, but is imbricated in it; or, as Diana Taylor writes, "Torture defines the society that practices it" (713). Writing human rights, as in "The Letter," then, does not restore civilization, the division between public and private, or the liberal subject. Instead, the story employs irony and the play of form in order to spar over the "space of narratability." In doing so, it refuses to accede, in Avelar's words, to the torturer's "great victory [of defining] the language in which the atrocity will be named" (262). Stephanie Athey goes further to argue that reading torture must not rest with "the body in pain," but rather should be turned outward to the political institutions and ideologies that support torture. Drawing on J. M. Coetzee's essay, "Into the Dark Chamber," Athey warns that "Tales of 'the dark chamber' can easily assist the state: the scene of torture can spread terror or overwhelm and paralyze the reader or infatuate the audience with the torturer' power" (182). Refusing to spectacularize her own suffering, the narrator avoids these dangers. She deflects attention away from personal suffering and toward political protest against her detention, treatment, and censorship.

The story's historical impossibility (another form of the distance between reader and text that demands measuring) may render moot the question of whether it catalyzes the reader's anti-Apartheid activism. However, historical impossibility also directs attention to other forms of situated engagement. As a work situated in the torture chamber of the totalitarian state, "The Letter" discloses the state's violent construction of its own identity. And, in place of the narrator's reply to her husband, or to the expectation of human rights literature as a narrative of suffering, the speaker makes a feminized, political, transnational claim to national and self-representation.

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