

HALL TICKET NUMBER

Department of English

Ph.D ENGLISH ENTRANCE EXAMINATION, JUNE 2017

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Do **not** reveal your identity in any manner on the **OMR** sheet or **answer book**.
2. Enter your **Hall Ticket Number** on the **question paper**, the **OMR** sheet and the **answer book**.
3. This question paper consists of two sections:

Part A consists of Multiple Choice Questions in Research Methodology and must be answered in the **OMR** sheet. **No** marks will be deducted for questions not attempted or wrong answers.

Part B must be answered in the answer book provided, and requires you to write an essay **and** a critical analysis of prose passages.

4. At the end of the examination return the **OMR** sheet and the **answer book**.

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Part A: Research Methodology

1. Tracking the evolution of, say, the concept of mimesis, would be a method common to the field called...
 - A. History of ideas
 - B. Consciousness studies
 - C. Representation studies
 - D. Thought history

2. If you are looking for critical material on the following topic, what would be the best and most productive keywords for your search?

Environmental Disaster and Image-making in Twentieth-century Cinema

- A. Disaster, cinema
 - B. Environment, image-making
 - C. Environment, disaster
 - D. Disaster, twentieth-century

3. Of the following, which database would give you information about relevant journals in your field?
 - A. *MLA International Bibliography*
 - B. *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*
 - C. *MLA Literary Research Guide*
 - D. *MLA Style Manual*

4. Which of the following distinguished journals carries an annual survey and checklist of the new publications, both primary and secondary, from postcolonial nations?
 - A. *Interventions*
 - B. *Postcolonial Text*
 - C. *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*
 - D. *Postcolonial Studies*

5. Explicating novels in order to see their effects on the reader's mind would be the field of inquiry called...
- A. Cognitive narrative studies
 - B. Neuroliterary studies
 - C. Reader consciousness studies
 - D. Mindboggling studies
6. When reading the novels of a period, if you were to examine the lives of objects in the lives of the characters, then you would be combining literary studies with
- A. Trash studies
 - B. Material culture studies
 - C. Waste studies
 - D. Home studies
7. The study of techniques of stage-craft would be a subset of drama studies called...
- A. Dramaturgy
 - B. Stage theory
 - C. Presentation studies
 - D. Spectacle studies
8. Taking the consent of human subjects before using their comments or life stories would be a part of research projects, and located under the rubric of
- A. Racial profiling
 - B. Subject ethics
 - C. Research ethics
 - D. Interpersonal ethics
9. Which of the following is attentive to the history of reading?
- A. Studies in biography
 - B. Studies in bibliotherapy
 - C. Consciousness studies
 - D. Studies in the history of ideas

10. Which of the following descriptions of **abstract** do you find suitable for a research project?
- A. A strong argument for or against a specific issue, for instance, only to discover through reading and discussion that one's arguments are in fact much more complex and demanding than originally conceived.
 - B. Concrete work done by way of compilation and collation from a multiplicity of audio-visual representations of ideas abstracted from their respective sources that enable members of a research community to keep everyone on the same mental page.
 - C. Carefully revised text of a longer dissertation or a book on a specialized subject made more accessible and cohesive, choosing strategies appropriate for easy absorption by a larger body of researchers and bibliographers.
 - D. Summary communicating the central ideas of an argument or project, widely used in academic and professional life to offer audiences a short preview of an article, a research program, a presentation, a performance, etc.
11. Square brackets [--] are used in a quoted passage to indicate -----.
- A. parenthetical asides
 - B. material from other texts
 - C. interpolated material
 - D. intertextual contents
12. When the Supervisor of your dissertation suggests that you consult the latest *MLA Handbook*, you ought to look for and consult:
- A. *MLA Handbook* 7th Edition 2017
 - B. *MLA Handbook* 8th Edition 2016
 - C. *MLA Handbook* 9th Edition 2017
 - D. *MLA Handbook* 9th Edition 2016
13. It is usual for researchers to mark/ indicate in short hand what *kind* of bibliographical source they have on their list: a journal article, a chapter in a collection, a book, a website, a movie, etc. Identify another source from the following that would belong to this set.
- A. An unpublished dissertation
 - B. Library acquisition number
 - C. Details of missing pages
 - D. Work by an anonymous author.

14. What is a *frontispiece*?

- A. Illustration on the front cover of a book.
- B. Illustration facing the title page of a book
- C. Exact copy of a printed material
- D. A separately published instalment of a book

15. In a research paper/ chapter, your first full reference to a work from which you intend to quote a number of times should -----.

- (i) appear the first time as a standard abbreviation.
- (ii) usually be in a note, adding that subsequent references will appear abbreviated.
- (iii) figure in your Works Cited, complete in all bibliographical details.
- (iv) be worked into the text as often as required in order that the reader is not distracted.

- A. (i) and (iv)
- B. (ii)
- C. (iv)
- D. (i) and (iii)

16. If you find "p.117 ff." in a note on some information/argument in a book or paper, what that means is -----.

- A. we shall find such material on 117 and the following pages.
- B. we shall find such material on pages following 117.
- C. we shall find such material only on p. 117.
- D. we shall find such material on and before p. 117

17. From among the following descriptions of the Dissertation Abstracts International (DAI) identify the correct statements.

- (i) It is a printed resource of bibliographic citations of dissertations that have earned degrees in the accredited institutions of the United States of America.
- (ii) It is a printed resource of bibliographic citations of dissertations that have earned degrees in the accredited institutions of North America.
- (iii) It prints abstracts of virtually all dissertations that have earned degrees in the accredited institutions in the world.
- (iv) It is published monthly and cumulated annually, comprising separate sections— A. Humanities and Social Sciences, and B. Sciences and Engineering.

- (v) It is published every quarter and revised annually but it focuses only on research submissions in the Humanities and Social Sciences.
- (vi) DAI is the most current printed source for the ProQuest Dissertations & Theses database.
- A. (i) (v) and (vi) are correct.
 B. (ii) (iv) and (v) are correct.
 C. (iv) (v) and (vi) are correct.
 D. (i) (iii) and (v) are correct.

18. The name most generally associated with English textual scholarship is -----.

- A. William E. Cain
 B. Patricia Meyer Spacks
 C. G. Thomas Tanselle
 D. G. K. Hunter

19. *Post hoc* reasoning is flawed because it assumes -----.

- A. That one thing did not cause another simply because it preceded the other.
 B. That one thing caused another simply because it preceded the other.
 C. That one thing preceded another simply because it caused the other.
 D. That neither one nor the other caused anything by precedence.

20. Which of the following is an absolutely error-free entry in the MLA Works Cited format?

- A. Étienne, Balibar. *The Philosophy of Marx*. Trans. Chris Turner. London: Verso, 1995.
 B. Balibar, Étienne. *The Philosophy of Marx*. Trans. Chris Turner. London: Verso, 1995.
 C. Étienne, Balibar. *The Philosophy of Marx*. trans. Chris Turner. London: Verso, 1995.
 D. Balibar, Étienne. *The Philosophy of Marx*, Trans. Chris Turner. London: Verso, 1995.

21. Is the following entry in the Notes appended to a research paper collected in a published book complete and correct? If it is not, what would make it complete and correct?

Ramya Kannan, "Medical Professionals Must Not Indulge in Unethical Practices." *Hindu* (September 2, 2007, downloaded from <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSDEL214327007116>.

- A. Complete but incorrect. Author's name should be cited as Kannan, Ramya.
 B. Complete and Correct.
 C. Incomplete and incorrect. The date of download should be mentioned.
 D. Incomplete unless the page number of the article is mentioned correctly.

22. Oversimplification, hasty generalization, begging the question, *ad hominem* argument, etc. are -----.
- A. respectable and standard methods of persuasion adopted by writers of dissertations.
 - B. rather dubious methods of persuasion adopted by writers of dissertations.
 - C. flaws in reasoning that weaken or invalidate arguments in dissertations.
 - D. effective ways of reasoning that work in short argumentative dissertations.
23. If your whole argument in a paper/chapter runs counter to an established theory/ view, it is advisable (at the outset) to:
- A. briefly but succinctly represent the established theory and put it in correct perspective.
 - B. direct the reader to the relevant sources in an end-note and bibliographical entry.
 - C. discreetly summarize its salient points to project your argument in a favourable light.
 - D. Run both arguments and counter-arguments in tandem so the reader can see them for what they are.
24. Jerome G. McGann pioneered “social textual criticism” that has considerably influenced our understanding of literary texts in their public availability. In brief, what McGann proposed was the following:
- A. Revisions of literary texts may become necessary depending on their colonial and other contexts which will certainly not end with one important commentary or the other. Such revisioning permits historians to reconsider literary texts in order to locate them in the long tradition of the production of imperial fictions and help us remap British or other cultural geographies through centuries.
 - B. All public appearances of a text — as revised and changed by authors, editors, readers, publishers, friends, and relations— have potentially equal textual significance and that the “bibliographical code” (the various physical forms in which a text appears publicly) is just as much part of its social meaning as is the “linguistic code” of its verbal content.
 - C. Forms of textuality appear to emphasize the sheer aesthetic experience of linguistic sound over the denotationality of the word, states of being over states of knowing, poetic over prose forms, mood over mind. *Logos* was critically important for the Anglo-American mind within the highest-value text, the Bible, for the salvation of the people’s souls depended upon it.
 - D. If we accept that actions, objects, beliefs, languages, ideas, and so on are culture-relative, we hide the power of texts from which “different cultures” came into being in the first place. “Cultures” have not been there all the time, but have been forced into being what they “are” today by the making of the modern/ colonial world of texts and textuality.

25. What are *ABELL* and *ABES*?

- A. *Annual Bestseller Learners' List* and *Annual Bibliography for English Students*
- B. *Annual Bibliography of English Language & Literature* and *Annotated Bibliography for English Studies*
- C. *Annotated Bibliography of English Language and Literature* and *Annual Bibliography for English Studies*
- D. *Annual Bestsellers in Life and Letters* and *Annual Bibliography for English Students*.

26. Match the following journals with their distinguishing aims and methods of scholarship:

- (a) *The Harvard Advocate*
- (b) *Prooftexts*
- (c) *Diacritics*
- (d) *Kunapipi*
- (e) *Obsidian*
- (f) *Clio*.

- (i) A Review of Contemporary Criticism
- (ii) Literature & Arts in the African Diaspora
- (iii) A Journal of Jewish Literary History
- (iv) Journal of Postcolonial Writing
- (v) A Journal of Literature, History, and the Philosophy of History....
- (vi) The oldest continuously published collegiate literary magazine in the US

- A. (a) – (vi.) (b) – (v) (c) – (i) (d) – (iv). (e) – (ii.) (f) – (iii).
- B. (a) – (v.) (b) – (iii.) (c) – (ii) (d) – (iv.) (e) – (i.) (f) – (vi).
- C. (a) – (vi.) (b) – (iii.) (c) – (v) (d) – (iv.) (e) – (ii). (f) – (i).
- D. (a) – (vi.) (b) – (iii.) (c) – (i) (d) – (iv.) (e) – (ii.) (f) – (v).

27. Why is *The Year's Work in English Studies* an invaluable source for anyone who begins research on topic(s) in English?

- A. It is by far the most comprehensive assemblage of viable and varied topics and ideas for beginners and advanced researchers in English.
- B. It is an annual update of current research interests of Departments of English across the world.
- C. It is the most comprehensive annual bibliographical review and qualitative assessment of scholarly work on English language and literatures written in English.
- D. It is primarily a guide to the methods and materials of professional research in English and annual call for scholarly preferment for those who seek such help.

28. Most dissertations in literary/cultural studies head towards a 'Conclusion' where nothing is *concluded*. What, however, they ought to carry are:
- A. Neatly summed-up passages of the study undertaken
 - B. Restatements of the major arguments of the study
 - C. Substantive results or findings
 - D. Justified claims made in the study.
29. When you find that you are using some textual material as primary data; when you appeal to a text's/ writer's authority; or you couldn't do a better job than your source in crucial style or expression or effect, it is better to -----.
- A. paraphrase the source as neatly as you can.
 - B. directly quote the source.
 - C. summarize the source as precisely as you can.
 - D. interpolate words/passages in your essay.
30. "Padding" in literary analysis refers to.....
- i. Repeating the same idea in different words and phrases
 - ii. Quoting large chunks from the primary text as a substitute for analysis
 - iii. Making irrelevant connections to other texts
- A. Only iii
 - B. iii and ii
 - C. i and ii
 - D. None of the above
31. Which of the following is usually *not* an 'organizational feature' of a literary text?
- A. Chapters
 - B. Illustration
 - C. Acts and scenes
 - D. Stanzas
32. Studying online fan fiction connected to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* would be an example of
- i. Transmedia Studies
 - ii. Fan Studies
 - iii. Adaptation Studies
- A. i, ii and iii
 - B. ii and iii
 - C. Only i
 - D. Only iii

33. An annotated bibliography refers to
- A. A listing of the quotations and summary from the primary sources
 - B. A bibliography which provides help in annotating the primary texts
 - C. A bibliography where each item is briefly described and evaluated
 - D. An index which provides bibliographical details to other sources
34. Read the following sentences and choose the correct option:
- i. Scholarly articles are found in the tabloid press.
 - ii. Sensational articles may not always be factually accurate.
 - iii. Scholarly articles are usually accompanied by lots of colourful graphics.
- A. Only ii is true
 - B. Both i and iii are true
 - C. All the statements are true
 - D. None of the statements are true.
35. A refereed scholarly journal publishes essays _____.
- A. towards scholarly discussion and public dissemination
 - B. selected by its board of editors
 - C. targeted at specialist referees
 - D. vetted and recommended by a peer group of referees
36. Grey Literature refers to
- A. non-formally published scholarly or substantive information
 - B. Literature which does not subscribe to fixed viewpoints
 - C. Primary and secondary sources related to the Silver poets
 - D. The work of Thomas Gray
37. Which of the following is *not* an attribute of the scholarly journal?
- A. Technically precise and discipline specific language
 - B. A certain degree of knowledge on the part of their readership
 - C. Summaries of essays where information is easily available
 - D. Citation their sources in the form of footnotes, endnotes or bibliographies
38. A review article or essay refers to
- A. An article that gives a detailed review of a book or a movie
 - B. An essay that surveys the research on a particular topic
 - C. A review essay on the use of articles in specific contexts
 - D. A detailed essay about the reviews of a particular book, movie or TV show.

39. The availability of a scholarly book in newer editions may indicate.....
- i. Only that it is popular
 - ii. That it has been revised and updated
 - iii. That it has become a standard resource in the field
- A. All the statements are false.
 - B. All the statements are true.
 - C. Only ii and iii are true.
 - D. Only iii is true.
40. Which of the following would not be considered a scholarly source for secondary material on the author Margaret Atwood?
- A. An essay in *The Guardian*
 - B. An essay in *Science Fiction Studies*
 - C. An essay in *Twentieth Century Literature*
 - D. An essay in *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*

Part B

Essay

(20 marks)

Write an essay on any ONE of the following topics. Your essay will be evaluated on the basis of your cohesive argument and the range of texts and illustrative material you draw upon.

1. Fictional science and the science of fiction
2. The English classroom in India
3. The 'global' eighteenth century
4. The English Romantics and the loss of 'romance'
5. Theory from *theoria*: to contemplate, to see
6. Reading world literature(s)
7. Queering the postcolonial
8. The not-funny comic book

Passage for Analysis

(20 marks)

Comment on Judith Butler's reading of Toni Morrison's parable of the bird children bring to the old woman. In what specific sense would you consider Butler's reading of the parable to be politically and theoretically different (if that be the case) from Morrison's? Develop your essay by commenting pointedly on such ideas common to both passages as the sociality, violence, abuse, guilt and humiliation to which language alone commits human lives.

Passage 1

"Once upon a time there was an old woman. Blind but wise." Or was it an old man? A guru, perhaps. Or a griot soothing restless children. I have heard this story, or one exactly like it, in the lore of several cultures.

"Once upon a time there was an old woman. Blind. Wise."

In the version I know the woman is the daughter of slaves, black, American, and lives alone in a small house outside of town. Her reputation for wisdom is without peer and without question. Among her people she is both the law and its transgression. The honor she is paid and the awe in which she is held reach beyond her neighborhood to places far away; to the city where the intelligence of rural prophets is the source of much amusement.

One day the woman is visited by some young people who seem to be bent on disproving her clairvoyance and showing her up for the fraud they believe she is. Their plan is simple: they enter her house and ask the one question the answer to which rides solely on her difference from them, a difference they regard as a profound disability: her blindness. They stand before her, and one of them says, "Old woman, I hold in my hand a bird. Tell me whether it is living or dead."

She does not answer, and the question is repeated. "Is the bird I am holding living or dead?"

Still she doesn't answer. She is blind and cannot see her visitors, let alone what is in their hands. She does not know their color, gender or homeland. She only knows their motive.

The old woman's silence is so long, the young people have trouble holding their laughter.

Finally she speaks and her voice is soft but stern. "I don't know", she says. "I don't know whether the bird you are holding is dead or alive, but what I do know is that it is in your hands. It is in your hands."

Her answer can be taken to mean: if it is dead, you have either found it that way or you have killed it. If it is alive, you can still kill it. Whether it is to stay alive, it is your decision. Whatever the case, it is your responsibility.

For parading their power and her helplessness, the young visitors are reprimanded, told they are responsible not only for the act of mockery but also for the small bundle of life sacrificed to achieve its aims. The blind woman shifts attention away from assertions of power to the instrument through which that power is exercised.

Speculation on what (other than its own frail body) that bird-in-the-hand might signify has always been attractive to me, but especially so now thinking, as I have been, about the work I do that has brought me to this company. So I choose to read the bird as language and the woman as a practiced writer. She is worried about how the language she dreams in, given to her at birth, is handled, put into service, even withheld from her for certain nefarious purposes. Being a writer she thinks of language partly as a system, partly as a living thing over which one has control, but mostly as agency - as an act with consequences. So the question the children put to her: "Is it living or dead?" is not unreal because she thinks of language as susceptible to death, erasure; certainly imperiled and salvageable only by an effort of the will. She believes that if the bird in the hands of her visitors is dead the custodians are responsible for the corpse. For her a dead language is not only one no longer spoken or written, it is unyielding language content to admire its own paralysis. Like statist language, censored and censoring. Ruthless in its policing duties, it has no desire or purpose other than maintaining the free range of its own narcotic narcissism, its own exclusivity and dominance. However moribund, it is not without effect for it actively thwarts the intellect, stalls conscience, suppresses human potential. Unreceptive to interrogation, it cannot form or tolerate new ideas, shape other thoughts, tell another story, fill baffling silences. Official language smitheryed to sanction ignorance and preserve privilege is a suit of armor polished to shocking glitter, a husk from which the knight departed long ago. Yet there it is: dumb, predatory, sentimental. Exciting reverence in schoolchildren, providing shelter for

despots, summoning false memories of stability, harmony among the public.

She is convinced that when language dies, out of carelessness, disuse, indifference and absence of esteem, or killed by fiat, not only she herself, but all users and makers are accountable for its demise. In her country children have bitten their tongues off and use bullets instead to iterate the voice of speechlessness, of disabled and disabling language, of language adults have abandoned altogether as a device for grappling with meaning, providing guidance, or expressing love. But she knows tongue-suicide is not only the choice of children. It is common among the infantile heads of state and power merchants whose evacuated language leaves them with no access to what is left of their human instincts for they speak only to those who obey, or in order to force obedience.

The systematic looting of language can be recognized by the tendency of its users to forgo its nuanced, complex, mid-wifery properties for menace and subjugation. Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge. Whether it is obscuring state language or the faux-language of mindless media; whether it is the proud but calcified language of the academy or the commodity driven language of science; whether it is the malign language of law-without-ethics, or language designed for the estrangement of minorities, hiding its racist plunder in its literary cheek - it must be rejected, altered and exposed. It is the language that drinks blood, laps vulnerabilities, tucks its fascist boots under crinolines of respectability and patriotism as it moves relentlessly toward the bottom line and the bottomed-out mind. Sexist language, racist language, theistic language - all are typical of the policing languages of mastery, and cannot, do not permit new knowledge or encourage the mutual exchange of ideas.

The old woman is keenly aware that no intellectual mercenary, nor insatiable dictator, no paid-for politician or demagogue; no counterfeit journalist would be persuaded by her thoughts. There is and will be rousing language to keep citizens armed and arming; slaughtered and slaughtering in the malls, courthouses, post offices, playgrounds, bedrooms and boulevards; stirring, memorializing language to mask the pity and waste of needless death. There will be more diplomatic language to countenance rape, torture, assassination. There is and will be more seductive, mutant language designed to throttle women, to pack their throats like paté-producing geese with their own unsayable, transgressive words; there will be more of the language of surveillance disguised as research; of politics and history calculated to render the suffering of millions mute; language glamorized to thrill the dissatisfied and bereft into assaulting their neighbors; arrogant pseudo-empirical language crafted to lock creative people into cages of inferiority and hopelessness.

Underneath the eloquence, the glamor, the scholarly associations, however stirring or seductive, the heart of such language is languishing, or perhaps not beating at all - if the bird is already dead.

She has thought about what could have been the intellectual history of any discipline if it had not insisted upon, or been forced into, the waste of time and life that rationalizations for and representations of dominance required - lethal discourses of exclusion blocking access to cognition for both the excluder and the excluded.

The conventional wisdom of the Tower of Babel story is that the collapse was a misfortune. That it was the distraction, or the weight of many languages that precipitated the tower's failed architecture. That one monolithic language would have expedited the building and heaven would have been reached. Whose heaven, she wonders? And what kind? Perhaps the achievement of Paradise was premature, a little hasty if no one could take the time to understand other languages, other views, other narratives period. Had they, the heaven they imagined might have been found at their feet. Complicated, demanding, yes, but a view of heaven as life; not heaven as post-life.

She would not want to leave her young visitors with the impression that language should be forced to stay alive merely to be. The vitality of language lies in its ability to limn the actual, imagined and possible lives of its speakers, readers, writers. Although its poise is sometimes in displacing experience it is not a substitute for it. It arcs toward the place where meaning may lie. When a President of the United States thought about the graveyard his country had become, and said, "The world will little note nor long remember what we say here. But it will never forget what they did here," his simple words are exhilarating in their life-sustaining properties because they refused to encapsulate the reality of 600, 000 dead men in a cataclysmic race war. Refusing to monumentalize, disdaining the "final word", the precise "summing up", acknowledging their "poor power to add or detract", his words signal deference to the uncapturability of the life it mourns. It is the deference that moves her, that recognition that language can never live up to life once and for all. Nor should it. Language can never "pin down" slavery, genocide, war. Nor should it yearn for the arrogance to be able to do so. Its force, its felicity is in its reach toward the ineffable.

Be it grand or slender, burrowing, blasting, or refusing to sanctify; whether it laughs out loud or is a cry without an alphabet, the choice word, the chosen silence, unmolested language surges toward knowledge, not its destruction. But who does not know of literature banned because it is interrogative; discredited because it is critical; erased because alternate? And how many are outraged by the thought of a self-ravaged tongue?

Word-work is sublime, she thinks, because it is generative; it makes meaning that secures our difference, our human difference - the way in which we are like no other life.

We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives.

"Once upon a time, ..." visitors ask an old woman a question. Who are they, these children? What did they make of that encounter? What did they hear in those final words: "The bird is in your hands"? A sentence that gestures towards possibility or one that drops a latch? Perhaps what the children heard was "It's not my problem. I am old, female, black, blind. What wisdom I have now is in knowing I cannot help you. The future of language is yours."

[...] Toni Morrison, Excerpt from her Nobel Lecture, December 7, 1993.

Passage 2

In the parable that Toni Morrison offers, the blind woman is analogized to a practical writer, suggesting that writing is to some extent blind, that it cannot know the hands into which it will fall, how it will be read and used, or the ultimate sources from which it is derived. The scene in the parable is an interlocution, where the children exploit the blindness of the woman in order to force her to make a choice she cannot make, and where the force of that address is what the woman reads, exercising an agency that the address had meant to deny her. She does not make the choice, but calls attention to “the instrument through which power is exercised,” establishing that the choice is in the hands of the interlocutors she cannot see. She cannot know, according to Morrison’s interpretation, whether language will live or die in the hands of those who use speech with the force of cruelty. In both the parable and in the reading that Morrison provides, the question of responsibility is central, figured as “the hands” of the children or, indeed, those who inherit the responsibility for whether language will live or die. The writer is blind to the future of the language in which she writes. The language is thought of “mostly as agency,” distinguished from forms of mastery or control, on the one hand, and by the closure of system on the other.

Morrison’s analogy suggests that language lives or dies as a living thing might live or die, and that the question of survival is central to the question of how language is used. She claims that “oppressive language ... *is* violence,” not merely a representation of it. Oppressive language is not a substitute for the experience of violence. It enacts its own kind of violence. Language remains alive when it refuses to “encapsulate” or “capture” the vents and lives it describes. But when it seeks to effect that capture, language not only loses its vitality, but acquires its own violent force, one that Morrison throughout the lecture associates with statist language and censorship. She writes, “the vitality of language lies in its ability to limn the actual, imagined and possible lives of its speakers, readers, writers. Although its poise is sometimes in displacing experience, it is not a substitute for it. It arcs toward the place where meaning may lie.” And later: “its force, its felicity, is in its reach toward the ineffable.” The violence of language consists in its effort to capture the ineffable and, hence, to destroy it, to seize hold of that which must remain elusive for language to operate as a living being.

The children’s question is cruel not because it is certain that they have killed the bird, but because the use of language to force the choice from the blind woman is itself seizing hold of language, one whose force is drawn from the conjured destruction of the bird. The hate speech that the children perform seeks to capture the blind woman in the moment of humiliation, but also to transfer the violence done to the bird to the woman herself, a transfer that belongs to the particular temporality of the threat. In a sense, the threat begins the performance of that which it threatens to perform; but in not quite fully performing it, seeks to establish, through language, the certitude of that future in which it will be performed.

Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (1997).