

# Refining Contrapuntal Pedagogy: Reflections on Teaching Warsan Shire’s “Home” and W.H. Auden’s “Refugee Blues” to First-Year Students

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## Abstract

This article reports on and discusses the experience of a contrapuntal approach to teaching poetry, explored during 2016 and 2017 in a series of introductory poetry lectures in the English 1 course at the University of Johannesburg. Drawing together two poems—Warsan Shire’s “Home” and W.H. Auden’s “Refugee Blues”—in a week of teaching in each year provided an opportunity for a comparison that encouraged students’ observations on poetic voice, racial identity, transhistorical and transcultural human experience, trauma and empathy. It also provided an opportunity to reflect on teaching practice within the context of decoloniality and to acknowledge the need for ongoing change and review in relation to it. In describing the contrapuntal teaching and study of these poems, and the different methods employed in the respective years of teaching them, I tentatively suggest that canonical Western and contemporary postcolonial poems may reflect on each other in unique and transformative ways. I further posit that poets and poems that engage students may open the way into initially “less relevant” yet ultimately rewarding poems, while remaining important objects of study in themselves.

**Keywords:** contrapuntal pedagogy; Edward Said; Mikhail Bakhtin; Warsan Shire; W.H. Auden; decoloniality; empathy; affect

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This article reports on and discusses the experience of a contrapuntal approach to teaching poetry, explored during 2016 and 2017 in a series of introductory poetry lectures in the English 1 course at the University of Johannesburg.<sup>1</sup> Drawing together two poems—Warsan Shire’s “Home” and W.H. Auden’s “Refugee Blues”—in a week of teaching in each year provided an opportunity for a comparison that encouraged students’ observations on poetic voice, racial identity, transhistorical and transcultural human experience, trauma and empathy. It also provided an opportunity to reflect on teaching practice within the context of decoloniality and to acknowledge the need for ongoing change and review in order to decolonise the curriculum. In describing the contrapuntal teaching and study of these poems, and the different methods employed in the respective years of teaching them, I suggest that canonical and contemporary poems may reflect on each other in unique and transformative ways. Further, I posit that poets and poems that engage students may open the way into apparently “less relevant” yet ultimately rewarding poetry, while remaining important objects of study in themselves. In providing this analysis of my experiences, I am also advocating for a transformation within the classroom that takes account of different genres and eras of poetry, the different identities involved in its production (contributing to the transformation of the canon), the context of reading, and the inclusion of a diverse student body in the teaching and learning process. I argue that taking account of diversity within the student body extends the contrapuntal comparison of texts into a polyphonic reception of comparison and difference. In my experience, ontological access matters in the classroom, an observation that became starkly evident when these poems were approached differently and in a contrasting order in the second year of teaching them. Ontological access may be understood in two ways in educational theory: as informing the person that the student *becomes* through the act of learning (Barnett 2009; Dall’Alba and Barnacle 2007), and as informing an educational practice that pays attention to *who the student is*, the latter being strongly related to epistemological access (Vorster and Quinn 2017, 39). Although this article pays greater attention to the latter meaning of the concept, my intention was also to focus students on social justice and thus encourage an ontological shift. Ultimately, I do not believe that contrapuntal pedagogy is an end in itself, involving the simple placement of texts side by side that are not usually studied together. Instead, I argue that that it needs to be carefully considered and ordered to provide optimal access and value to contemporary South African students whose voices, in response to the texts under study, form part of the matrix of discussion and learning.

Some context and a disclaimer are required at the outset, especially in an article that forms part of a themed issue on the topic of poetry and decoloniality. Before 2016 there had been two sections of poetry taught in English 1 at the University of Johannesburg. The first was designed to introduce students to poetic techniques and devices and

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<sup>1</sup> The University of Johannesburg’s Department of English offers a three-year undergraduate programme in the study of English literature. English 1 provides an introduction to literary genres: novels, short stories, drama and poetry. There are approximately 600 students in the class in each calendar year.

different poetic forms; the second provided a focus on postcolonial poetry. From 2016, when teaching on the first part of this course, I wanted to break the unwitting divide created by this structure between “general” (often canonised Western) poetry and political or postcolonial poetry. In an article in *The Guardian* titled “How Not to Talk about African Fiction”, Ainehi Edoro (2016) criticises this divide, paying particular attention to African novels. She examines how “African fiction is packaged and circulated, bought and sold not on the basis of its aesthetic value but of its thematic preoccupation”, and links this to what she terms the “anthropological unconscious of the African novel”, which manifests within the history of literary criticism as an engagement with African texts merely “from the standpoint of the social or political issues they address”. This “anthropological” focus emerges, she argues, in contemporary criticism wherein “African fiction is invisible except when it is reflected on a mirror of social ills, cultural themes and political concerns”. Edoro calls for a consideration of African and postcolonial writing that pays equal consideration to its style and aesthetics. My aim in teaching, in keeping with this call, was to dissociate Western poetry from technique and African poetry from mere political expression and to foreground politics and technique as combining in both traditions. For the weeks when I was teaching, I adopted a contrapuntal method, structuring each week according to different themes and teaching poems from different times and contexts that explored or related to these themes. This article describes one week of teaching, which was repeated for two consecutive years, during which the thematic focus was on refugee experience.

The disclaimer, then: in South Africa, decolonisation in the university context is often synonymous with the “call to Africanise the curriculum” (Almeida and Kumalo 2018, 2); however, I am not making claims in this article for having enacted a method of decolonising the curriculum with a particular focus on (South) African writing. Both of the poets under study are British (although one is of migrant African identity and descent), and each poem focuses on a historical and current world issue: Auden’s poem focuses on Jewish refugeeism in the late 1930s, and Shire’s on the contemporary global refugee crisis. Within the context of the call to decolonise higher education (and the 2015 and 2016 student protests playing out at the time<sup>2</sup>), Jonathan Jansen writes: “decolonisation ... is ... a *knowledge* project” (2019, 2). This article applies Jansen’s view of decolonisation as *epistemological* to an analysis of contrapuntal and polyphonic practice within the teaching of poetry. For me, contrapuntal teaching may dismantle the Western canon—often privileged in university literary syllabi—while nonetheless retaining Western literature that is held to be of value by relating it to literature of the global South. The intention is to discourage an educational focus dealing only with

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<sup>2</sup> In 2015 and 2016, South African universities were rocked by student protests under the banner of the #FeesMustFall movement. Students across the country shut down universities in protest against unaffordable fees and financial exclusion. The protests were not only related to money: the university’s colonial history and associations with whiteness came under fire and an urgent, escalating call for the decolonisation of university curricula arose.

“poetic identities ... sanctified with laurel crowns and preserved in printed editions”, as Terry Ross (2000, 4) describes the English canon. It is to avoid the “teaching of literature”, as emphasised by Henry Louis Gates, as synonymous with the “teaching of an aesthetic and political order, in which no women and people of color were ever able to discover the reflection or representation of their images, or hear the resonances of their cultural voices” (cited in Guillory 1994, 7). I hold, moreover, that decoloniality should also be seen as *of the world*. It should acknowledge the voices of the oppressed, albeit from different places and eras, in the South African teaching context, where issues of social justice should take precedence and where students may productively reflect on, and compare and contrast, injustices that have shaped the global as well as the local. Due consideration must be paid to how the global is framed in relation to the local, and lecturers and students should explore how canonised and contemporary or otherwise marginal(ised) texts may reflect upon or provide access to one another.

In drawing together two poems from different contexts that explore similar themes, my intention is to introduce students, albeit briefly, to the productive space of comparative literature. Edward Said, in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), famously described comparative literature as “a field whose origin and purpose is to move beyond insularity and provincialism and to see several cultures and literatures together, contrapuntally” (Said 1994, 49). Said adopts the adjective “contrapuntal” from musical theory, adapting it to literature. In music, counterpoint (the noun form of “contrapuntal”) refers to the relationship between independent voices or melodies that are interdependently linked in musical unity. Used metaphorically in literary studies, interpretive counterpoint brings together independent voices in comparison (in this case, Auden and Shire) to see how they may be viewed together—harmoniously or discordantly. Importantly, Said views the contrapuntal method as an “antidote to reductive nationalism and uncritical dogma” (1994, 49), as a means of “see[ing] some sort of whole instead of the defensive little patch offered by one’s own culture, literature, and history” (1994, 49). He argues that “as we look back at the cultural archive, we begin to reread it not univocally but *contrapuntally*, with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts” (1994, 59).

A pedagogical method based on counterpoint may resist a defensive, univocal validation and reification of the Western literary canon, an accusation that may arguably be levelled against a course presenting a poet like Auden. It may also resist parochial methods of teaching, including an unnuanced decolonial approach, in which “only one culture [or identity] matters for its own sake in the classroom” (Metz 2019, 2). While Michael Garbutcheon Singh and James Greenlaw (1998, 194) provide a simple definition of contrapuntal pedagogy as “a comparative method in which teachers juxtapose Eurocentric and postcolonial texts”, how this juxtaposition occurs is an important point of consideration within the classroom. The question may arise, for example, whether contrapuntal pedagogy fulfils the requirements of decolonising the curriculum if Western poetry still features prominently within it. I suggest, though, that

a real benefit of comparative, contrapuntal teaching is its opening up of a space of plurality, of global literary circuitry, in which not only individual poems and identities are discussed, but also their relevance to the contemporary moment and to students' contextualised reading experience. In this way, Western literature may be decentralised as merely one part of a field of multiple, global voices, while significant literary works—many of which engage with and denounce social injustice, like Auden's "Refugee Blues"—are acknowledged and appreciated in the process. I want to open up the concept of contrapuntal pedagogy so that it does not simply reflect two or more texts in conversation with one another or being subjected to interpretation together, but also takes account of the teaching space, which consists of a diverse array of students (from different South African cultural, racial, linguistic, educational and financial backgrounds) and more factors than only the texts under study.

I therefore relate counterpoint, in music and literary studies, to the concept of polyphony, another musical term used to describe two or more lines of independent melody, taken up by Mikhail Bakhtin to inform his own theories of literature. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1984), Bakhtin explores the way multiple voices constitute individual texts, disrupting the authority of any single voice (Abrams and Harpham 2012, 86). Contrasting Dostoevsky's novels with what he identifies as the monologic fiction of Tolstoy, Bakhtin notes "*a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices*" (Bakhtin 1984, 6–7; italics in original). I extend Bakhtin's definition to the classroom. It is important to emphasise the polyphony and plurality of the teaching and learning space, not only in terms of a contrapuntal approach to texts, but also in relation to the multiple "fully valid voices" (Bakhtin 1984, 7) of individual students, and the relevant and contemporary issues that may be brought to bear on literature—and vice versa—in the classroom. A polyphony of voices is important when dealing with a theme such as the refugee crisis and thus highlighting the experiences of vulnerable individuals from the global South within the context of globalisation. The South African university classroom is a mixture of multilingual and multicultural identities, and with its history of apartheid and migrancy from other African states, the polyphony of the classroom adds to the multivalency of literary comparison and interpretation. A transhistorical focus on oppression and migrant experience in different contexts also foregrounds the importance of looking back to other times and across to other places to reflect on current and recurring historical and political issues and to engage with literary expressions countering social injustice. This transhistorical approach requires historicising different texts: this draws contexts into relation with each other and levels the political playing field between them as well as the literary texts emanating from them. In my classes I emphasise poetry's evocation of empathy and I also suggest to students the productive possibility of empathising across cultural or identity divides and historical time in a manner that prioritises neither canonical poetry (such as that of W.H. Auden), nor contemporary poetry (such as Warsan Shire's). Instead, transcultural empathy brings together different voices to highlight issues of social injustice and, in this case, to articulate the traumatic experience of the refugee and the affective capacity of poetry to

communicate it. The call to empathy across a cultural divide also counters, in the reader's experience, the dynamics and othering of xenophobia that inform the refugee speaker's experience in each poem under study.

Teaching contrapuntally involves looking closely at the texts, authors and contexts under study: not only at how they overlap or intersect, but how they may each be received individually within the classroom. W.H. Auden's "Refugee Blues" and Warsan Shire's "Home" both explore refugee experience in the first-person voice of the refugee (although Shire's poem also makes sustained use of the second person). Completed in March 1939, Auden's "Refugee Blues" is spoken by a Jewish refugee in the turbulent lead-up to World War II. The speaker's identity in Warsan Shire's "Home" is not as readily identifiable, although it is clear that the poem is situated within the contemporary global moment. A version of the poem was first published in Shire's debut collection of poetry, *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth* (2011), as "Conversations about Home (At a Deportation Centre)". I provided students with the transcription of another version simply titled "Home", published on YouTube and performed by Shire herself.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to the necessity of *reading* "Refugee Blues" as a modernist poem in print, I wanted my students to *hear* Shire's poem in performance and to engage with the embodied, audible affect that it expresses. Engaging with poetry in performance allows students to respond to poetic affect more readily and quickly than a perhaps belaboured first reading of a poem by first-year students, inexperienced in reading poetry, would allow. Hearing poems in performance may encourage students to think about how best to read a poem when faced with the task themselves.

Shire's performance of "Home" coincided with the ongoing Syrian refugee crisis, which also corresponded with my teaching and provided contextual, topical access to the poem.<sup>4</sup> As global citizens, most students were familiar with the news footage and images that flooded world media at the time and subsequently, as well as the worldwide rise in nationalism and xenophobia. Students, however, are not only global citizens or citizens of the global South: they are primarily South Africans, which means that they constitute a diverse social body. As I have mentioned earlier, classroom reflections on global injustice were framed and situated within the South African context. My teaching corresponded with a wave of xenophobic violence in South Africa itself, and the trauma expressed in both poems—in the voices of distinct, suffering individuals who had experienced violent xenophobia and racism—allowed students to reflect on South African events and the individual traumas resulting from them. The global and South African crises formed backdrops to my teaching, which focused on experience and

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<sup>3</sup> Warsan Shire's reading of "Home" may be accessed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nI9D92Xiygo>.

<sup>4</sup> As of 1 March 2020, World Vision's website notes that, since the onset of the Syrian civil war in March 2011, more than 5.6 million Syrians have fled the country and 6.2 million have been displaced within it (see <https://www.worldvision.org/refugees-news-stories/syrian-refugee-crisis-facts#fast-facts>).

affect, and the role and techniques of poetry in replicating and producing both. Both poems, in their use of the first-person voice (among other strategies), invite the reader directly into the refugee's experience. They therefore encourage empathetic readings and provide strongly affective, powerful counter-narratives to discourses of oppression, othering, racism and xenophobia.

It is well-established that students find poetry “hard and that teaching it therefore presents a challenge” (Fulani, Hendricks, and McCarthy 2019; Moyana 1991). My aim was to find poems that “spoke” to my students and each other, thereby multiplying points of discussion and access to poetry within the classroom. The topical theme of refugee experience in relation to current global events and xenophobic violence was one way “into” the poetry, allowing students to engage with it more readily. However, there was more to consider than simply contextualising the poems. The call for decolonisation in higher education has led to intensified reflection regarding teaching practice in the South African context, where issues of identity matter in the classroom and often become the basis for students' receptivity to the subject under study. I needed to ask myself, then: How will students relate to the texts and writers chosen in this course? I had correctly predicted that students would gravitate to Warsan Shire more readily than to W.H. Auden. Like Shire, the majority of English students at the University of Johannesburg are young, black urban women. In addition, the freshness of Shire's performance poetry holds great appeal. Laura Apol (2017) observes that the “most exciting development in the world of poetry for young people is in the arena of performance. There is a widespread renewed interest in spoken poetry for and by young people. Its growth is signaled by the emergence of hip-hop, rap, poetry slams and spoken-word poetry events.” Raphael d'Abdon (2014, 78) further emphasises South African students' potential receptivity to spoken word performances when he describes spoken word poetry as one of the “most notable means of artistic expression for South African youth in the post-apartheid urban cultural milieu”. In a world where digital media is proliferating, moreover, in which spoken word poetry is widely disseminated and shared, and a large proportion of students are literate, comfortable users of digital media, Shire's poetry has reach. With thousands of Twitter followers, coverage on YouTube and her poetry featured on Beyoncé's sixth album *Lemonade* (2016), she appeals immediately to many contemporary students.

Introducing students to W.H. Auden is more challenging. It is worth thinking here about how students who are unfamiliar with an author may encounter them initially. Beyond lectures, this encounter is most likely to occur online, and Auden's online presence may appear stuffy and intimidating to students encountering his persona and work for the first time. A Google Image search yields a series of black and white photographs, most of Auden in his old age. Austere, tweed-clad and white, his craggy looks may personify European, masculine intellectualism and produce the impression of bygone scholarly severity. From the perspective of the average twenty-first century South African student, he is distant in numerous, seemingly intractable ways: age, time, culture, citizenship, and most likely race and gender as well. It is worth asking, therefore, how such a figure

may become relevant to a contemporary first-year South African student. One answer is in the subject matter of the poetry; another lies in the way in which it is taught. Introducing students to Auden's poetry by way of Shire, and suggesting that their poems, although penned by a contemporary British-Somali poet and a dead British modernist respectively, may reflect on South African issues and experiences, makes the task significantly easier.

It is not my teaching method to dwell on the identities or biographies of writers unless they are particularly relevant to the subject matter. But it is necessary to provide some historical information about the texts under study, and the experience of teaching these texts together indicated that authorial identity *does* matter to students and *does* influence affective responses to reading. Increasingly, as identity politics come to the fore in the contemporary moment, we cannot declare the author dead as, following Roland Barthes, we were wont to do in the past. As I will argue later, the way in which the poems are introduced and contextualised strongly influences students' receptivity to them. However, I also want to discuss the poems themselves, as I do in my classes. In teaching these poems together, I move quickly to discussing the speakers' voices and their representation of experience. To start a discussion in the classroom that takes note of the voices emphasised in the concepts of counterpoint and polyphony discussed above involves reading both poems closely with students, to see how each poem emphasises refugee experience and thus works to evoke the reader's empathy and response. I considered the representation and voicing of subjectivity in each poem and attempted to situate these subjectivities historically. Students were encouraged to give voice to the poems by reading them aloud in preparation for the lectures (due to the large classes, I read the poems to students during class time), and were asked to consider: Who is the "I" that is speaking? What is the "I" communicating about their experience? What is the effect upon the reader of that communication?

Auden's "Refugee Blues" explores the treatment and experience of Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany just before World War II. The speaker has escaped to a new country where s/he feels alienated, vulnerable and out of place. I asked my students to identify themes that the poem explores as implicit in the refugee experience, and which contribute to the mood and affect of the poem, attempting to draw the students' voices into the discussion. From the poem, students identified the following themes of refugee experience: homelessness, alienation, restriction, death-in-life, purposelessness, disbelief (in the hatred of others), rejection, discomfort, danger, threat and war. They were then asked to find quotations in the poem that reflected each theme and to analyse these. An important aspect of teaching poetry to students is teaching them how to write about it: this is one of students' difficulties with the genre. Granting clear epistemological access is necessary for student success, and an important aspect of decolonial education (Vorster and Quinn 2017). Identifying themes, attaching them to quotations and analysing the significance of the quotations in discussion in the classroom allow students to begin to construct an informed argument while working through the poem and responding to it intellectually and emotionally. Rather than



having lecture slides prepared in advance, I asked my students to help me to create them, workshopping and modelling poetic analysis with and for the class. In relation to the theme of homelessness, for example, a class discussion produced the following paragraph (I provide extracts from my workshopped lecture notes here to illustrate my notion of the polyphonic classroom, in which class dialogue actively contributes to learning):

In lines 1 and 2 of the poem, Auden uses imagery of the city to suggest that, from the refugee's point of view, all of the citizens of the city in which s/he has arrived have a home. The speaker describes "ten million souls" (line 1) who are "living in mansions" (line 2) or "living in holes" (line 2). S/he therefore describes an enormous city—the place in which they have come to live—in which the millions of people, from the rich to the extremely poor, have a place to stay. However, the third line of the poem sets up the contrast of the refugee experience, emphasising the speaker's homelessness, isolation and sense of displacement: "Yet there's no place for us, my dear, yet there's no place for us" (line 3). This isolation is emphasised by the structure of the tercet and the fact that the third line stands on its own in relation to the rhyming couplet.

An important aspect of "Refugee Blues", which contributes to an understanding of the speaker and the context of the poem as an utterance, is that it is addressed to a specific hearer or addressee: I wanted students to engage with this terminology. This aspect of the poem—its voicing in the first-person plural ("yet there's no place for us, my dear, yet there's no place for us" (line 3)—also contributes to its affective dimension and I wanted students to explore this. Throughout the poem the speaker addresses someone for whom s/he has great affection, someone who is loved. S/he addresses the loved one as "my dear", a melancholy phrase of endearment that recurs in the last line of every stanza. Students are asked to consider the effect of this repetition and also the effect of experiencing the poem as an expression of intimacy between two oppressed people whose humanity is not recognised—in fact, is actively denied—outside the context of their relationship. Effectively, students are asked to consider how the speaker's relationship with the addressee contributes to the reader's empathy. Together, we composed the following analysis responding to these questions, extracted from my lecture notes of 2017:

The speaker expresses great affection for the addressee, which is evident in the repetition of the phrase "my dear" throughout the poem. Although the speaker's circumstances suggest their alienation and that they have come to a country where they receive no kindness or compassion, the fact that they address someone who loves them and whom they love in return reveals that they are entirely worthy of love and care despite the circumstances. The refugee the speaker addresses is worthy of affection and compassion too, which they receive from the speaker. By emphasising the speaker's caring relationship, the poem invites the reader to care for the speaker and their addressee too, to see their warmth and humanity, and thus to appreciate the terrible plight and alienation of the refugee. The hatred, violence and coldness that they have experienced are emphasised not only in the descriptions of horror but also because of the contrast of these to the warm emotions reflected in the speaker's relationship with the addressee,

emotions nonetheless tinged with shared sadness, loneliness and paralysis within the political context.

In exploring poetic voice in Auden's "Refugee Blues" with my students, I asked them to consider how the poem's use of the first person, as well as its emphasis on the speaker addressing another with care and understanding, may invite the reader into the personal experience of the refugee. The poem both situates the reader within the perceptions of the speaker and addresses the reader as though they were the loved one themselves. The reader is simultaneously speaker and addressee and is thus doubly hailed. This doubling occurs in multiple ways, allowing the reader to experience, for example, the simultaneously spoken and voiceless condition of the refugee, the simultaneity of dehumanisation and raw, vulnerable human experience, and the dual experience of political and social hatred alongside the poignant intimacy of personal care and human worth. In addition, students considered the musical genre of "the blues", which informs Auden's poem and contributes to the poem's sense of nuanced, multivocal affect. They were asked to listen to blues music and to consider the layered empathy and attention to human suffering inherent in a poem that, as James Held (1992, 139) writes, "capitalizes on the emotional power of the blues, its themes resonant with the blues' great themes of suffering", specifically the suffering of generations of African Americans, which suggests the poem's wide view on human suffering and social injustice. This musical history drew further connections between Auden and Shire and focused further attention on transhistorical and transnational issues of "race" and marginalisation, enabling students to consider the poem as Auden's "experience of his new home after his emigration to New York in 1939" (Held 1992, 139). To balance the attention paid to listening to Shire read her own poetry, students were given the option, having been warned of disturbing footage, of viewing and listening to a YouTube version of the poem set to blues music, accompanied by Second World War images.<sup>5</sup> In this video, the poem's sense of devastation is augmented by visual imagery and the resonant sense of suffering inherent in the blues.

Thus far I have provided observations based purely on Auden's "Refugee Blues". This method of discussing Auden's poem first mirrors my first year of teaching these poems. The method I employed in the second year, however, when I reversed the order of teaching, was far more effective. I suggest, therefore, that the way and order in which contrapuntal texts are taught matter. The point that I am making here is that identity matters in teaching and that the different identities of Warsan Shire and W.H. Auden, referred to earlier in this article, contributed significantly to students' reception of the poems. In an important article on decoloniality and South African higher education, Jo-Anne Vorster and Lynn Quinn (2017, 39) observe that, for black students, "curricula and pedagogic processes are often not aligned with who they are as people and it is not possible to divorce themselves—their being—from what is taught and how it is taught".

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<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=krubUqbYslc>

This implies that “teaching and learning is not only an epistemological project, but, in essence, also an ontological one” (39). As Vorster and Quinn argue, in South African higher education, “the discourse of epistemological access must be critiqued and explicitly understood as integrally linked to that of ontological access” (39). Similarly, Katherine J. Mayberry observes that sensitivity to identity in the classroom—to ontological access—has profound and positive implications for teaching and learning. Academics, she writes, who pay attention to identity or ontology and its role and implications in the classroom are driven “to step back from their podium and ponder the teaching role, to reconsider and in some cases redefine the goals, methods, and informing ideological assumptions of undergraduate teaching” (Mayberry 1996, 6).

Auden’s “Refugee Blues” is undoubtedly a moving poem. As Yi Tang argues, the poem “addresses the serious Jewish refugee problems by evoking in its reader the intense effects of poignancy, apprehension and compassion” (Tang 2017, 442). Nonetheless, after the first year of teaching the poem in conjunction with “Home”, I stepped back from the podium and pondered my teaching role, as Mayberry argues is necessitated by a focus on ontology in the classroom. The response to Auden had been subdued; later, the response to Shire was decidedly not. Initially, I had not considered how the poems should be taught, specifically in relation to each other: I had simply taught them in chronological order, assuming that contrapuntal teaching was merely “a comparative method in which teachers juxtapose Eurocentric and postcolonial texts”, as Singh and Greenlaw (1998, 194) define it, and without thinking of how the juxtaposition should function. Effectively, moreover, my decision had unwittingly prioritised Auden over Shire, seemingly making her poetry relevant by virtue of its similarity to his. Placing Auden first appeared to result in students finding the lecture largely uninspiring—another ordinary, Eurocentric history or poetry lesson in which they were asked to look at black and white photographs of, for most of them, distant European history and personages, and then introduced to poetry of, consequently, limited excitement or relevance. To reveal to students the worth and poignancy of Auden’s poem and to de-emphasise the focus on Western literature and history inadvertently set up by the way I was teaching (objectives that may seem contradictory, but certainly are not), something needed to shift. Flipping the order of the poems the following year changed the teaching and learning experience entirely.

There is a contemporary urgency to Shire’s “Home” that can be related to her identity as a young, black, contemporary poet of African migrant heritage with influence in the global internet world and popular culture, expressing topical political and social concerns. As Anna Carasthatis and Myrto Tsilimpounidi observe of Shire’s political relevance in *Reproducing Refugees: Photographia of a Crisis*:

Warsan Shire’s “Home” went viral and became a rallying cry and was widely referenced in sympathetic discourses at the height of the refugee crisis—not only in Europe but also in protests against the Trump administration’s so-called Muslim ban in the United States and demonstrations in Israel against a proposed policy which would have led to the deportation of tens of thousands of African migrants. (2020, 81)

The contemporary urgency of “Home” arises in part from the way Shire finds inspiration for her poetry. As Alexis Okeowo (2015) observes in an article for *The New Yorker*, “Shire has said that she is most interested in writing about people whose stories are either not told or told inaccurately, especially immigrants and refugees.” She collects these stories from her family members and people she meets, “bring[ing] out her Dictaphone when relatives come to her with tales from their experiences”, injecting her poetry with authenticity and understanding. Interestingly, there is also some potential and direct South African relevance to Shire’s expressions of refugee experience. In an interview with Kameelah Janan Rasheed (2012), she describes spending time in South Africa:

South Africa completely changed the way I write about home. While I was there I worked with African refugees. I understood homesickness in a more direct, desperate [way]. My homesickness is privileged. Before South Africa I could not even write about home.

Whether these descriptions of “home” are related to the poem “Home” is debatable. However, “Home” strongly expresses the refugee’s ambivalent feeling of homesickness in relation to a home that has become hostile, a feeling that Shire implicitly expresses in the quotation above. Drawing students’ attention to Shire’s experience of South African refugees was valuable in helping them to focus on the ways in which the poem may relate to the issue and trauma of South African xenophobia. Students began to reflect on the traumatic circumstances that may result in a refugee leaving home and on the compounded trauma of xenophobia experienced in the country of destination (including South Africa). Already Shire seems relevant to South African students in ways that Auden could never be. Her “race”, African heritage, experience of working with African refugees in South Africa and capacity to “go viral” in the internet age situate her in the context of teaching in tangible ways. However, her poem’s sentiment is echoed in Auden’s. As Yi Tang observes, “[d]riven by his moral conscience, Auden attempted to use his art to affect the public in order to call for a change in refugee policy by asylum countries” (Tang 2017, 442). Teaching the poems together intensified and expanded students’ responses to the theme of refugeeism, also requiring them to think of histories of oppression, ranging from the treatment of German Jews to the contemporary treatment of refugees. With ontological access in mind, teaching Warsan Shire’s poem *before* W.H. Auden’s granted him relevance and interest while also prioritising Shire and thus flouting any emphasis upon the metropolitan and canonical. Teaching Shire’s poem first also focused students on important poetic techniques employed within it and presented the poem as possessing interrelated aesthetic and political significance in the same way in which “Refugee Blues” was taught later.

As with Auden’s “Refugee Blues”, my teaching of Shire’s “Home” emphasised the speaking voice. This focus was augmented by allowing students to listen to Shire reading the poem herself. In a powerful and moving performance, Shire’s voice cracks and quivers with emotion as she voices the speaker’s horror at being driven from home.

Interestingly, this is the only point at which the second-person voice of the poem, which implicates the reader in the refugee's experience, shifts to the emotional vulnerability of the first person. This is reflected in Shire's sudden emotion within the recorded reading and a feature of the poem which students discussed in comparison to "Refugee Blues":

I want to go home,  
 but home is the mouth of a shark  
 home is the barrel of the gun  
 and no one would leave home  
 unless home chased you to the shore  
 unless home told you to quicken your legs  
 leave your clothes behind  
 crawl through the desert  
 wade through the oceans

The pauses in and shakiness of Shire's reading at this point (towards the conclusion of the poem) reflect the trauma expressed within it: non-verbal, emotional and embodied tone and rhythm take precedence over the language itself, thereby emphasising its meaning. In trauma and affect theory, pain and trauma are frequently described as non-verbal. Elaine Scarry, for example, in *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (1987), describes pain as inexpressible in language, even as obliterating the meaning-making function of language. As I have discussed elsewhere (Grogan 2014; 2018), Julia Kristeva, in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984), identifies two dimensions of language. These are: the symbolic, or the aspect of language that clearly and logically conveys meaning; and the semiotic, or the affective, bodily dimension of language, evident in extra- or pre-verbal factors such as rhythm, tone, hesitation and breathing. After hearing Shire reading her poem, an affective space opened in the classroom as students engaged with it in an emotional, immediate sense. Their responses were intensified by what many students have described as an affinity with Shire and an understanding of the poem's topic and relevance. The experience of the poem is powerful and I have to warn students beforehand that topics arise within it that may upset them. Nevertheless, the power of the experience is important. I have never yet observed as strong a response in the classroom to literature in its written form. This experience offers a significant opportunity, however, to reflect back on poetry that students must read themselves. In addition to acknowledging the ontological access that Shire's poetry appears to provide, I share Deanna Roberts' sentiment: "I have found using spoken word poetry in the form of online videos entices students to explore poetry further" (2015, 103). Focusing on Shire, in my experience, allows students to recognise the significance of all poetry as an affective medium, hence the reversal of order in my teaching of the poems in the second year of presenting them. In that year, students expressed far greater understanding of Auden's "Refugee Blues" and far greater empathy for the Jewish European speaker in the 1930s who suffered such cruel oppression. The love that some of them expressed for Shire and her poem translated

more freely and easily into understanding the love and care expressed by the speaker to the addressee in “Refugee Blues”.

To return to Warsan Shire, the analysis of “Home” in the classroom occurred in much the same way as the class discussion that resulted in a shared interpretation of “Refugee Blues”. Students were asked to identify what the poem communicated and they summed it up as “providing explanations for why it is that the refugee must leave his or her home country”. They agreed that the poem is designed to show the listener or reader the refugee’s history of violence and trauma and to indicate that leaving home is not a choice but a necessity. They recognised that the poem, like “Refugee Blues”, is designed to encourage empathy. In looking at how the poem encourages a focus on refugee experience, three particular features were discussed. First, students were asked to reflect on the complexity and ambivalence of home, as the speaker presents it in the poem. Second, repetition or anaphora was discussed, particularly of the phrase “no one”. Finally, the personification of home was addressed to identify how it contributed to the speaker’s ambivalent responses to the notion of home. The following analysis emerged, taken from my lecture notes of 2017:

The poem understands that “home” is essential to the creation of an identity. It is where we come from and informs how we understand ourselves. “Home” is usually understood to be a nurturing environment to which we return for solace and affirmation. “Homesickness” is the feeling of sadness experienced when away from home, evident in the poem’s description of the refugee “carr[ying] the anthem under [her] breath” (lines 18–19). However, feelings regarding home become mixed when home is violent, like “the mouth of a shark” (line 2), a place to which it is neither safe nor desirable to return, however much the refugee may yearn to do so. The combination of the fear and love of home therefore informs the refugee’s ambivalent experience.

The phrase “no one” is repeated throughout the poem to emphasise the fact that “no one” would make the choice to leave home unless circumstances forced them to do so. There are a number of examples of this sentiment expressed in the poem; for instance: “no one leaves home unless/home is the mouth of a shark” (lines 1–2); “no one leaves home unless home chases you” (line 12); “no one puts their children in a boat/unless the water is safer than the land” (lines 24–25). Each of these examples suggests that the option of staying at home is dangerous and untenable. Home is emphasised as unwelcoming and unfriendly. By repeating the phrase “no one”, the speaker suggests that nobody, including the reader, could tolerate the circumstances of the speaker’s home country. This encourages an understanding of the refugee’s experience of terror at home and the message that “home” can in fact turn against its citizens.

Throughout the poem, “home” is personified to suggest that it has become violent and hateful. However, at the end of the poem we see a slightly different version of “home”. “Home” is personified as telling the speaker to “run away from me now/I don’t know what I’ve become/but I know that anywhere/is safer than here” (lines 94–97). This image of a “home”, which is saddened by what it has become, allows the speaker to suggest that “home” still displays some degree of care and kindness, warning the speaker

to get away from it. The personification at this point in the poem therefore shows that the speaker feels some degree of sympathy for “home” despite its violence, and therefore some degree of love for it.

The classroom is an affective space, in which various responses and affects circulate, constituting the experience of accessing texts and the interactive nature of the classroom itself. This article has argued that contrapuntal teaching can contribute to this affective circulation and its expansion, especially when attention is paid to the way and order in which poetry is taught, and if the unique aspects of the poems under study are read with a view to the interaction between their formal and affective components. Students respond enthusiastically to contemporary poets with whom they identify. In my own classroom, students were moved to read or listen to more of Warsan Shire’s work and to Google performances of her poetry. However, they were also excited by the way in which her poem, “Home”, provided access to W.H. Auden, whose modernist poetry might otherwise have appeared opaque, foreign, anachronistic and difficult. In a previous year, Auden’s poem was less enthusiastically received, perhaps even lost, in the process of teaching it before a lecture on the more popular Shire. However, Auden’s “Refugee Blues” circles the same themes as “Home”—refugee displacement, alienation, fear and overwhelming loss—which further opened up the theme of refugee subjectivity, allowing students to reflect in more depth not only on the poems themselves, but also on the current global refugee crisis, historical refugee experience and the pervasiveness of xenophobia within South Africa today. A polyphony of voices within the contemporary South African university classroom and an emphasis on all of these voices, including those of students, opens up discussion in exciting and productive ways. Nevertheless, students’ epistemological and ontological access must be considered, contributing to curricular and pedagogical choices and providing exciting and important opportunities for responding to contemporary, historical, local and global injustice.

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