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Agencies of voice: teaching and writing with the short stories of Uwem Akpan

Abstract:

How we tell stories, who we tell them to, and their importance in our culture, has undoubtedly changed over the past two hundred years. Even so, the exchange of stories about ourselves and our worlds is flourishing in new ways, both in print and online. Jonathan Greenberg observes with reference to Walter Benjamin that the ‘difference between story and novel is the difference between speech and writing, craft and art, voice and text, presence and absence’.¹ Arguably, the reader of the published work is similarly separated from the production of the story. Benjamin’s point is that the decline of the numinous qualities of communal storytelling and the rise of the narrator as bourgeois individual are symptoms of social and political isolation brought about by the progress of capital. This notion may be applied to fictional accounts of the evolution and impacts of globalisation among very different cultural contexts.

Uwem Akpan’s *Say You Are One of Them* offers short stories that engage and confront both readers and writers. Told from the viewpoint of children in Africa, Akpan’s stories are immediate, sometimes shockingly visceral, and yet beguiling. They offer fruitful exemplifications of the use of voice and agency in fiction: inviting readers and writers to step into the shoes of the characters, in order to realize Africa’s troubled circumstances, and our own. More powerfully, for students of creative writing, critical and contextualized readings of Akpan’s stories demonstrate the narrative power of notions such as agency and point of view, enabling students to recruit these more effectively within their own writing practice. This paper explores some of the possibilities suggested by Akpan’s stories for critical reading as a strategy for teaching literary technique in fiction. The paper also suggests that Akpan’s fiction strives to enact a return to relationship and connection, through the communal voice of the storyteller.

Biographical note:

Stephanie Green currently teaches Writing, Communication and Literature at Griffith University. She was awarded a doctorate from the University of Western Australia in 1998 and is a widely published and prize-winning author of short fiction, creative non-fiction and poetry. *Too Much Too Soon*, a selection of her short stories, was published by Pandanus Books in 2006.

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In his essay 'The Story Teller' Walter Benjamin describes the rise of the novel two centuries ago as a symptom of the decline of storytelling (2007: 87).² With its literary conventions, narrative devices and plot structures, he argues, the novel has separated us from the oral storytelling tradition: a process that heralded the end of epic wisdom and the emergence of secular materialism. How we tell stories, who we tell them to, their importance and meanings in our culture, have all undoubtedly changed over the past two hundred years. Even so, the exchange of stories, about ourselves and our worlds, is flourishing in new ways, both in print and on line.

Jonathan Greenberg points out that Benjamin addresses the separation between the story and the storyteller: 'The difference between story and novel is the difference between speech and writing, craft and art, voice and text, presence and absence' (2007: 426). The reader of the published work is now similarly separated from the production of the story, unlike Benjamin's fireside listeners to ancient communal tales. This is intensified in the context of academic reading, where, arguably, the apparatus of textual interpretation, close attention to rhetorical devices, the historicity, politics, even the authorship of a text, reifies both the work and its analysis.

This paper is founded on the proposition that creative production and textual analysis are fundamentally interrelated, and that their perceived separation tends to reflect cultural dissonance rather than a conceptual split between creative production and critical deconstruction. Benjamin's point about the story and the storyteller is that the decline of the numinous qualities of communal storytelling and the rise of the narrator as bourgeois individual are symptoms of social and political isolation brought about by the progress of capital. He refers here to European narrative transitions. This notion may be applied, however, to the evolution and impacts of globalisation within and among very different cultural contexts.

Uwem Akpan's *Say You Are One of Them* offers short stories that speak from multiple story-telling traditions. Open-ended, reflecting commonalities of perspective and experience, they simultaneously engage and confront both readers and writers. Told from the perspective of children in Africa, Akpan's stories are immediate, visceral, shockingly revealing and yet also joyously beguiling. They invite readers to step into the shoes of the characters and find some understanding of Africa's troubled circumstances, and our own. Approached in terms of textual analysis and compositional instruction, these stories proved effective as a resource for creative writing students at Griffith University in developing their skills as both readers and writers. Drawing upon this experience, the following discussion explores some of the possibilities suggested by Akpan's writing for the teaching and practice of writing in a 'post-globalised' world. It is suggested, further, that Akpan's fiction strives to position the reader in such a way that the separation from the production of the story may be, at least notionally or imaginatively, overcome.

Uwem Akpan was born 'under a palm wine tree' in Ikot Akpan Eda, southern Nigeria, in 1971. He studied Philosophy, English and Theology at university and was ordained as a Jesuit priest in 2003. While teaching in Nigeria and seeking a way to express 'the ills of my country', Akpan began writing and 'felt as if a gate had opened...every night I ran through that gate like a mischievous child' (Akpan, 1 Oct, 2009). He

eventually received an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Michigan in 2006. *Say You're One of Them* was published by Abacus (UK) in 2008. These stories of marginal, dislocated lives have attracted international and commercial acclaim, and received literary and humanitarian awards, including the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Book, African Region, 2009.

Akpan's stories arise from a keen social and literary analysis and are informed by recognition of the impact of ideology and power on individual human lives. Embedded in the dislocated, war-torn landscapes of contemporary Africa, his work can be contrasted, for example, with the celebrated African writer Chinua Achebe, who so powerfully used tribal rituals of oral storytelling to instruct the form of the novel. Akpan writes stories that, in a rather different way, offer narrative instruction as a strategy for connecting readers and authorial voices. A priest, his stories are not sermons, however. Rather, Akpan creates narrative subjectivities that invite and challenge readers and writers to respond dialogically to the dire conditions in which the characters live. Each of the stories is told from the point of view of a child. Together, the stories of *Say You Are One of Them* form a kind of conversational testimony that is shared among the voices of these lost and wandering young survivors.

Childhood is a central theme of Akpan's short story collection. Written in English, inflected with a mixture of African and French language fragments and intonations, the settings for these stories are equally diverse: Nigeria, Ethiopia, Kenya and Rwanda. His characters live in conditions or situations that would seem extreme to many readers. In 'An Ex-mas Feast', for example, Akpan uses the shock tactics of inversion to engage the reader's attention:

Mama smiled at the glue and winked at me, pushing her tongue through the holes left by her missing teeth. She snapped the tin's top expertly, and the shack swelled with the smell of a shoemaker's stall. I watched her decant the *kabire* into my plastic 'feeding bottle'. It glowed warm and yellow in the dull light. (2008: 7)

Here the story is realised through palpable details such as the *kabire* tin and the child's feeding bottle filled with the fummy intoxicating glue, a disturbing metaphor for the nurturance of mother's milk. The *kabire* offers a balm for hunger and discomfort and prevents the children from whimpering: 'kabire is for children only' is the family rule instigated by Jigana's grandfather. Elsewhere Akpan uses dark comedy to elaborate character and setting. In 'Fattening for Gabon' for example, humour is used to beguile the reader and to shift the point of view between an adult and a child perspective. This story is narrated by a young boy named Kotchikpa, as he remembers his rupture from the last vestiges of his family circle. It begins as a kind of macabre 'how to' manual for human trafficking and ends with the reader's deep immersion in the troubled world of the escaping boy.

Selling your child or nephew could be more difficult than selling other kids. You had to keep a calm head or be as ruthless as the Badagry-Seme immigration people. If not, it could bring trouble to the family. What kept our family secret from the world in the three months Fofu Kpee planned to sell us were his sense of humour and the smugglers instinct he had developed as an *agbero*, a tout, at the border. (2008: 33)

In 2009 I decided to include *Say You're One of Them* on the schedule for a course I presently teach at Griffith University, which explores contemporary international readings as a background for creative and reflective writing. The course was originally established by Nigel Krauth as a way of encouraging students to engage with current writing as a context and stimulus for their own writing practice, and later taught by Patrick West. Akpan's stories presented me with a way to show my Australian creative writing students some of these processes at work and to explore techniques of story, voice, perspective, tone, setting and time. My aim with this course was similarly to approach creative writing through practice and analysis, inviting students to become deeply involved in both reading and creative production by presenting them with internationally recognised writing that deals with current thematic and textual issues.

Students were asked to read the stories paying attention to themes, characters, setting, voice, metaphor, etc, and be prepared to discuss them in class. Some chose a story from this book as a topic for their required seminar presentation, leading class discussion and bringing their own readings, perceptions and experiences as writers to their consideration of the chosen text.

Students commented that they found Akpan's stories confronting in various ways. He writes of a family living under a canvas canopy on the streets of Nairobi, keeping hunger at bay by sniffing glue, children who are sold into slavery, a child who escapes rape only to witness her mother's murder and a Muslim boy murdered for his religion. At no point in any of these stories is hope offered for a safe, tranquil future. Yet the students commented in class that they were above all impressed with the humour, joy, curiosity and spiritedness of Akpan's stories. Several students remarked that these stories show acceptance – not acceptance of suffering and cruelty – but of the vulnerability and confusion of humans caught up in the cross-currents of power, greed and ideology. Above all they were impressed by Akpan's story-telling technique: short narratives that presented diverse and hybrid cultural influences from different points of view that were nevertheless accessible and thought provoking for a distant, relatively affluent, readership. Some students talked about how they thought they would react in such situations, others could not imagine that such conditions exist and embarked on research about contemporary Africa.

The author's encapsulation of cultural hybridity within a single text, through the deployment of linguistic and cultural difference was also a key theme of our discussions. For example, an exchange student from Germany commented that, as a reader, he never felt alienated from the characters or their situations and this applied even to the perpetrators of violence.³

Michel Foucault remarks that:

one must conduct an ascending analysis of power, starting from its infinitesimal mechanisms, which each have their own history, their own trajectory and then see how these mechanisms of power have been ... extended towards global domination. (1980: 99)

Akpan's stories could be said to express the infinitesimal impacts that reveal the larger distortions and contradictions at play among mechanisms of global power. As

citizens we encounter each other most often in terms of the formal roles we occupy in society, yet we experience these encounters as individual subjects bound to localised experience which we make sense of by telling stories to others with different experiences of their own. Among speaking subjects, communication thus occurs through signifying processes that encompass a multitude of heterogeneities.

The single-voiced archetypal epic of pre-modern times, to which Benjamin refers, is perhaps no longer a dominant medium of narrative expression in contemporary globalised cultures. Nor, arguably, is the faintly alienated bourgeois flaneur a characteristic or symptomatic narrator of social and political alienation in contemporary writing. Yet storytelling persists in a variety of forms, vocal registers, genres and cultural contexts. Through creole cultures and languages, through shifting narrative perspectives, by positioning the reader to identify with his child narrators, Akpan's stories contain and express embodied difference, drawing readers virtually first hand into new worlds. Storytelling, as the utterance of multiple perspectives and voices, can be seen as a vehicle for heterogeneity (Zavala, 1990). As Mikhail Bakhtin points out, 'language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions' (1982: 294). Rather, utterance always belongs in part to the other: the interlocutor, listener, reader, viewer. Akpan's stories embrace both relationship and difference. Capturing linguistic and cultural hybridity, through the unifying perspective of the child, they perform the diverse cultures and permeable boundaries of an Africa struck by famine, sickness and war. These stories reveal the potency and partiality of point of view as a literary technique. While the narrative voice may shift, between a personal or omniscient narrator and various other characters, the point of view always returns to that of the child, drawing the reader into a dire reality where subjectivity is both viscerally determined and undeniable.

Creative expression entails working with subjectivity. Julia Kristeva argues with reference to Lacan, that 'subject formation' occurs at the moment of language acquisition. We become 'subjects' when language, separates the child from its safe and harmonious bond with the mother. From that moment: 'every unsatisfied desire recalls the original loss' (Kristeva cited in Jensen: 17-21). Akpan's stories take us to the condition of that loss. And they refer not just to a symbolic loss of integrity and nurturance. They also confront us with the physical loss of the basic elements of survival – food, water, shelter, protection from harm. It is this to which Akpan's children give voice, in which they are in one sense at least, subjects speaking back to the authored forms of social power over which they have no control – ethnicity, nationhood, profit, religion. Thus, Akpan's stories strive to establish relationship rather than alienation, bring focus and emotional connection to this diverse circle of storytellers, and invite us to participate rather than to remain aloof. The title of the collection is not just the mother's advice in *My Parents' Bedroom* as a way to survive, but a petition, even a challenge to the reader to step into the shoes of the story tellers.

Uwem Akpan shows us that not all voices can be heard – especially in a turbulent, violent or unequal society – but that the power to shape one's own meaning and identity is also the ability to tell one's own story. At the end of 'Fattening for Gabon' the boy narrator, Kotchikpa, is the only one of his family to survive a human trafficking deal that goes wrong. He lives to tell his story. But his memory is also his

burden. When he finally escapes from his captors, facing death, he tries to take his baby sister with him. Too young to understand his frantic behaviour, she resists him, and he leaves her behind in the locked cement hut with the guard. Kotchikpa's story concludes, "I ran and I ran, though I knew I would never outrun my sister's wailing". (Akpan: 139) This voice, the wailing little sister of 'Fattening for Gabon', is the sustained echo of loss.

Akpan's fiction reaches for a way to convey shared understandings through a sense of story that is engaged with, but untrammelled by, modernity and which connects readers with our own experiences of childhood. Akpan quotes Rilke (1 Oct: 2009): 'let everything happen to you: beauty and terror', suggesting that – as readers – we allow the full range of possibilities to enter our imaginations. Of course, this is advice for writers as well. In Contemporary World Writing, students were introduced to Akpan in the context of international reading and writing and in relation to concepts of post-colonialism, globalisation and international corporate publishing. They also encountered concepts such as diversity, gender, and hegemony. Students were asked to read and discuss the stories in class. They were later offered a choice of assessment tasks which included a creative writing response to one of Akpan's stories: 'Choose a minor character from one of the books and give the story from their perspective'; or, 'Write from the perspective of someone watching events unfold from a distance such as a neighbour across the street, a news reporter, a shop owner, aid worker or rescuer'.

I was interested in the effectiveness of the exercise in assisting students to step into the shoes of another persona. Akpan's stories demonstrated a way to write with immediacy and emotive power, how to use setting, point of view and vocal heterogeneity. The students were motivated to produce strong, original pieces of work which, far from reproducing the terms and elements of Akpan's stories, adapted and developed relevant themes and characters in new ways.

During the semester, only a couple of weeks before I was due to give my lecture, *Say You're One of Them* became an Oprah Book Club choice title, remarkably ensuring the global promotion of Akpan's book.⁴ This had the effect of motivating the students further, feeling that – through their reading in this course – they were connected to a world-wide project of raised awareness about conditions in Africa.

The encounter with Akpan was strikingly successful. Two students, in particular, captured voice and point of view in an exemplary way. Hollie Robb submitted a piece of writing that is both frightening and enchanting, with its story of a scared older brother, determined to protect his little sister from the 'white crap' that has already destroyed his family (Untitled, 2009).

Hollie Robb placed her story in an underprivileged New Zealand Maori context. Her narrator is Matariki, a boy who is proud of his heritage, protective of his sister Aroha, but becomes caught up in the drug culture that his older brother Hemi inhabits. In portraying Matariki's relationship with his sister, Robb draws on Kotchikpa's feeling for Yewa in 'Fattening for Gabon'. She writes:

Hemi started teaching me the nature of his business, weighing, cutting bagging and knowing what to look for in a good batch. I was a quick learner; Hemi noticed this and set me to work on the streets selling to his customers. Aroha watched me endlessly ...

‘Matiki, show me, play please.’ I consoled the begging, ‘Nah Aroha, you gonna be bright, smart girl. You never to touch cousin Hemi’s white crap ... One day you gonna be a superstar.’ At this her eyes used to flutter like miniature butterflies and her smile spread from ear to ear showing her missing two front teeth’ (2).

Later in the story Matariki gets a visit from their addict/dealer cousin Hone:

My biggest fear was what Hone would try and do to her, do what some of the cousin followers had done to me ... I held out my hand and he snatched the bag from me. He opened it, wetting his finger, dabbing it in, then placing it back into his mouth ... the only light illuminating the tiny room was Aroha’s half painted flowers on the dresser ... backed against the worn varnished top was a gram of Hemi’s *tapu*. Lines were racked up thicker than my fingers. ‘C’mon Matariki, gonna be fun, juss try a lil bit.’ Hone handed me a ten dollar note. And there it was without me knowing, I was doing it. I choked, spluttered, it was stuck in my airways. I swallowed over and over. It hit me, just like Hone’s slap...It caned, my mind whizzed and I swear I only blinked a few times but when my eyes opened as wide as circus clowns he was gone’ (3).

In the short exegesis accompanied her assignment, Hollie noted that she had some personal familiarity with the circumstances of the story. She was interested in the way Akpan had interwoven African and English words and wanted to see how it would work to use some words from Te Reo Maori. More importantly, she wrote the story through the eyes of a child narrator, which she felt would allow the reader to picture the situation and characters more vividly and ‘gain a deeper understanding of the child’s view, their issues, hardships and life experiences’ (4).

Josie Brookman’s short story, *Asante*, extends the action of Akpan’s ‘An Ex-mas Feast’ to tell the story of the teenage sister, Maiesha, who supports her family through prostitution (2009). Brookman conveys an imagistic fevered nightmare of exploitation and pregnancy in which Maisha supports her family at the age of 12 through prostitution. Finding herself pregnant, she has an abortion.

I remember before the warmth of my sheets, that Christmas night in the concrete house with high stone and walls - counting those three girls. Fat *ma* - the man the big man made me full with his sap. I twisted and scratched to get him out of me and off but he was big and he was American. It is my job after all. Fucking without condoms is like walking with the dead (2).

Brookman remarked in her exegesis that she wrote the story ‘so that the reader may envisage and position themselves to live the experiences of the character of Maisha. I wanted the reader to feel uncomfortable ... as though they wanted to escape’ (6). But Brookman also wanted to allow the reader some room to make up their own minds about what happens.

Leave now and do not speak of me. Do not speak of this day. I look down and the blood on her hands was mine this time not Tanesha’s. My Jaguar adventures of perfume and high heels. Blood and sap and spit and tears and a clear wash that tastes like chemical. Makes me light and warm and hot. *Asante* - thanks Mama *asante* for everything (3).

She also observed the importance of language in Akpan’s stories, using some fragments of traditional language quoted in Akpan’s original story ‘An Ex-mas Feast’.

‘Words like *machoksh* – family – and *asante* – thanks – were important to me while reading Akpan’s text as they gave me a point of entry ... something to relate to in a cultural sense deeper than the presented plot and characters. In addition ... I also used my own experiences as a reader and referred to the enjoyment I feel when reading scripts’ (6).

Robb’s and Brookmans’s pieces are arresting, pulling us forcibly into the narrator’s point of view. Both are informed by the experience of close reading in context. Yet each reflects a distinctive narrative voice, a time, place and set of actions that is the author’s own creation. While drawing on the given themes in Akpan’s writing, each in its own way conveys a desire to tell distinctive stories that matter. The work of these beginning writers, inspired by that of Akpan, exemplifies the potency of textual alterity, expressed here through voice narrative, to establish a productive connection between the reader and the text.

Akpan’s religious background might have caused him to strive in his writing for some kind of monological epic narrative or transcendent solution. The short stories in *Say You’re One of Them* never give us that comfort. They are, above all, stories of voice and difference, grounded in the common experience of childhood terror. The telling of stories is no longer, as Benjamin argues, a unified tradition through which meaning, knowledge and wisdom are passed from one generation to the next. Truth, however we define it for ourselves, belongs no more to the past, than it belongs to the future; and, I think, equally to writers and readers. But, we if can accept Bakhtin’s premise that: ‘To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to respond’ (1983: 293), then story, at least these stories, can be seen as the multiple voices seeking answer.

Endnotes

1. Available at <http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/mit4/papers/greenberg.pdf> (accessed 12 August, 2010).
2. ‘The earliest symptom of a process whose end is the decline of storytelling is the rise of the novel at the beginning of modern times.’ (Benjamin: 87).
3. Permission was granted by student participants in Contemporary World Writing 2106HUM in 2009 to refer to comments made during class discussion. An ethical clearance process was undertaken to enable me to cite examples of student work.
4. Available at <http://www.oprah.com/oprahdotcom/Say-Youre-One-of-Them-by-Uwem-Akpan-63rd-Oprahs-Book-Club-selection> (accessed: 14 September, 2009).

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