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Notes for an Oppositional Poetics

Erica Hunt

I developed the title and theme of this talk – “The Possibility of Oppositional Poetics” – in the Spring of 1988, while reading monographs on human rights and Elaine Scarry’s book, *The Body in Pain*, a philosophical treatment of pain, social and personal attitudes towards pain, and as an instrument of state power. Some time later, I came across the two books I will discuss later, *Beloved*, by Toni Morrison and *Survival in Auschwitz* by Primo Levi, two works of what I call oppositional writing. After I gave this talk in the following Fall, I was influenced by several articles, a few of which actually furthered the critical thinking here, and others which added special urgency to the task, if only for their obdurately blind point of view.

One article in particular provides a starting place: I happened to find it in the kind of magazine you read in airports while waiting for a connection. For that reason, I have no author to cite, and in fact it doesn’t really matter since it has the stamp of popular wisdom, delivered daily on the evening news. The article was written to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the beginning of World War Two. In passing it observed that Europe in 1945 ended a cycle of global violence lasting many centuries – that the post-war period marks the longest interval of peace in several hundred years.

What the article omitted is the fact of a New War, its violence dispersed in dozens of places throughout the world. It is a war that, according to *The State of the World Atlas* includes 26 million armed forces and 52 million who stand ready to supply it. In the constant and global New War, there are six times as many military personnel as medical personnel, consuming 40% more of all government spending than health care. In 1985, the New War had displaced 14 million refugees fleeing ethnic and political persecution, a number that no doubt has grown in the last four years. Fifty-seven out of the world’s 125 states participate in this New War, the era of official peace, employing exceptional methods of social control: execution, terror, torture and disappearance. What feels like peace to the western world is for a good portion of the rest protracted violence in which 24% of the world is hungry, while one “developed” country, in this case Germany, consumes more income than half the world’s population.

The point is that the industrialized countries have managed to create the illusion of a world at peace – with the exception of a few remote places. The effects of this displacement of violence, outside the borders of the west, are not easily conjured away. The violence of the New War doesn’t just occur in the Third World, that other planet, but erupts internally and scabrous in exhausted cities and nerve-dead rural areas, seeping into the lives of the nominally less marginal.

In America, one of the seats of power that has brought such “peace,” the majority are complicit, often unconsciously, with the New War, and as the borders of countries dissolve and nations become more interdependent, the violence spreads and entangles.

The conjunctions multiply between the nations at “peace” and those in a state of war. The most devastated populations of South America grow the drugs consumed by the most devastated populations of our cities, smuggled in through the same paths on which our country sends its guns. Americans lose jobs that pay “family” income to overseas subsistence wage workers in US government supported authoritarian states. Agricultural chemicals banned in this country are exported to poorer countries where they are used on the produce shipped back to American supermarkets.

If the negative character of the exchange between the west and the rest is abundant and abundantly repressed; its positive character is equally hidden. The levels of systemic warfare conceal the price that most of us pay beyond taxes. What is stunning is the brimming void in which visionary culture confronts power.

In recognition of the scope of the submerged, disconnected and violent character of contemporary life I renamed this talk “Notes for an Oppositional Poetics”. Oppositional poetics and cultures form a field of related projects which have moved beyond skepticism to a critically active stance against forms of domination. By oppositional, I intend, generously, dissident cultures as well as “marginalized” cultures, cutting across class, race and gender.

Poetics is derived from philosophical and structuralist studies of literature, descriptive of the way sounds, words, phrases and sentences form literary units. Poetics distinguishes between genres, typically by identifying the literary norms of writing and reading along rationalized lines of authority, from poem to essay. Prestige is crucial to the division of genre; forms rise to the top or sink, subtly reinforcing the rigid distinctions of genre. Essays ascend through ornament or logic, shifting with the era; an objectivist poetry reproduces the architecture of fact, a strain of fiction studies the double bind of the entirely lived imaginary; the advances often attributed to the mastery of a particular writer or group of writers is severed from its social origins.

But conventional poetics might also be construed as the way ideology, “master narratives,” are threaded into the text, in content and in genre: fiction and nonfiction, objective and subjective voice, definite and indefinite register. The affinities and subordination are familiar – and familial – linked traceably to the way the social body is organized. Notions of character as a predictable and consistent identity, of plot as a problem of credibility, and theme as an elaboration of a controlling idea: all these mirror official ideology’s predilection for finding and supplying, if necessary, the appropriate authority. Social life is reduced once again to a few great men or a narrow set of perceptions and strategies stripping the innovative of its power.

In an expanded sense of poetics, a more fluid typology would favor plural strategies to remove the distance between writing and experience, at least as it is socially maintained by the binarism of fact and fiction, of identity and nonidentity. So that plots are or can be historical or hysterical, revised or translated, manufactured plausibly or incredibly, ludicrous or cold eyed, bewildering or conspiratorial. Or character might be singular, plural, inexplicable, composite, evolving, non-human or found. And theme might consist of a surface, a tone, a didacticism; be latent or disjunct. All this is to suggest that narrative invention stems from multiple levels of perception and experience that literary standards conceived as ceiling tend to raze.

Dominant modes of discourse, the language of ordinary life or of rationality, of moral management, of the science of the state, the hectoring threats of the press and media, use convention and label to bind and organize us.

The convenience of these labels serves social control. The languages used to preserve domination are complex and sometimes contradictory. Much of how they operate to anesthetize desire and resistance is invisible; they are wedded to our common sense; they are formulaic without being intrusive, entirely natural – “no marks on the body at all”.

These languages contain us, and we are simultaneously bearers of the codes of containment. Whatever damage or distortion the codes inflict on our subjectively elastic conception of ourselves, socially we act in an echo chamber of the features ascribed to us, Black woman, daughter, mother, writer, worker and so on. And the social roles and the appropriate actions are similarly inscribed, dwell with us as statistical likelihoods, cast us as queen or servant, heroic or silent, doer or done unto.

The codes and mediations that sustain the status quo abbreviate the human in order to fit us into structures of production. There is a place for everyone, even the subordinate, if they know their place. It is consciousness of the subtractive quality of the primary vehicles of socialization that fuels the first intuition, the first sentiment of opposition.

In general, for a person of color, a woman, a member of the working class, school is first place where she is encouraged to exchange the richness of her experience and the values of her community

for standards that run directly counter to her sense of solidarity. Even a child knows the terms of the exchange are unjust.

In communities of color, oppositional frames of reference are the borders critical to survival. Long treatment as an undifferentiated mass of other by the dominant class fosters collective identity and forms of resistance. In a sense, then, oppositional groupings, be they based on class, race, gender or critical outlook, have traditionally been dependent, in part, on external definition by the dominant group – the perceived hostility of the dominant class shapes the bonds of opposition. And that quasiddependent quality extends even further: we get stuck with the old codes even as we try to negate them. We experience acute difference: autonomy without self-determination and group identity without group empowerment.

The effect of this can be sensed in the feeling of captivity we have before there is a psychic or social advance, the state of alienation we reside in: somehow the codes fit and do not fit us, somehow we are the agents of the prescribed predicates and not the agents. The simple negations that form the borders of opposition, the residues of old encounters between dominant and subordinate stand as prison walls as much as they suggest shelter, collapsing from obsolescence or repeated attacks, constraining the new languages that must be made for resistance.

Inside what is rich about the wonder of having survived at all, of being a people or group still on its feet are also the values that make us suspicious of variations from tradition. We judge then as we have been judged, sanctioning the differences that are our common property. We reiterate codes that negate our humanity by denying human differences among us. The white woman who engages images with scientific and erotic intensity; the Korean woman who pleasures combatively, the Black man who yields feeling cerebrally is doubly, sometimes triply, exceptionalized in social life.

Water closing over the surface where the rock plunges in. Our recovered histories are filled with tales of the wounded, of marginalization, involuntary silence, mental and physical illness and death. They are the metonymic correlates of the wounded social body; the fractured desires of opposition and subordinated groups spell out caution.

Projects of historical reconstruction are common to all contemporary oppositional intellectuals in America. This follows from the erasure of “other” from dominant historical accounts; if it said by those who deny us now that we have no past, then we have to insist we have a past as deeply as we have a present.

The goal of these reconstructions, traditionally, is to find orientation, example and value with which to fuel present resistance. The positive aspects of these projects were:

- *The discovery that history could be reconfigured.

- *Attention drawn to the fact of erasure and to the continuity of the expressive impulse for liberation,

- *Reflexivity: the contemplation of the past could be a critical reflection on the present.

But there was a downside to these projects as well:

- *Conservatism: nostalgia for a lost unity or richness of culture: e.g., goddess culture, the African motherland, the poet as prophet.

- *Insularity: an inability to acknowledge or find value in the synthetic texture of present culture. or in syncretism, and a rejection of the nonorganic or nonindigenous.

- *Cooptation: the reinscription by dominant discourse on conceptual advances made by oppositional groups into the terms, values and structures of dominant ideology.

Two examples of the last come to mind: When I was a child Black people rarely appeared on television as socially complete human beings. When there was a Black person on television, the

person was usually male, very very accomplished and distinguished, and my mother would call all of us into the room to hear what he, as a representative of the race, would say in this brief window of public space. We held to that screen, bound in aura of unity, done proud by association, fixed on the few words he could say in 20 seconds; an oracular experience objectively disproportionate to his fragmented electronic presence. In his decontextualized state, he served as the Black place holder of sorts between the loop of recitals of dominant power. But his telecast also reiterated the authority of the medium: he held the appearance of an autonomous hero without a community, a man of merit throwing the rest of us onto ambiguous ground. A role model from outer space.

Another example is the feminist project to understand and reshape the boundary between public and private. The goal of this project was to show that forms of private life are a matter of public policy, a notion which tremendously advances strategic intervention in the way that codes have organized family and personal life.

Feminists traced the multiple patterns of a woman's life and family life in history, showing that contemporary middle class norms were not the triumphant restoration of an ideal, but related to patterns of production, reproduction and consumption. Their value informed critique commented directly on capitalist as well as liberal, socialist and other left theories of society.

Feminism had a popular component, drew responses from many women and men who felt they were living truncated lives. It ignited public debate and catalyzed a social movement, awakening in many women the desire to engage the public realm.

Despite these accomplishments, two subtle transformations of this conceptual advance occurred: the first was to transform women's demands for greater public roles into tokenism, granting exceptional status to women willing to battle for the right to labor for a wage on terms identical to men's dehumanized conditions of work. The second transformation was the counterdemand that the values of private life, intimacy and cooperation (to name two), be abandoned as the price of entry into the public sphere.

The principle of cooptation is this: that dominant culture will transfer its own partiality onto the opposition it tries to suppress. It will always maintain that it holds the complete world view, despite the fissures. Opposition is alternately demonized or accommodated through partial concessions without a meaningful alteration of dominant culture's own terms. The opposition is characterized as destructive to the entire social body and to itself. State power in dominant culture depends upon its reducing social and political problems into pathologies requiring the police. It is a small step from that point to reducing world politics to individual aberration and to gaining our consent to maintain a world-wide police.

Literary cooptation generally doesn't require a police, the economics of literary production usually effect sufficient control. From the financial insecurity that seems to be an inescapable occupational hazard to the difficulties of getting into print and the narrow range of options for literary presentation, it has not been difficult to limit oppositional writing. Moreover, literature in this culture appears a fragmented professional specialty; oppositional writing tends to unintentionally reproduce the practices it protests, its social demands illegible in print.

In literature – a highly stratified cultural domain – oppositional projects replicate the stratification of the culture at large. There are oppositional projects that engage language as social artifact, as art material, as powerfully transformative, which view themselves as distinct from projects that have as their explicit goal the use of language as a vehicle for the consciousness and liberation of oppressed communities. In general, the various communities, speculative and liberatory, do not think of each other as having much in common, or having much to show each other. In practice, each of their language use is radically different – not in the clichéd sense of one being more open-ended than the other, but in the levels of rhetoric they employ. More interesting is the limitations they share –

limitations of the society as a whole which they reproduce, even as they resist. To articulate these intuitions, by no means mine alone, is to go down to the deepest roots of official culture and the state's role in preserving the status quo, and find how oppositional culture is both a wedge against domination, opening free space, and a object/ material, absorbed by dominant culture.

It is worthwhile to note that many oppositional writers of color, feminist writers and speculative writers' consciousness has been shaped in powerful ways by social movements. In America, social movements fulfill part of the role that opposition parties play in other countries: channeling the expression of mass resistance and the demand for social transformation. (Think of the American writers who were formed out of the abolitionist, pacifist and antiwar, populist, labor, suffrage and women's and civil rights movements as these movements pursued change in areas critical to creating genuine democracy.) This is not to reduce writing to its social voice, but only to extend the usual critical focus to beyond the psychology of individual writers.

It is no coincidence then that writers who use words to produce critical views in language as a social and intellectual activity, or to liberate a richness of expression, frequently think of their writing in oppositional terms. Like race, class, gender, and affectional freedom, insights based on language as a mediation of consciousness have a central position in developing visionary culture. But as a strata of movement, they too suffer from a kind of poor visibility, marginalization as a "special interest" group dependent on a self-justifying chain of the avant-garde and viewed as destructive more than constructive.

Speculative projects are not exempt from the cul de sacs that contain other oppositional writing. For instance, there is nothing inherent in language centered projects that gives them immunity from a partiality that reproduces the controlling ideas of dominant culture. When such projects produce claims of exclusive centrality, they are bound to be disturbing to allies who have experienced social subordination. There are also serious shortcomings in any opposition that asserts its technical victories and removes itself from other oppositional projects on the grounds of pursuing new possibilities of consciousness. The fetishization of the new is well advanced in our society, and borrows from dominant culture that culture's authority: it feeds our collective amnesia.

One troubling aspect of privileging language as the primary site to torque new meaning and possibility is that it is severed from the political question of for whom new meaning is produced. The ideal reader is an endangered species, the committed reader has an ideological agenda both open and closed, flawed and acute, that we do not address directly. On one level the lack of address is a problem of the dispersed character of the social movements in this country at present; on another level is the general difficulty of looking squarely at the roles we play as writers in forming social consciousness. It runs directly across the grain of some sense of writing as a private act done in dialog with one's materials, with the art body, an art public. But rather than simply negate that threshold sense of writing as an autonomous specialized art form, I would suggest that it is important to think how writing can begin to develop among oppositional groups, how writing can begin to have social existence in a world where authority has become highly mobile, based less on identity and on barely discerned or discussed relationships.

While all critical projects begin with simple negation, all advance when any of them advances. Each new movement of understanding yields twofold benefits: they show us where there is solid ground and shadow; and they show us that interconnections proliferate; that change for those with the least status pulls everyone forward or back. Thus the civil rights movement accomplished more than gaining the franchise for African Americans: most immediately, it removed pathological racists from the open and delegitimized the worst aspects of Jim Crow. Moreover, it proved the efficacy of mass mobilization and organization, it fed expectations of a political and economic democracy, and it reopened the space for dissent.

Contiguity, as a textual and social practice, provides the occasion to look beyond the customary categories of domestic and international, politics, history, aesthetics, philosophy, psychology, sociology and so on. As a social practice it acknowledges that the relationships among groups who share an interest in changing the antidemocratic character of the social order is not as oblique as their individual rhetoric would represent. As a reading and writing practice, it suggests new synthesis that move out of the sphere of a monoculture of denial; syntheses that would begin to consider the variance between clusters of oppositional writing strategies with respect for what has been achieved by each and a sense of the ground that holds it in place.

Its in this context that I've been thinking about the two books I mentioned earlier, *Beloved* by Toni Morrison and *Survival in Auschwitz* by Primo Levi, which have in common protagonists who survive an extraordinary level of legally sanctioned violence. *Beloved* is a work of fiction, in fact a gothic, and *Survival* is a memoir – and of course there are crucial differences that follow from the recollected and the imagined. Levi is quite candid about his partiality, he doesn't propose as Morrison, a conventional novelist, does the total world of a piece of fiction. He wrote *Survival* to frame the recollections that he subsequently reframed in later books, for example, *The Reawakening* and *The Drowned and the Saved*. Morrison imagined a true event with the purpose of "creating a monument" to African American slaves. The common bond these works share, beyond their self-evident critique of dominant culture, is that they show that violence is not exceptional, that majorities can be inoculated to tolerate growing levels of targeted violence.

Someone gave me *Beloved* shortly after my daughter was born. It didn't take me four pages to realize that it was about infanticide and the abyss of powerless parenthood. I put it aside until I had evolved my own version of motherhood.

The book concerns an escaped slave, Sethe, and her only remaining child, a daughter, Denver, who live in Ohio. They live in a house animated by the emotional energy of Sethe's murdered child – Beloved, called Beloved because that is the only word that Sethe could afford to have engraved on the child's tombstone. The story of Beloved's murder is told from multiple points of view through flashbacks, stimulated by the arrival of an old friend, a fellow ex-slave, Paul, who Sethe has not seen in 18 years. They were to have escaped together, along with her husband, children and the other men, but the plan was detected. Only Sethe was able to escape with her three children. The account of Sethe's flight in the fifth month of pregnancy with three young children provides some of the book's most harrowing enactments, reiterating, in an oblique way, the escape of Eliza in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, but with significant differences. What was suppressed in the *Cabin*, is the ground explored by *Beloved* – the particular concentration of the effects of racial, economic and sexual oppression. It is Sethe's fleeting triumph that she was able to bring all her children with her out of slavery, an extremely rare feat. In this act, she negated the logic of slave culture to whom the ownership of Black women meant the ownership of reproductive capacity – children and potential fertility and the perpetuation of slave culture.

Sethe is, as far as she knows, the only one among her compatriots to have successfully escaped. Her husband, who planned to accompany her, disappears on the night of her departure. She reaches her mother-in-law in Ohio, recovers from having given birth prematurely during her flight, settles for a brief period into a new emancipated life. For reasons that Morrison seems to attribute to community apathy or envy, local Black people fail to tell Sethe or her mother-in-law that white strangers have arrived in their hamlet. At the last moment, Sethe sees the figures in the distance, recognizes her former master by the shape of his hat, and sweeps her children into a shed. There, in a daze of remembered pain, she slits each of their throats, killing one of them, determined not to return them or herself – back into slavery. The posse enters the shed, recoil and realize that as property Sethe is worthless to them, having shown her radical refusal of reproductive use.

Sethe is jailed, then released through the intervention of sympathetic abolitionists: but her three remaining children are afraid of her: they understand that she has a love that can kill. Only one child stays, the girl, Denver; the two boys leave as soon as they are able. Denver stays behind in a mixture of resentment and paralysis induced by her mother's act. For Denver, the choices for an independent life are limited: she knows only the world Sethe inhabits, a world where no self-possession is possible for women.

The second movement of the book concerns the tentative relationship between Paul, the ex-slave with whom much of Sethe's story is exchanged with tales of his own miserable sojourn. The relationship's development is interrupted by the appearance of a young Black woman, about 18 years old, apparently a victim of trauma, with no memory of her own. Sethe nurses the strange woman back to health, who as she grows stronger literally assumes – that is absorbs – the identity of the murdered child Beloved. The open end of the book is that the minor and sometimes violent disturbances in the house, attributed to Beloved's ghost, disappear as the strange woman takes on the person of Beloved.

The book is a lineal descendant of the slave narrative. In that respect it shares the hesitations, the selectiveness, the vivid accounts of dehumanization and brutality recounted by former slaves, though very few slave narratives were written by women. It views slavery from the sign of the mother situated in the context of ownership, in the plantation owners possession of other human beings, in a mother's ownership of her body, and in the manner in which the logic of ownership is enacted on her children. In *Beloved*, every woman has lost at least one child – at the auction block or sometimes because the mothers made similar though less dramatic choices to that of Sethe, refusing to nurse a child they were forced to conceive through rape. It is probably here that we can see the origin of her community's failure to warn Sethe of the posse – for she alone of all the local women had all her children in emancipation.

The book achieves its contemporary and plural edge through a reading of it as a statement of problem in African American and feminist thought. Both movements lack an analytic that weaves insight about the qualitative and connecting conditions of sex, race and class oppression. Both until very recently tended to characterize oppression within their own singular terms. And there is insufficient language to articulate the connective tissue that joins their critiques.

Beloved begins this task by linking the battle for control of Sethe's reproductive capacity to the dispersed and wounded kinship she has with her people. When she murders her child she radically undermines her worth as an object of slavery. When she murders her child she emotionally mutilates herself and her community. The men in town avoid contact afterwards: Paul is chased off for a while when someone gossips the entire story to him.

The novel also illuminates the relative privilege of a Black woman who has all her children with her. Sethe through the patronizing charity of her previous owners was allowed to choose her husband. She chose him, because of all the men where she lived, he alone used his days of rest, Sundays, to hire himself out so as to purchase his mother's freedom and send her to Ohio. When Sethe arrived at her mother-in-law, she alone of the fugitives had an established place to stay. Her mother-in-law, a respected spiritual leader in the community, made a party for all her neighbors on an eve following Sethe's complete recovery, a party in which the abundance of victuals and pies expressed a kind of victory. And it was the next day the posse came for its unfinished business.

Morrison's strategy of a gothic narrative suggests that even the ghosts must be recovered within the bounds of fictive kinship, e.g., humanity. On another level, the use of supernatural approximates white Americans' conventional disbelief, even obliviousness to the most rudimentary accounts of slavery and its legacy, including, up until recently, the fact that 20 million Africans died in the slave trade during the Middle Passage.

Survival in Auschwitz is an autobiographical work by Primo Levi, an Italian Jew who spent ten months in Auschwitz from 1944-1945. A chemist by training, he joined the Italian resistance only to be caught very early on, and then deported by the Nazis with about 600 other Italians.

Two grim accidents begin and end this volume of his memoirs. In the first he is asked during his initial interrogation what he was doing out of the prescribed area after curfew. In a quick and critical decision, he identifies himself as Jewish, with the mistaken belief that it might lead to less suffering than if he admits to being a political.

The second turn comes at the end of Levi's memoir, he describes surviving against all odds the methodical and monotonous routines of the death camp. He succumbs to scarlet fever about a month before the Russian advance on the Polish front. Sick internees were expected to die: minimal provision was made for their care in the infirmary. In his severely weakened state, depleted and cold, perpetually hungry, he has no reason to believe that he will survive his fever. Yet, as it turns out, as the Russians draw near, the Germans evacuate everyone in the camp able to walk. Virtually none of the evacuated survived the march. The only survivors of his section of Auschwitz are those confined to the infirmary.

Within this context of choice and accident, Levi's tone is clear and dispassionate – that is, he employs a level method of address more commonly associated with the writing of natural scientists, in detailing the forms of men he finds in a social organization driven by ideological supremacy, deprivation and mass murder.

The bureaucratic rationalism of death stamps the camp into a hierarchical and rigid order: those who look “fit” live, those that do not die. Jewish women and children are killed almost immediately; Jewish men as long as they are not yet ill, live. The SS inspect, disinfect, shave and number and discipline. The interns are divided into the green triangles – criminals, red triangles – political; and red and green triangles – the Jews. The criminals are in charge of dispensing the rations and are surrogates for the SS, enforcing obedience. The high numbers are recent arrivals: Levi is 174517. There are very few low numbers, the few who live at Levi's arrival are the survivors of the Warsaw ghetto. There are about 30,000 people in the camp during the course of the memoir. Only 800 survived.

The prohibitions are innumerable and the rites profuse and senseless. In this order, ubiquitous signs admonish hygiene and ethics. One message heads all the corridors: *Arbeit Macht Frei* – Work Gives Freedom.

The number of different languages, and the numbing depression that is the unshakeable companion of the inmates makes organized resistance difficult. Resistance is manifest in its most shrunken form – the muffled will not to die. Eventually, Levi learns how to make himself understood. Communication and imitation permit Levi to operate as an “organizer”, camp slang for someone who knows how to use the breaches in the system to survive. Although Levi uses the word organizer, it is probably more descriptive to say counter-organizer. He organizes against and despite the order that conspires his death.

The longer he stays the more he becomes acquainted with how to work accident to his advantage, which is the essence of an organizer. By theft, exchange, trade or skill, the organizers are able to get extra rations or amenities without which life would be unsupportable. The organizer is one who escapes the snares of his illusions about his condition, who manipulates the order to look the other way from him when he is obtaining the forbidden means of survival.

The language of the first part of the Levi's account uses the first person almost exclusively, reflecting the degree to which social cohesion has been reduced. While there are individual bonds, these bonds are the atrophied connection between fellows in a state of misery waiting for death. But as the signs of liberation mount (Russian and English bombing draws closer to the camp), Levi begins to

use the word “we” consistently, eventually using the word “you”, correlating to the change from victim to witness. Although the account is a chronological one, it is also structured by topic. There is, too, another sense in which time has been pressured from its usual linear representations; the book is an act of retro-spection, yet the language – particularly its progressively differentiated use of pronouns that correspond to the approach of liberation, suggests the continuous present.

The dispassionate tone of Levi’s memoir validates lucidity as an emblem of his prevailing and of triumph. In the preface to his book of essays, *The Drowned and the Saved* (translated by Raymond Rosenthal), Levi says:

Almost all of the survivors, orally or in their written memoirs remember a dream which frequently recurred during the nights of imprisonment, varied in detail but uniform in its substance: they had just returned home and with passion and relief were describing their past sufferings, addressing themselves to a loved one, and were not believed, indeed were not even listened to. In the most typical (and cruelest) form, the interlocutor turned and left in silence.“

This account of the dream bears a morphological resemblance to the description of torture given by Elaine Scarry in *The Body in Pain*:

Torture . . . consists of a primary physical act, the infliction of pain, and the primary verbal act, the interrogation. The verbal act, in turn, consists of two parts, the ‘question’ and the ‘answer’, each with conventional connotations that wholly falsify it. The question is mistakenly understood to be the motive; the answer is mistakenly understood to be the betrayal. The first mistake credits the torturer, providing him with a justification, his cruelty with an explanation. The second discredits the prisoner, making him rather than the torturer, his voice rather than his pain, the cause of his loss of self and the world.

The dream Levi speaks of seems to bear a close relation to the social and moral world of pre-war Europe, and the power of European anti-Semitism and the Nazis in defining the social world, even the affective world. Substitute for loved ones, in Levi’s comment, one’s country or one’s neighbors, and the nightmare’s content about the reversal of moral responsibility becomes clear.

By contrast to the tone of *Survival*, Levi’s sequel, *The Reawakening*, is teeming with language and story. The *Reawakening* traces his liberation through his travel through Europe back home to Turin, a period of six months. The liberation represents a kind of potential utopic chaos. Episodes are picaresque, society is classless. Every character regains the power of telling, a power almost obliterated by the cataclysm of fascism. Levi’s sense of solidarity is boundless, there is no state, only personalities. Thus even the process of getting enough food to eat, keeping warm, etc., deliriously emancipated from the mean and obsessive regulation of the camp, is based on a principle of restored humanity – a free association.

In the discourse of conventional literature, Levi’s and Morrison’s works are the literatures of two “special interest groups,” victims that won’t stop whining, or alternatively, who are invested with special moral authority that eliminates the need to rigorously take positions in the present. To say they are of special interest pronominalizes them, fractures them, blunting their critiques, severing them from the contemporary crisis in human rights.

“It is only the prisoner’s steadily shrinking ground that wins the torturer his swelling sense of territory” (Scarry).

Both *Survival* and *Beloved* do aspire to be monuments, to commemorate through telling that which has been suppressed or might be construed as betrayal. The monument achieves its effects through moves that occupy space, by recovering lost territory, that is the body, and the domestic. It is said that civil war monuments in this country face south if in the north or face north if in the south. These monuments face in two directions simultaneously as well, addressing the past (and making the most of its pained voice) and attempting to form the bases of current critical thought.

“Intense pain is language destroying – as the content of one’s world disintegrates, so the contents of one’s language disintegrates” (Scarry).

Both works are written in variations of normative, linear prose. Their linear appearance is a

deliberate contrast to the experience of involuntarily induced dissociation. The linearity is there for self preservation, as such it suppresses other meaning, past humiliation – of that which it is too painful to speak. Despite the superficial linearity, they both eschew chronological treatment of time, they jump around in the continuous present and repeat incidents as a kind of parallel of spoken recollection. The use of internalized time structure has some implication for the official historical time it is their goal to supplant. Bidirectionality gives this linear quality a spin as well: each book's central character has a partially corroborating witness, someone who shares their destiny but not their fate.

“Time is precisely the impossibility of an identity fixed by space” (Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies*).

Both Levi and Morrison tell a story about the “last man”. In *Survival*, the last man is hung shortly before the liberation. He is being hanged for plotting among the prisoners – mutiny against the SS. The SS assembles the entire sector to watch the hanging in the course of which, the man cries out “I am the last man.” Levi writes that with this final shout he knew that the program of extermination had extinguished the last shred of resistance in himself and the prisoners. Morrison continually identifies Paul as the “last man” at Sweet Home (the plantation); he alone survives the serial traumas of the fugitive existence and the ritual bestialization by the laws of slave society.

I have chosen writing derived from extremely violent conditions to take a look at how such writing renders negation, and the strategies for resistance in the world and the text. The two works that are at the center of my talk are aimed at creating opinion and critique to demonstrate a multiple focus and means of opposition. They beg the question of what function writing in the present can perform in dispersing a domination that monopolizes public and private life. Certainly writing alone cannot enlarge the body of opposition to the New Wars, but it may enhance our capacity to strategically read our condition more critically and creatively in order to interrupt and to join.