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Oracle Bones: The “Profusing Gash” of Brokenness as a Space of Vernacular Articulation in Jamila Lyiscott’s TED talk *3 Ways to Speak English* and Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*

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Abstract:

Juxtaposing Dr. Jamila Lyiscott's theory of articulation (as explained in her TED Talk "Three Ways to Speak English") with Harper Lee's "To Kill a Mockingbird," this paper both examines the notion that articulation has everything to do with brokenness, broken language, and vernacular and seeks out within these works and others the lacunal crack of broken arms as sites of authentic and articulate expression which de-center Dominant American English in favor of African American Language.

Keywords: English Literature, Education, Arts and Humanities, History, Mass Communication, Linguistics.

In the 2014 TED talk *Three Ways to Speak English*, Dr. Jamila Lyiscott, through spoken word poetry, tells the story of a woman's encountering her and being “baffled” by how “articulate” she is (Lyiscott). By observing only the superficial “shell where [Lyiscott's] soul dwells,” the fact that she is black, the woman immediately anticipates that Lyiscott will speak African American vernacular because she cannot speak Dominant American English (DAE) (Lyiscott).

So impressed is this woman with Lyiscott's articulation, that she feels it incumbent upon her to announce and praise it aloud for all those present. In this way, she takes on the air of a presumptuous Wizard of Oz figure, ritually and munificently anointing Lyiscott -whom she clearly perceives as inferior - with an attribute of which Lyiscott is already possessed.

To be sure, this is a powerful and incendiary opening anecdote, but Lyiscott does not waste her time on the TED stage being justifiably but predictably incensed. Instead, she chooses to use the occasion to challenge her audience's understanding of the word “articulate.”

In Lyiscott’s vision, “articulate” will no longer be an adjective to describe only those who are fluent in DAE but those who have mastered the grammatical and rhetorical conventions of any “high” or “low” dialect. In redefining the word “articulate” to include fluency in any vernacular form of English heretofore categorized as “broken,” Lyiscott asks her audience to remember that, at its etymological base, the word “articulate” has everything to do with breaks and brokenness.

The noun, “articulation,” though it has become associated almost exclusively with fluent speech, actually refers to jointed breaks like those found in the arm at the location of the shoulder, elbow, and the wrist and is as likely to pop up in the common parlance of an orthopedists’ offices as it is in the the language lab of Professor Henry Higgins.

Such a foray into its etymology makes clear why the word “articulation” as we know it linguistically means what it does. From the Latin *articulare*, meaning to divide into utterly distinct joints, an articulate person is someone who pronounces each word as a distinct jointed piece of the linear flow of a sentence in the same way that the linear flow of an extended arm is broken by the distinct articulations of its joints. And yet, in both the instance of the linear assertion and the linear arm the jointed articulations conjoin flow far more than they break it up because they allow such otherwise stringent linearity the freedom to bend with fluidity, and, in the case of language, fluency.

Thus fluent and articulate expression resides not in the prescribed unbroken linearity of DAE but in the space of the jointed, articulated lacunae of this line where vernaculars reside and, if allowed to, emerge: “broken” English from spaces of articulated brokenness, dialects borne of alleged “error” which inspire creative idiomatic errancy of expression. After all, it is only the shift of one vowel that turns the *wandering* of errancy into the *wonder* of new languages and idioms.

For Lyiscott, to reimagine articulacy as a project founded in brokenness is also to challenge the prevailing view of African American Language (and by association any vernacular parlance) as an inferior inarticulate subsidiary of DAE, the pristine white homogeneity of which black vernacular has broken and “taint[ed] [with] urbanized suggestion” (Lyiscott). Rather, *Three Ways to Speak English*, posits African American Language as an authentic language unto itself which emerges wholly from the primal scene of the brokenness of its speakers, from the cracked bones, the articulated open wounds and “profusing gashes” that were and are intrinsic to

their experience in America, a language that exists not *despite* its being broken but, rather *because* it is and revels in being broken (Lyiscott).

Beyond its own considerable merits as a model of oratory and a text, *Three Ways To Speak English* opens up an invaluable space to re-examine and reimagine articulacy, brokenness and voice as these motifs play throughout canonical literature in which speaking authentically, interestingly and often enough, is tied to accessing the space of articulation occasioned by the breaking of bones.

Broken bones as a means to tell stories are nothing new. In ancient China questions about the future were inscribed by means of a sharp instrument onto the scapula of oxen. These oracle bones were then subjected to intense heat, and the ensuing cracks were read as prognostications of the future. In fact, the Chinese character for “to divine” is thought to have derived from the shape of the crack that emerged quite consistently when bones were set afire.

Likewise, in literature such articular and oracular broken bones abound. It is the shattering break of Finny’s left leg in John Knowles’ 1959 novel *A Separate Peace*, that provides the lacunal crack from which Gene’s truly dark and Dionysian feelings of rage, jealousy, and love for his friend can emerge and be expressed. And Paul Sheldon, Stephen King’s protagonist in his 1987 novel *Misery* is a writer unable to move beyond the genre of hackneyed bodice rippers until his sinister muse and number 1 fan, Annie Wilkes, hobbles his left leg from which “profusing gash” pours forth the finest writing of his life.

In the realm of film, Greta Gerwig’s 2017 *Ladybird*, opens with the teenage title character and her mother driving and arguing until, utterly frustrated and misunderstood, Ladybird hurls herself from the car and breaks her arm, a cracked oracle bone which, subsequently bound in a white cast, bears her pithy manifesto of articular liberation: “Fuck you, Mom” (Gerwig).

And then there is, lodged somewhere amongst these articular bones cracking across time from ancient China to Hollywood, Harper Lee’s however inadvertent study in osteology *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Call me an eisegete, but I cannot but help reading the first sentence of this novel, spoken by Scout, Lee’s narrator, as a moment of eerily, spine tingling prescience on the part of Ms. Lee anticipating Lyiscott’s TED talk, Gerwig’s film, et al by some 60 years: “When he was nearly thirteen, my brother Jem got his arm badly broken at the elbow” (Lee 1).

In the opening paragraph that follows, Scout goes on to explain that the story she is about to tell retrospectively will end at the same time as, and partially because of, the breaking of Jem’s elbow, and because one can only truly and fully relate the narrative arc of a story when its conclusion is assured, the reader understands that Lee’s plot strategy as well as Scout’s ability to tell this story are both indebted to this fracture.

Before the accident, we can imagine Jem’s arm in all its pristine linearity and whiteness as symbolic of a sentence spoken in whole Dominant American English, but the crack of its elbow as the novel begins, like Chinese oracle bones in fire, resounds in the silent air, shattering the narrative expectations of a white and fragile 1960’s readership by beckoning forth from this Lyiscottian profusing gash the broken vernacular voices of many of Lee’s characters who otherwise would have remained silenced.

Predominant amongst these characters is Tom Robinson, the black man whom Jem and Scout’s father, Atticus Finch, is defending against a false accusation of rape entered by a white woman. It would initially appear that the characters Jem and Tom would have nothing more in common than their connection to Atticus were it not for the color and condition of their respective left arms.

In many ways, these arms are indeed vastly different: Jem’s is white and that of a child, and Scout describes the grown man Tom’s as “soft black velvet” (219). But a closer examination reveals that these arms are also remarkably similar by virtue of the respective injuries they have sustained at the hands of assailants who acted in the service of racist agendas.

12 year old Jem’s arm is broken by the villain Bob Ewell who, furious that Atticus defended a black man, attacks Jem and his sister, and Tom, an avatar of the way in which the American agricultural empire flourished at the cost of forced black labor, “like to bled to death” when, as a boy, his left arm was caught “in a cotton gin” and the machine tore “all [his] muscles...loose from his bones” (211).

But while Tom’s and Jem’s arms are broken under similar racially charged circumstances, the respective injury each sustains differs markedly in degree. True, as the result of Ewell’s attack and the events that lead up to it, Jem will assuredly go through life with a physical scar to match his emotional one- his left hand thereafter will hang “at right angles to his body, his thumb parallel to his thigh”- but for the most part, Jem “couldn’t ... care... less” because the scar is minor, and he can still “pass and punt” (3). In short, Jem will heal and go on.

Conversely, the damage done to Tom's arm is permanent and devastating. Many years after the occasion of his accident when Tom stands in court as a man unjustly accused of rape, his left arm remains "dead at his side... [ending] in a small shriveled hand," demonstrable evidence of the violent carnage of which he was and still is the victim (211).

And when one takes into account both the linear similitude of arms to physical sentences and breaks in them to sites of articular expression, the linguistic prognoses for Jem and Tom is much like their orthopaedic ones.

As assuredly as Jem, a white boy, will survive his injury and prosper, so too his arm, broken at the elbow, will not break him but, instead, give rise to the articulation of an entire canonical novel. Conversely, Tom, dispossessed of an elbow let alone the power in his forearm to bend that elbow at its articular crook, is unable to access the broken and authentic vernacular voice within him which would assuredly emerge from such a bending and give rise to the testimony that might exonerate him in court.

However, while such a brachial reading underscores Jem's ability to articulate versus Tom's silencing, it would be misleading to suggest that anyone in this novel, least of all its author, is free to tell this story of brokenness without hindrance.

Indeed, a closer look at Jem's and Tom's respective oracle bones reveals the way in which both their arms and assertions are truncated and literally manipulated to serve preordained conclusions. Consider first that after they heal from their respective injuries, Jem's left arm is somewhat "shorter than his right" (3), and Tom's left arm when he stands up in court to face his accusers, is revealed to be "fully twelve inches shorter" than its dextral counterpart (211). Stature wise, then, both Jem and Tom list to the right, but more important than its effect on their carriage, this brachial asymmetry curtails Jem's and Tom's respective powers of articulation. While both left arms are indeed *prima facie* articulations of the violent racism that gave rise to their breaking, the fact that they are both foreshortened suggests that Jem and Tom are stopped midway in the telling of these individual stories of racism, cut off at the pass, silenced in brokenness before telling the "whole" tale.

Bringing now their whole and healthy right arms into the mix and remembering that English is written and read from left to right, from beginning to conclusion, both Jem and Tom, who physically list to the right, will find that any attempts to initiate the beginning of authentic narratives from the articular breaks on their left arms will not only be broken and interrupted,

they also will be literally outweighed, outspoken and subsumed by right arms symbolic of “right” and “whole” conclusions drawn about anything they might say far in advance of their ever saying it.

For Jem this means that in the same way he lists to the right, so too the narrative trajectory of the novel whose structural destiny his oracle bones foretell. We have already noted that the beginning paragraph of *Mockingbird*, situated at the leftmost side of the text is no beginning at all, but rather a diegetic and prospective recounting of the novel’s ending when Jem’s arm is broken. Because this beginning actually occurs at the ending, the novel demands that a reader just opening the book from the left divert her attention immediately to its conclusive right side, an occasion of textual whiplash that seems less a purposeful narrative strategy on Lee’s part than an unwilling gesture of obeisance paid to the racially charged contexts to which *Mockingbird* is tethered: 1930’s Alabama when the novel takes place and 1960’s America when it was published. As both of these eras were mired in the “right-eous” and “conclusive” belief of African American inferiority and presumed guilt regardless of the circumstance, *Mockingbird*’s structure and Lee from the first page forward, must perforce follow suit, sensing intuitively that the conclusion of any novel about an innocent black man accused of rape, is so inevitable that it might as well serve as the story’s beginning.

But even after having ceded the beginning paragraph of *Mockingbird* to its conclusion, Lee and her characters still, in subsequent paragraphs, find that their various efforts to commence their telling from the left, much like Jem’s and Tom’s foreshortened left arms, simply don’t measure up. Instead, they are the unsure and halting stutters of a writer and her characters who, because they are unable to plant a definitive flag at the narrative starting line, squabble amongst themselves, Scout “maintain[ing] that the Ewell’s started it all,” and Jem arguing that “it started long before that...the summer Dill came to [them]” (3).

Discarding both of these conjectures as unsatisfactory, Scout decides to “take a broad view of the thing,” asserting that the story to follow really began 160 years prior when “Andrew Jackson...drove the Creek [Indians] up the creek,” annihilating the Native American presence in Alabama, and clearing a path for Scout’s ancestors without whom there would be no Scout, no narrator, and no novel (3).

More than just Scout’s retrospective analysis of “where it all began” this is Lee’s acknowledgement that the authority to articulate a beginning to this story rests not with her or

any of her characters who have personally either witnessed or suffered the oppression and racial erasure documented therein, but with the architects of an all white American dream who, residing outside the text and long before its inception, set the stage for such atrocities.

And inasmuch as Lee is forced to invoke Andrew Jackson, marauder of the Creeks, as the muse who begins her story, Tom must submit to the white male inventor of the cotton gin, Eli Whitney, as his. For at about the same time Jackson was killing the Creeks, clearing a path for the Finch ancestors to sail up the Alabama, Whitney's machine, not to say his machinations devoted to breaking all people of color, was ensuring that Tom's articular arm would be maimed into silence long before he ever stood in the Maycomb courthouse to speak of such brokenness.

Finally, calling to mind once again that texts commence on the left and conclude on the right, Lee's depiction of Tom's standing in court looking "oddly off balance" is telling (211). As he leans decidedly right, resting his whole and healthy arm "on the back of his chair," (216) his left arm, in stark contrast, appearing even more foreshortened than it actually is, Tom is embodiment of the scales of justice weighed down heavily to the right in favor of a preordained conclusion of his guilt.

And if there is any doubt that, as regards Tom, conclusions of his guilt deemed "right" in court will overspeak his broken assertions of innocence from the left, one need only look to the struggle that ensues, a few moments later, between his right and left arm when he is asked to take an oath to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

Thomas Robinson reached around, ran his [right hand] fingers under his left arm and lifted it. He guided his arm to the Bible and his rubber-like left hand sought contact with the black binding (216).

This devastating image of an innocent black man forced to ritually enact the story of his own silencing by literally manipulating the broken articular assertions of his left arm with his whole and conclusive right one is made all the more disturbing when this same left arm slips fecklessly and soundlessly off the Bible, assuring readers that the authentic African American vernacular testimony which might have poured forth from that articular site has no chance of being recognized as legitimate by a Bible or a people both slavishly devoted to Dominant American English. Indeed, while swearing in a literary tradition is generally associated with articular defiance - Shakespeare's Caliban defies Prospero's efforts to force him to speak English by learning "to curse" in the language of his oppressor, and Eliza Doolittle famously

defies the elitist linguistic lessons of Professor Higgins by imploring the horse she has bet on at the tony Ascot Races, to move its “bloomin arse”- Tom, bereft of an articular left arm, possesses not even the agency to be passively sworn in, let alone the capacity to swear at his linguistic oppressors.

More disheartening still, even when the acknowledgement of Tom’s left arm as useless should serve as a boon to his defense, prima facie evidence that he could not possibly have inflicted the bruises on the right side of his accuser’s face, the “righteous” conclusion of his guilt still carries the day. White Bob Ewell may be in possession of a whole left arm and hand, his facility with which he gladly demonstrates to the jury by signing his name, but, no matter. It is Tom, black and possessed of an irreparably broken left oracle bone, who “in the secret courts of men’s hearts” was found guilty long before the case came to trial, “the minute Mayella Ewell [his accuser] opened her mouth and screamed” (276).

Tom’s and Jem’s oracle bones could not portend a more hopeless assessment of the articular options of *Mockingbird’s* African American characters, those white characters who essay to recount their stories, and its author who sought with her novel to shift the conversation about race in 1960’s America. The atmosphere of futility that pervades these attempts is summed up in Scout’s exchange with Atticus about Tom’s prospects at trial: “...’Are we going to win it?’ ...’No, honey.’...Then why-” (87).

Then why- indeed. Why, in circumstances where the axiomatic and logical response should be bitterness, does Lee persist in writing *Mockingbird* even when she is robbed, from the first paragraph onward, of the autonomy of shaping its conclusion? Likewise, why does Tom persist in his efforts to speak his broken brachial truth even as he sees that truth being manipulated against him? And, at the risk of conflating the fictional and the real, why do Atticus Finch and Jamila Lyiscott vehemently persist in their respective efforts to elicit from that which is irreparably broken and “profusing” and “gashed” that which is articular and whole and eloquent?

We can, if we choose, certainly write them all off, from Lee through Lyiscott, as quixotic dreamers, tilting toward the windmill of an impossible articular future. Or, we can remember Atticus’ response to Scout’s *then why...?*, that being “licked a hundred years before we started is no reason for us not to try,” (87) and that we must, all of us, nevertheless persist in this work of taking each occasion of brokenness and silence and finding the whole and articulate voice

embedded therein until we are in sight of Lyiscott's vision, however quixotic it may seem today, of a world where only God, "the one recorded in the Genesis" will say of one language in hierarchic relationship to another, "it is good" (Lyiscott).

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