

The literary archives of experience

Rogers, Asha

DOI:

[10.1093/camqtly/bfaa015](https://doi.org/10.1093/camqtly/bfaa015)

License:

None: All rights reserved

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Rogers, A 2020, 'The literary archives of experience: Richard Rive's Oxford Library', *The Cambridge Quarterly*, vol. 49, no. 3, pp. 252–270. <https://doi.org/10.1093/camqtly/bfaa015>

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

Publisher Rights Statement:

This is a pre-copyedited, author-produced version of an article accepted for publication in *The Cambridge Quarterly* following peer review. The version of record Asha Rogers, *The Literary Archives of Experience: Richard Rive's Oxford Library*, *The Cambridge Quarterly*, Volume 49, Issue 3, September 2020, Pages 252–270 is available online at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/camqtly/bfaa015>.

General rights

Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

- Users may freely distribute the URL that is used to identify this publication.
- Users may download and/or print one copy of the publication from the University of Birmingham research portal for the purpose of private study or non-commercial research.
- User may use extracts from the document in line with the concept of 'fair dealing' under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (?)
- Users may not further distribute the material nor use it for the purposes of commercial gain.

Where a licence is displayed above, please note the terms and conditions of the licence govern your use of this document.

When citing, please reference the published version.

Take down policy

While the University of Birmingham exercises care and attention in making items available there are rare occasions when an item has been uploaded in error or has been deemed to be commercially or otherwise sensitive.

If you believe that this is the case for this document, please contact UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk providing details and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate.

The Literary Archives of Experience: Richard Rive's Oxford Library

Academic debates in literary studies about how best to take the measure of the distinctive characteristics of a literary work and the larger forces shaping its meaning typically fall between two posts, each containing a possible methodological drawback. On the one hand, practising the kind of close textual analysis that privileges linguistic and other formal features can risk eliding the social and material conditions of literature's production and circulation. On the other, historical or sociological approaches to literary analysis may obscure the aesthetic specificity of a given work of literature. The sociologist of literature Gisèle Sapiro sums up the apparent conundrum: 'whereas internal analysis focuses on the structure of works', 'external analysis insists on their social function', however, she adds, a 'real study of cultural production' would combine both elements, 'taking into account the mediations between these two orders of phenomena'.¹ If such an undertaking seems more easily described than achieved, it is also relatively opaque on the question of archives and the role they might play in these overarching conversations about method. Archives are, among other things, material arenas for the inner workings of texts and their rearticulating private and public lives. They can also be symbolic spaces of literary historical and imaginative investment, sites of memory and counter-memory. According to David Scott, the archive is 'a domain of positivity, of pure materiality', partly driven by the 'impulse to collect'.² Yet it also contains a 'meta-dimension' captured in language; the 'discursive condition of *possible* statements of knowledge'.³ To 'fully understand a statement (a document, say, a narrative)' Scott continues, we must 'become acquainted with the archive in which the statement is located', and what it makes possible, or not. Furthermore, he argues that criticism is itself tuned to the practical labour of creating and maintaining an archive to the extent that it too 'depend[s] upon the assembly and re-assembly of the sources that make memory possible'.⁴

Returning to the apparent standoff between internal and external modes of analysis with this in mind, we might ask a different, if ultimately related, question: what kinds of literary reading might be facilitated by certain kinds of archives? Or, put differently, how might the assembled and re-assembled materials of an archive change how we read?

In the early 1990s, Magdalen College at the University of Oxford received a considerable quantity of books belonging to a former student, the South African writer Richard Rive. Rive had died suddenly in 1989 and specified in his will that a large proportion of his personal collection be donated to his alma mater, where he had studied for a doctorate on Olive Schreiner in the early seventies. Rive's Oxford collection is an unusual kind of archive: the two hundred or so largely hand-autographed first editions gifted to Rive by other writers suggests a carefully curated series of 'highlights' rather than the totality of books in his possession. The specific details of the inscriptions throw into relief the richly performative act of bequest itself, in this case on the part of an apartheid classified 'Coloured' writer to a prestigious English educational institution known for accommodating particular kinds of subjects and forms of knowledge. This article draws on the collection's suggestive material features – the signed first-editions – as a conceptual point of departure for thinking through certain of the resonances of *inscription* (a dedication or durable mark of ownership, but also, in the geometrical sense, the enclosure of one entity within another). These resonances which form an important background to the bequest.

We can see what kinds of reading this unusual archive might facilitate by using the book collection as a context for re-reading Rive's 1956 short story 'The Bench'. Its early depiction of civil disobedience not only became emblematic of South African protest fiction generally, but also helped Rive to move beyond a relatively local literary sphere and to forge a career

internationally, particularly in the United States, where the story circulated along lines of transatlantic racial consciousness. The story's archived presences, found in the anthologies and adaptations given to Rive in appreciation for his gift of rights to his literary materials, allow us to see what it was about 'The Bench' that failed to travel and invites us to read it afresh. That is, in making visible the moral, social and political judgements levied on the story's narrative content – judgements which informed various re-articulations of 'The Bench' – Rive's library can help us to reflect on the aspects of literary works that travel easily and with difficulty, and on the questions of history, material form, location, audience and genre that accompany adaptation. If the history of its uses suggests that 'The Bench' possessed the literary qualities it needed to be mobile, my own re-reading suggests that it also demands to be read more closely. That is, by taking seriously the story's efforts to reflect upon the boundaries and difficulties of interiority and exteriority – important themes in 'The Bench' - we can read it as an attempt of a writer at the beginning of his career to represent subjectivity in the strained conditions of social existence.

Archives of inscription

The Rive collection held at Magdalen College Library falls into three distinct categories: firstly, personal copies of Rive's own published works, including editions of his novels *Emergency* (1964) and '*Buckingham Palace*', *District Six* (1986), as well as *Quartet: New Voices from South Africa* (1963), a collection of short stories by himself, Alex La Guma, James Matthews and Alf Wannenburg edited for Heinemann, the collected short stories *Advance, Retreat* (1983) and the 1981 memoir *Writing Black*. Secondly, it holds his books on and about the South African writer Olive Schreiner, the subject of his doctoral

studies including Rive's edited collection of her correspondence. Thirdly, and, most importantly for the purposes of this article, the Rive collection contains books autographed by himself or presented by other writers to him. These volumes in particular elicit questions about the materiality of literary space by embodying subjects through the handwritten dedications. This distinctive feature of the collection acts as a conspicuous 'testimony to Rive's international reputation and to the esteem in which he was held by his contemporaries', as Christine Ferdinand, the Librarian responsible for cataloguing the Rive books, put it.⁵ The inscriptions archive the local networks and global circuits of prestige in which Rive moved during his career, literary networks which incorporate major figures of the world literary field (the African Nobel winners J. M. Coetzee and Doris Lessing) and its minor intermediaries (the English translator of Aimé Césaire's *Cahier by Présence Africaine* Emile Snyder). They cross the Black Atlantic via signed editions of works by Langston Hughes (*The Weary Blues, Ask Your Mama, Laughing To Keep From Crying, New Negro Poets U.S.A*) into the less obvious linguistic and geopolitical arenas into which Rive's writing was being translated during the Cold War (Japanese, Russian, German and Slovenian). The collection records intimacies, relations, and modes of connection not always fully captured in such systematizing abstractions of literary totality as network, field, or ecology. Where Chinua Achebe's 'salaams' via a 1963 African Writers Series edition of *No Longer at Ease* were characteristically restrained, Breyten Breytenbach's dedication to Rive ('whom I've known for 200 years') were playful. (The Black Consciousness poet Mafika Gwala's handwritten message to 'the Son of Blackness' distilled a different set of political priorities). Messages are issued back and forth between Rive and his friend and mentor in letters Es'kia Mphahlele capturing distinct temporalities, registers and locations. Rive expressed his 'admiration and regard for [Mphahlele's] work for literature on the African continent in general, and for his and our country, South Africa, in particular' formally and in public in the

published epigraph to *Quartet*. Mphahlele's own handwritten note to Rive two decades later on the inner leaf of *The Unbroken Song* (1981) offered more intimate praise to a 'fellow explorer of the silent music & loud silences of our life'. The Rive books thus enact a reciprocal and recursive mode of recognition and literary filiation across the breadth of generations and careers.

However, the collection also elicits questions about the materiality of twentieth-century African letters in less immediately obvious ways. The preponderance of inscribed books are suggestive of something larger than themselves and invite us to think about the meanings and modes of inscription more generally. Rive's will, which determined the terms of his bequest, made a clear distinction between his personal book collection destined for Magdalen College Library (all books autographed by himself or fellow writers; all personal copies of his own books; all books related to Schreiner), and the remainder of his vast collection of literary, cultural and historical materials, which he wished to remain in South Africa. The decision to direct a large part of his personal collection, or at least a selection of its finest parts, to his former Oxford College rather than retain them in South Africa was no doubt controversial at the time, given Rive's status as a champion of African literature and local artistic culture. The decision can be interpreted in several ways: Rive's confidence in the manner and expertise of the storage offered by a major University and desire for international scholarly access may have also taken in the tarnished political credentials of the University of Cape Town, following allegations of liberal complicity with the apartheid regime. Rive's attention to the collection's international legacy after his death dovetails, of course, with the prestige value of the bequest's location. His time at Oxford was of major life significance as the 'the apotheosis of his educational achievements'.⁶ While the decision to gift the books may have been quite possibly for pragmatic reasons – the will indicates that the

remainder of the collection was to be left to a former student – it also suggests that Rive was as expressive in his identifications as he was self-conscious of Oxbridge's accommodations.

That Rive anticipated exporting his materials abroad remains striking and intersects with larger arguments about the construction of 'South African' writing abroad.⁷ It is, however, less surprising in light of the explicit identifications and implicit disavowals he makes elsewhere. The autobiography *Writing Black* (1981) documented a series of key episodes in his adult life outside of South Africa in the sixties and seventies, from his early travels on the subcontinent and in Europe to time spent studying at Columbia University and at Oxford, and lecturing in the United States, Britain and France. It is a highly selective, self-curatorial text, notable for Rive's silence on key matters, including his sexuality. (As Brenna Munro remarks, *Writing Black* 'omits heterosexuality as assiduously as it denies homosexuality').⁸ Such omissions are counterbalanced, however, by Rive's tendency to perform his affinities and affiliations in giving accounts of specific acts of textual inscription. 'Dear Dick,' the Nigerian playwright J.P Clark writes in a copy of his own *Song of a Goat*. 'I like the way you've just bludgeoned me into buying this... to "inscribe" to you – I hope it soothes your rugged soul'.⁹ At Oxford, Rive dedicates a copy of his Faber-published novel *Emergency* to his Conservative-voting, bingo-playing Welsh College cleaner, Mrs Davies. Overawed by Rive's apparent literary status, she uses it to admonish the undergraduates racing past his rooms lest they interrupt his 'thinking'. If such instances of actual inscription are peripheral to the autobiography overall, Rive's willingness to write himself into certain spaces is harder to miss. His evocation of an Oxford of flapping gowns and dons mumbling down the High is part ironic invocation of a quaint imagined England, part subtle self-casting. This kind of self-fashioning is consonant with Rive the writer more generally, and it met with varying levels of success.¹⁰ Nonetheless his performance of the 'guide-book, week-end, touristy aspects of Oxford' displayed a wry insider knowledge of less desirable but no less

authentic aspects of local knowledge, from 'the dull uniformity of suburban Oxford' to the 'damp, cement-smell of the cinema...with its dirty lavatory'.¹¹

Rive's acute consciousness of being inscribed as a black person in Britain – in the sense of being enclosed within a boundary or label, or of bearing a conspicuous mark – was particularly charged in Oxford, a place he described as 'that strange, challenging and very often uncompromising environment'.¹² Whereas his exchange with Mrs Davies brought specific social benefits and free food at Christmas, a different encounter with a white working-class woman from the provinces highlighted how his anxiously assumed position might also fail to accommodate others. Perceiving a waitress's brusque manner at a cultivated Oxford restaurant as 'the first overt sign of racialism in Oxford', his decision to give her a dressing down 'in my most Magdalen College accent' rapidly unravels when she upbraids him for 'speak[ing] posh'.¹³ The revelation that she read him as a quintessential Oxford snob – the implication being classism on his part rather than racism on hers – may have been a relief to a South African 'bruised...by the local experience'.¹⁴ Still, the episode proved that Rive was as disquieted by Oxford as he was capable of being dazzled. His expressions of retrospective identification with it as a place of intellectual and social formation, textually in the memoir and materially or symbolically in the bequest, betrayed an acute self-consciousness of being recognised as other in such an environment – an inheritance shared with other students of colour from the colonies.

The intricacies of Rive's positioning, amid larger questions of accommodation and recognition, gain an additional dimension in his struggle to acquire a space to conduct doctoral research on African literature in the elite English university system. Rive's College file shows that while his status as a *bona fide* student at Oxford could guarantee him significant insulation from the official enquiries of the British Home Office or the apartheid authorities, its creative and intellectual affordances were very much subject to the

institutional boundaries policing literary studies in the early seventies. Rive had approached Oxford following the promise of a scholarship from Kings College at Cambridge, which had failed to come good after the University was unable to locate a suitable academic supervisor. The Cambridge experience would prove instructive. In 1970, Rive's proposed topic underwent a series of intricate shifts to improve his chances of admission to the Oxford English Faculty. His initial proposal to study contemporary directions in the modern anglophone African novel or poem in September was modified the following month to literature produced in South Africa or any Commonwealth country since 1945.¹⁵ By December, the College authorities pragmatically advised Rive to state his interests in the more capacious terms of 'twentieth century literature' to increase the likelihood of his acceptance by the Faculty Board. The gesture seemed to substitute modern African writing in English for twentieth century English writers, as if the temporality of the former was somehow at odds with that of the latter. These constraints did little to prevent Rive from pursuing a characteristically English fudge by writing a 'Biographical and Critical Study' of Olive Schreiner, a pioneering figure in the field of South African literature in English.

The University's struggle to accommodate African writing raised from a different direction the questions of hospitality and recognition with which Rive grappled. Rive, for his part, was not opposed to these subtle negotiations, however much they said about the linguistic, geographical or national parameters framing literary studies at Oxford at the time, and however strong their effects on the kind of research available to him. Pragmatically committed to the approximately fourteen million non-whites living in South Africa, whom he felt he represented in coming to Oxford, he regarded its institutional failure of recognition as an unfortunate but not insuperable obstacle. In his view, the precise object of study mattered less than the value of the qualification, its authorising institution, and what this could enable him to do next: teach African literatures at university level in South Africa in the years to

come. For all his retrospective performances of affinity with the Oxford way of life, then, the reality of Rive's academic interests and ethnic difference continued to inflect aspects of his experience. Terry Eagleton, a temporary supervisor of Rive's in 1972, foresaw no problems in him producing a good piece of research and yet also observed the stylistic mannerisms that marked Rive as unambiguously "African".¹⁶ The unpromising beginnings of Rive's doctoral quest maps onto histories of the discipline and its boundaries while also showing how African literature might fail to function as a mediating category in helping certain writers gain access to prestige-bearing institutions. At the same time, the bequest suggests more might be at stake than a unidirectional flow of validation. Rive was fully prepared to extract value from the same consecrating institutions that today self-conceptualise as inclusive amid wider twenty-first century debates about decoloniality and social representativeness.¹⁷

'The Bench': a story of global literary making

Having established the wider context for the Rive collection held at Magdalen College Library, this next section examines how this unusual archive might shape the interpretation of a single literary work – 'The Bench', a relatively canonical short story of 1956. It does so by attending to some of the different versions of the story held in the Library in the form of anthologies and other volumes gifted to Rive during his lifetime in appreciation for rights to access and use his literary materials. These re-articulated versions of Rive's work demonstrate the alternative public lives of the short story post-publication and illuminate the shifting values of its past interpretations and what might be at stake in re-reading the story now.

'The Bench' charts the journey of Karlie, a man classified 'Coloured' by the South African state, from the status of political innocent to political convert. Visiting Cape Town from the provinces, Karlie is moved to take up his role in the anti-apartheid struggle after stumbling upon an opposition rally while visiting a friend. Karlie ruminates on the implications of the anti-apartheid message for his own existence and encounters apartheid's injustices afresh on his journey home. He ultimately decides to take heed of the rally's political rhetoric that one must 'challenge':

But one must challenge these things the woman had said. And the man with the rolling voice. Each in his own way. But how did one challenge? What did one challenge?

Then it dawned on him. Here was his chance. The bench. The railway bench with the legend WHITES ONLY neatly painted on it in white.

For a moment it symbolised all the misery of South African society.¹⁸

Spurred to take action, Karlie sits on the public bench designated 'whites only', and resists a challenge from a white passerby, enduring a subsequent confrontation with a white police officer over the 'bench dispute'.¹⁹ The story ends as Karlie surrenders himself peaceably for arrest.

The short story was originally inspired by the Defiance Against Unjust Laws Campaign in South Africa in 1952 and 1953. It continued to be praised decades after its initial publication for its clear political trajectory and the uncomplicated manner in which it fictionalised the ways in which an individual might come to realise their place in a larger political struggle. On this reading, Karlie's 'political instinct' is first 'aroused', before his 'political education' is tested and proved by the prospect of the bench.²⁰ The story was central

to the process of Rive's global literary making as a South African writer, thanks in part to Langston Hughes, who encountered it as judge of a short story competition run by *Drum* magazine earlier in the fifties. Hughes then included it in the South African section of his anthology of African literature *An African Treasury* (1960), where it staged Rive's appeal as a writer positioned within the major historical fault-lines of the twentieth century.

Unsurprisingly, the story acquired a special resonance in the United States where it was widely read as a South African reworking of the Rosa Parks episode in American Civil Rights history, as well as a story offering valuable insights into the particular conditions of apartheid. That 'The Bench' travelled well along these lines was partly because its form of realism was historically and geographically legible amid the politics of resistance taking place within the United States and South Africa, the two archetypal contexts for twentieth century racial struggle.²¹ The realism crafted by Rive and his peers in fifties South Africa was, his biographer Shaun Viljoen suggests, 'a mode of expression that enabled [him] to articulate an anti-racist, humanist position' that performed specific social and political work in the era of post-war anti-colonialism, anti-racism and civil rights.²² Central to its value was the way it imagined the relationship between the individual and the collective. This was a matter which proved as relevant to those liberal-humanist literary critics who regarded Karlie's act of protest as an 'assertion of his dignity and oneness with his race', as to those who read the story as exemplary of national consciousness.²³ Rive had not simply written 'on nationalist impulse', as one critic put it in a 1989 essay titled 'The Nationalist Impulse in South African Prose Writing', but had inspired his readers 'to national consciousness and to a dream of racial equality in South Africa' by fostering awareness of 'the human predicament in South Africa'.²⁴

Rive's Oxford book collection, however, alerts us to a number of other ancillary interpretations which became available as his work circulated, and was received and adapted, inviting us to consider which aspects of the story travelled well and which did not. In 1962 'The Bench' formed the foundational text of *Peaceful Heroes*, a collection of fourteen one-act plays for performance by high school students in the United States, compiled by Rosalie Regen and published by an association of Quaker groups in North America and Canada. Drawing on the historical connections between drama and religious experience, but also on values-based education, the Quaker adaptation repurposed literary and historical narratives for the contemporary cause of religious pacifism. It presented 'fearless men and women over a period of three hundred years in their witness against war and injustice', foregrounding the social and moral benefits the story of a 'young writer in Cape Town, South Africa' offered to young adults in North America.²⁵ 'The Bench', which addresses the challenges of reconciling inner to outer realities, was an appropriate choice given the volume's overarching interest in helping young people relate the 'inner world' of 'self-examination and self-knowledge' to 'the great outer world which is constantly crowding in upon them to the point of suffocation'.²⁶ Given Rive's preoccupation with the entanglement of subjectivity and external pressures in the story, Regen's decisions in the adapted piece, titled 'For Europeans Only!', are all the more questionable. For one thing, the challenges of reworking a piece of narrative fiction into a one-act performance piece meant that the play 'For Europeans Only!' steered clear of the story's opening scene in which Karlie is first introduced to the possibilities of life as a citizen with certain rights.

Karlie was concentrating hard while trying to follow the speaker. Something at the back of his mind told him that these were great and true words, whatever they meant.

The speaker was a huge black man with a rolling voice. He paused to sip water from a glass. Karlie sweated.²⁷

As I shall suggest in the final section of this article, in this scene Karlie experiences the rally's political rhetoric as something other than immediate. Although the speaker's exposition of how society 'can only retain its social and economic position at the expense of a large black working class' causes Karlie to feel 'something stirring deep inside him, something he had never experienced before', rather than assimilating the speech in his rational mind, Karlie experiences its meaning through his bodily senses. By contrast, the play substituted the rally scene with a new one, introducing two wholly new characters: two white housewives returning from shopping in the city wait for the same late-running train as Karlie and his friend Willie. The freshly scripted dialogue between the two women – one openly espousing the standard apartheid view, one more apologetic – amps up the moral drama of the piece as the two sets of characters cross paths:

(Enter Karlie and Willie, two dark brown Africans. Karlie sees the women's predicament and picks up several packages. He hands them to Second Woman.)

SECOND WOMAN: Thank you.

(Karlie hands two more parcels to First Woman, who backs away from him in disgust.)

FIRST WOMAN: Don't you dare touch my things, black man! You are the cause of all our troubles.²⁸

The amendment to the story's narrative structure not only has the effect of cutting out the sections that establish the features of Karlie's inner life. It also relegates his political learning

to retrospective explanation in dialogue between himself and Willie, making the story more didactic overall:

KARLIE: Anyway, Willie, I want to talk to you about the meeting this afternoon at the Grand Parade. I'm so glad I came to Cape Town. That was the most wonderful speech I ever heard in my life.

WILLIE: It was too radical for me.

KARLIE: Is it radical for us to fight against all this injustice? I didn't know how bad it is.²⁹

'For Europeans Only!' thus extracts the story's thematic properties and certain of its plot elements to provide a worldly perspective on nonviolent resistance at a key juncture in the American Civil Rights movement. It functions less as a critical cultural resource than a vicarious mode of personal (spiritual and ethical) formation that espoused the values of civil disobedience under the religious by-line that God made all men equal. Yet the adaptation did more than simply re-frame the story to construct a pacifist ethic across time and location. Rather, modifying the way in which Rive's narrative content was expressed also had a bearing on what it might 'say'. *Peaceful Heroes* responded to the demands of dramatization and the restricted economy of a one-act play by substituting the original omniscient narrative voice of the fiction, which moves in and out of Karlie's consciousness, for an audience less intimately involved. In other words, 'For Europeans Only!' represented a change in the relation between readers and the narrative; in this case the high school students performing or witnessing a performance of the play were still attendant on its some of the story's effects, but the subtleties and complexities afforded by its narration were no longer available to them. At the same time, the adaptation's attention to a young adult audience resonated with the

original form of the short story as a less prestigious medium long regarded a 'junior' genre of fiction to the novel. This history of the form bears on the kind of 'tutelage' users of Rive's work might seek to enact, but also on writers at formative stages in their careers.³⁰ Rive's own first novel, *Emergency*, appeared just under a decade later.

The Quaker link in the chain of publication proved 'The Bench' was not only amenable to being read as a tale of formation, but was also eminently teachable. Building on Mary Louise Pratt, Shital Pravinchandra reminds us that while the short story is often regarded as peripheral – 'as a launching pad for progression to the longer and (supposedly) more difficult form of the novel' – it is also disproportionately used for the teaching of "world literature".³¹ Educational resources were one aspect of the story's ready availability in in the United States. Understood as part of what Stéphane Robolin describes as the 'sensitizing and conscientizing of African Americans about the racial regime in Southern Africa', 'The Bench' effected 'a powerful sense of transnational relation', offering an unparalleled resource for the horizontal comparison of the American and South African political situations.³² The 1978 textbook *A Two Way Mirror: Differing Perspectives on the World* published by the International Curriculum Development Programme drew on Rive's literary materials for related reasons. The authors turned to 'The Bench' for a university module on racial segregation as part of their larger aim to 'eradicate parochialism' in the curricula of the US education system through a focus on 'the continent of Africa' with its 'multitudinous diversifications'.³³ *A Two Way Mirror* attributed African literature the important local value of serving specific disadvantaged constituencies ('native Americans, Appalachian whites, and American blacks') by indirectly embedding equal opportunity principles in the curriculum. Framing works such as Rive's short story as a metaphoric Pierian spring guiding individuals 'toward a reality-oriented world of cultural pluralism', the creators of the textbook bestowed upon African

writing the capacity to challenge ‘the attitudes, values, and knowledge of a predominantly western society’ by reciprocating knowledge and cultural transmission.³⁴ ‘The Bench’ acquired a further set of meanings in the context of volume’s governing metaphor for cross-cultural relations as a ‘two-way mirror’. ‘Without regard for geographical limits’, they added, the overarching frame of interpretation was ‘cultural confrontation and conflict’.³⁵

Whereas *Peaceful Heroes* adapted the narrative content of the story for a different medium and genre, *A Two Way Mirror* altered the terms of its possible meanings by foregrounding its relations to historical events in Montgomery, Alabama in 1955 and to the contemporary world. A series of study and discussion questions enacted this relation by moving between the historical narrative of US civil rights, the world of Rive’s story and the choices facing students as subject citizens in a modern democracy:

Was Rosa Parks’ reason for sitting in the white section of a bus in Montgomery, Alabama in 1958 [*sic*] similar to Karlie’s reason for sitting on the bench?

Did Karlie and Rosa need nerve to do what they did?

Do you know of incidents in real life or literature that were caused by discriminatory practices?

Is there any cause for which you might take the risk that Karlie and Rosa Parks took?³⁶

The questions not only reflected wider multiculturalist educational objectives, they also registered the narrower objective to ‘compare apartheid and segregation as oppressive social policies’.³⁷ The fraught lived conditions in which ‘The Bench’ was sometimes read thus conveyed proximity between experiences of life under two distinct racist systems. This was a resonance that Rive had encountered in his own life-time – the autobiography *Writing Black*

began as a talk Rive gave in the United States in 1979 titled 'The Ethics of an anti-Jim Crow'. The African American poet Julia Field once told Rive how she had decided to read the story aloud to a class in a segregated school in Alabama when it came under attack by white protestors. The pupils 'listened because they also knew those segregated benches marked "Whites Only"', Rive reflected.³⁸

By the 1990s, however, educational uses of the story struggled under the collected weight of the meanings it was intended to deliver, suggesting that this form of recognition might not always be clear cut. Although school readers demonstrated sought-after outcomes in their responses to 'The Bench', they also developed a more equivocal outlook on the political efficacy of Karlie's actions. One student response, reproduced in a 1993 teacher's manual, performed the story's virtues by demonstrating readerly identification with the protagonist, assimilation of his likely thoughts and feelings, and a personal response manifested in the commitment to specific social behaviours. At the same time, it resolved difficult tensions in story about whether Karlie's actions had actually made a difference ('In some sense it did..., and it didn't') by latching onto the historical figure of Martin Luther King as a more stable example of the conscientious individual whose decision to 'tak[e] a stand' had undoubtedly made 'a big difference'.³⁹

The uses of the story I have recounted from Rive's Oxford collection, with their shifting social, political or ethical values, might pose questions about the work's literariness. In *Peaceful Heroes*, 'The Bench' moved as pure content with little regard to its original form, while in *A Two Way Mirror* the short story travelled easily as a text of cross-cultural encounter. Both traded on a set of emotional responses thanks to the original's attention to individual courage. These adaptations of 'The Bench' therefore did more than simply move or re-frame Rive's text; rather the 'materials' of genre, media, audience and historical

resonance were also in play in ways that put pressure on the implicit claim that adaptation might liberate narrative content from the anchoring constraints of its form. Such evidence might confirm Lewis Nkosi's dissonant critique of South African protest fiction as 'journalistic fact parading outrageously as imaginative literature'.⁴⁰ According to Nkosi, South Africa lacked the kinds of writers capable of responding with 'vigour of the imagination and sufficient technical resources' to lived conditions in the country; its black writers seemed to him 'totally unaware' of the 'compelling innovations' of modern literature.⁴¹ Such forceful criticism – that writers such as Rive were artlessly telling the apartheid story – was damning indeed, intersecting with the questions of literary value embedded in the distinct modalities 'The Bench' acquired as different agents re-articulated Rive's literary materials in line with their own particular goals.⁴² Attention to the shifting ways in which Rive's narrative content has been expressed – an approach facilitated through his Oxford archive – can thus help us reflect on what 'The Bench' might 'say' to us as readers. That is to say, attending to those aspects of a relatively canonical work that *failed to travel* can return us afresh to its possibilities.

Re-reading 'The Bench'

It is clear by now that we can approach 'The Bench' vertically as a universal story of individual struggle and horizontally by transporting its message to political struggles elsewhere. It also demands to be read in other ways, including as one writer's revealing attempt to relate the self to the social world by representing subjectivity amid the wider conditions of social existence. This dimension of the story's literary experience can be brought to light by making two fairly simple observations. First, 'The Bench' falls into two

parts. The second, best-known part, is easily and widely circulated and consists of Karlie's decision to sit on the railway station bench and his subsequent confrontation with passers-by and the authorities. The first part, which is less often discussed, or otherwise omitted, describes Karlie's attendance at the rally and his walk to the train station. It is in the first part that Rive invests considerable energy establishing the intricacies of Karlie's interiority. The story's opening paragraphs depict a psychological reality in perpetual motion; the narrative voice shifts from an omniscient perspective into the contours of Karlie's consciousness. It moves between the political message he hears, the alternative futures he begins to imagine (ordering a rich breakfast in a café, his children playing sports at the local high school), and the immediacy of the present with all its stifling demands. The world of Karlie's perception is highly visual – he fantasizes his act of defiance after seeing a photograph of a man in the newspaper smiling during arrest, then acts it out. It is also highly recursive: images are ventured and pulled back again into the prose; for example, the white activist in her 'blue, shop-bought dress' impresses itself on Karlie's mind and recirculates variously as 'the lady in the blue dress', the 'white woman offering Mr Nxeli a cigarette', the 'lady on the platform', 'her dress tight around her', and the figure with 'hair that gleamed with gold in the sun'.⁴³

The prose moves between Karlie's mental pictures and his own bodily experiences as he synthesises his experience. Remembering the white woman who offered a cigarette to a black activist, Karlie takes out his own 'crumpled packet of Cavalla' and begins to smoke (25). If the short story is in direct conversation with historical events of the early fifties, as Rive suggested, it is a strange imagining of this history; one we experience by passing through the fluid movements of Karlie's mind. We fail to gauge the significance of Karlie's subsequent political action in the second half without properly recognising the interior space of his personhood set against the conditions of social existence in the first.

The structure of the short story can also be divided into three encounters between the subject and language: the rhetoric at the rally; a racist slur hurled at Karlie in the street immediately afterward; and the institutionalised racism of the state designating the bench 'whites only'. Each makes something happen in the social world – the white woman who calls Karlie a 'bloody baboon!' from her car after he steps out to cross the road violently throws him back into the world – building towards an act through which he realises his 'membership as a human in human society' (24, 25). Each instance acts as a marker of Karlie's journey to reconcile the inner reality of his experience with a life heavily determined by apartheid conditions. Tellingly, he does not find such encounters immediately comprehensible but 'queer', 'confusing and strange' (23). Karlie's ontological struggle is situated against racist social structures and steeped in black philosophies of existence. His attention to the political speeches about the social and economic rights deserved by all South Africans wavers with ruminations 'at the back of his mind' and the feeling of the 'burning sky' on his neck (21). The language of the competing realities of his inner and outer world is distinctly coded in the vocabulary of existentialism: he is preoccupied by problems of freedom and agency in a world where 'there seemed a cocoon around each person' and 'each mov[ed] in a narrow pattern of his own manufacture' (25). He struggles with what it means to be good or achieve justice against 'the evils of a system he could not understand' (25). It is this linguistic coding (from the Sisyphean 'huge black man' with the 'rolling voice' at the rally, to the bodily sensations of exhaustion and fatigue with which Karlie registers racist language) which invites readers to view the body as a site of struggle between self and social world. Such markers foreground the psychosocial and philosophical intricacies of black subjectivity as important contexts for interpreting the story.⁴⁴

Described as as 'an exquisite piece of literary nationalism' and 'committed literature' whose 'major purpose' was to reveal 'a social and political condition that affects an

oppressed or minority group', 'The Bench' evidently possessed the literary qualities to render it mobile.⁴⁵ The re-reading offered above, however, complicates the idea of transparency conventionally associated with protest realism as a style that might privilege aspects of 'content' (themes, plot, moral-political values) over narration, structure, technique or composition.⁴⁶ Instead, the story's focus on the corporeal and somatic provides something other than a transparent relationship between reality and representation, word versus world. In doing so, it pushes back at Nkosi's criticisms about the failure of South African writing to demonstrate contemporaneity with European literary experiment. On this reading, 'The Bench' offers a compelling depiction of political consciousness at its incipience; it is both uncertain and potentially alienating. Taking the story's philosophical materials as a point of departure, we can see how it foregrounds what Lewis R. Gordon calls 'the "situation" of questioning', in this case, how to reconcile inner realities and worldly pressures and responsibilities.⁴⁷ That there are as many as twenty six questions in eight pages – seventeen in the overlooked first half – almost all posed by Karlie to himself, seems highly suggestive in this regard. Though the story's questioning mode goes largely unrecognised in subsequent adaptations, it is central to Rive's representation of Karlie's liminal position. Rive's protagonist is a traveller between the city and the country, between political innocence and experience. Perhaps most importantly of all, the mode of narration speaks of the story's subtle interests in language as a navigator of the thresholds between inner and outer realms.

Offering such a reading is not to renounce the potential moral benefits of Rive's early realism, to split hairs about its political versus philosophical value, or to run down the advantages of works that bring marginalised constituents and experiences into aesthetic view. It is, instead, to recognise that if theories of black existence are sustained by what they offer to lived experience, the ending of 'The Bench' is politically affirmatory even as it stages the

question of what it means to arrive at a particular stance. Karlie's decision to act by sitting on the prohibited bench amounts to a decision to *live on*, as in the classical encounter with nihilism.⁴⁸

This article has sought to demonstrate the different kinds of reading facilitated by different types of archives, emphasising how they might bring into view the processes through which creative language has found a way into the world. Reading 'The Bench' in light of Rive's personal collection at Magdalen draws out some of the partial, or problematic, aspects of the ways it has travelled as a piece that helped make his career international. Using Rive's carefully curated collection of books to chart the changing arenas in which the story was made legible, I have suggested that what failed to travel was perhaps that which was most important: its central preoccupation with the relationship between the self and the social world. The material forms and locations of the story – but also the materials of its language, form and genre – traces of which can all be found in the archive, invite us to consider Rive's story as an attempt on the part of an emerging writer to represent subjectivity in context. The short story's interest in the relationship between the subject and the world beyond failed to travel in these fuller ways as it circulated in public. Instead, understood as a model tale of political awakening leading to concrete political action, the story participated in Rive's literary making as an author of a certain kind.

Recuperating these aspects of the short story might also invite us to reflect on the shareable and unshareable and how literary works can act as public expressions of personal lives, intersecting with this article's interest in the rearticulating private and public lives of texts, the unstable demarcations between the personal and the public staged in the handwritten inscriptions of books, and what it might mean to bring material archives to our reading of the elusive archives of experience we find in literary texts. Describing Rive's

'divided subjectivity' as a black mid-century intellectual, Viljoen casts him as 'a part of, yet apart from; being black and engaged in struggle, iconic of and giving voice to the oppressed mass'.⁴⁹ J. M. Coetzee was also puzzled by Rive's performances and omissions. Reviewing his autobiography in 1982, Coetzee suggested that if *Writing Black* was a 'life-story...of a black South African who would have preferred not to live his life within this or any other racial categorization': it was 'partial and selective', opening up questions about the said and unsaid.⁵⁰ Read in the context of Rive's Oxford library – a self-curated collection of materials and itself a symbolic act of inscription – such statements have a purchase on what Brenna Munro describes as Rive's 'revealing literary mask' as a 'queer anomaly'.⁵¹ Munro observes that Rive offered a "'realist" representation of sexualities' and departed from the associations and conventions of South African protest fiction 'precisely because he was interested in socially inchoate queer subjects whose oppression did not seem worth witnessing from the standard antiapartheid point of view'.⁵² As such, she reads Rive's fiction as 'alternate stagings of the autobiographical self in a less charged literary space', alerting us to 'the autobiographical within the fictional – as opposed to the fictionalization that is involved in every memoir'.⁵³ If this attention to Rive's curiously punctuated autobiography is to move from one framing context for the short story to another, my point is not to attain a definitive position on Rive's elusive identifications, but to indicate how the shareable and unshareable operate contrastingly in different material contexts. Of course, using the material archive to read a writer's life is not quite the same as using it to read a short story, but that is the subject of a different essay.

Acknowledgements

For their help researching this article I would like to thank Magdalen College Archives, Christine Ferdinand and especially Shaun Viljoen for uncovering the particulars of the

bequest. I am grateful to Peter D. McDonald for first alerting me to the networks visible in Rive's collection and to Nathan Suhr-Sytsma and Rachel Bower for their comments on an earlier draft.

¹ Gisèle Sapiro, 'Autonomy Revisited: The Question of Mediations and Its Methodological Implications', *Paragraph*, 35/1 (2012), pp. 30–48: 30, 43.

² David Scott, 'The Archaeologies of Black Memory', *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism*, 12/2 (2008), pp. v–xvi: vi.

³ Scott, 'The Archaeologies of Black Memory', p. vii.

⁴ Scott, 'The Archaeologies of Black Memory', p. vi.

⁵ Christine Ferdinand, 'Richard Rive', *Floreat Magdalena*, 12 (2013) p. 16.

⁶ Shaun Viljoen, *Richard Rive: A Partial Biography* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2013), p. 33.

⁷ See for instance Andrew van der Vlies, *South African Textual Cultures: White, Black, Read All Over* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007); Andrea Thorpe, 'Cosmos in London: South Africans Writing London after 1948', PhD thesis (Queen Mary University of London, 2017).

⁸ Brenna M. Munro, *South Africa and the Dream of Love to Come: Queer Sexuality and the Struggle for Freedom* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), p. 118.

⁹ Richard Rive, *Writing Black* (Cape Town: DPhilip, 2013), pp. 79–80.

¹⁰ See also 'Four South Africans Abroad', *Contrast*, 10/3 (1976) pp. 49–57. See Shaun Viljoen and Meg Samuelson, 'Proclamations and Silences: 'Race', Self-Fashioning and Sexuality in the Trans-Atlantic Correspondence between Langston Hughes and Richard Rive', *Social Dynamics*, 33/2 (2007) pp. 105–122.

¹¹ Rive, 'Four South Africans', p. 49.

¹² Rive, *Writing Black*, p. 49.

¹³ Rive, *Writing Black*, p. 56.

¹⁴ Rive, 'Four South Africans', p. 54.

¹⁵ South Africa had left the Commonwealth in 1961. The Rive student file is held at the Magdalen College archives, reference AD 1971 Rive. For an extended biographical discussion of this period in his life see Viljoen, *Richard Rive: A Partial Biography*.

¹⁶ T.F. Eagleton, Progress Report on R.M. Rive, (1972), Magdalen College archives, AD 1971 Rive.

¹⁷ The proportions of UK-domiciled black students admitted to the English programme at Magdalen remain very low (one per cent between 2015 and 2017). Richard Adams and Caelainn Barr, 'Oxford Faces Anger over Failure to Improve Diversity among Students', *Guardian*, 22 May 2018.

¹⁸ Richard Rive, 'The Bench', in *Advance, Retreat: Selected Short Stories* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1983), pp. 18–28: 25. I refer to the version of the story contained in this edition, which makes clear the connection to the events of 1952-3, differing also from the version popularised by Langston Hughes' 1960 *African Treasury*. Surprisingly, given its boost to Rive's international career, *An African Treasury* is not included in the Magdalen collection.

¹⁹ Rive, 'The Bench', p. 28.

²⁰ P.O. Iheakaram, 'The Nationalist Impulse in South African Prose Writing', in Ebele Eko, Julius Ogu, and Azubike Festus Iloje (eds.), *Literature and National Consciousness* (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books Nigeria, 1989), p. 228.

²¹ Stéphane Robolin, *Grounds of Engagement: Apartheid-Era African American and South African Writing* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), p. 5.

²² Viljoen, *Richard Rive: A Partial Biography*, p. 31.

-
- ²³ William R. Elkins et al. (eds), *Literary Reflections*, 4th edn. (New York; London: McGraw-Hill, 1982), p. 105.
- ²⁴ Iheakaram, 'The Nationalist Impulse in South African Prose Writing', p. 228.
- ²⁵ Rosalie Regen, *Peaceful Heroes* (Philadelphia: Religious Education Committee, Friends General Conference, 1962).
- ²⁶ Regen, *Peaceful Heroes*, pp. 15, 11.
- ²⁷ Rive, 'The Bench', p. 21.
- ²⁸ Regen, *Peaceful Heroes*, p. 162.
- ²⁹ Regen, *Peaceful Heroes*, p. 163.
- ³⁰ See Mary Louise Pratt, 'The Short Story: The Long and the Short of It', *Poetics*, 10/2–3 (1983), pp. 175–94.
- ³¹ Shital Pravinchandra, 'Short Story and Peripheral Production', in Ben Etherington and Jarad Zimler (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to World Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 197–210: 197–98.
- ³² Robolin, *Grounds of Engagement*, pp. 144, 149.
- ³³ *A Two Way Mirror: Differing Perspectives on the World: A Collection of Cross-Cultural Teaching Modules, International Curriculum Development Program, 1973-1978* (New York: Phelps-Stokes Fund, 1978). Ama Ata Aidoo and Chinua Achebe acted as literary advisors on the resource. The Rive component was designed by Brenda Flowers Savage, Professor of English at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, an Historically Black College and University.
- ³⁴ *A Two Way Mirror*, pp. 3, 1.
- ³⁵ *A Two Way Mirror*, p. 2.
- ³⁶ *A Two-Way Mirror*, p. 63.
- ³⁷ *A Two-Way Mirror*, p. 66.
- ³⁸ Rive, *Writing Black*, p. 142.

³⁹ Shirley P. Brown, 'Lighting Fires', in Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan L. Lytle (eds.), *Inside/Outside: Teacher Research and Knowledge* (New York; London: Teachers College Press, 1993), pp. 241–49: 247.

⁴⁰ Lewis Nkosi, 'Fiction by Black South Africans', in Ulli Beier (ed.), *Introduction to African Literature: An Anthology of Critical Writing*, New ed. (London: Longman, 1979), pp. 221–27: 222.

⁴¹ Nkosi, 'Fiction by Black South Africans', p. 221.

⁴² The copies of *Peaceful Heroes* and *A Two-Way Mirror* at Magdalen College Library contain handwritten notes of thanks to Rive, expressing their gratitude for permission to use the story. The story also travelled back to Oxford via the 1983 edition of Rive's short stories *Advance, Retreat*, which appeared with the progressive South African English-language publisher David Philip. Philip was an important publisher of Rive's work and a former pupil of C. S. Lewis at Magdalen College in the fifties. The copy of *Advance, Retreat* is dedicated to 'Magdalen College Library from author and publisher – Richard Rive (1971-74) David Philip (1946-50)'.

⁴³ Rive, 'The Bench', pp. 22-24. All future references are contained parenthetically in the text.

⁴⁴ See N. C. Manganyi, *Being-Black-in-the-World* (Braamfontein: SPRO-CAS/Ravan, 1973) for the seminal South African contribution to black philosophies of existence.

⁴⁵ Iheakaram, 'The Nationalist Impulse in South African Prose Writing', p. 229; Elkins et al, *Literary Reflections*, p. 105.

⁴⁶ What Sapiro calls the 'social identification of characters, plot and message'. 'Autonomy Revisited', p. 39.

⁴⁷ Lewis Gordon, *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy* (New York; London: Routledge, 1997), p. 3. 10/07/2020 18:03:00

⁴⁸ Gordon, *Existence in Black*, pp. 6–7.

⁴⁹ Viljoen, *Richard Rive: A Partial Biography*, pp. 41-42.

⁵⁰ J. M. Coetzee, 'Writing Black', *English in Africa*, (Oct. 1982), pp. 71–3.

⁵¹ Munro, *South Africa and the Dream of Love to Come*, pp. 119, 116. She is referring here to Stephen Gray's characterisation in 'Richard Rive: A Memoir', *Staffrider*, 9/1 (1990), pp. 42–55: 54. She reads Rive's refusal to intimately self-disclose as emblematic of José Quiroga's notion of the "melancholic subject who refuses the confession, the subject who chooses to mask it, while at the same time showing us the mask".

⁵² Munro, *South Africa and the Dream of Love to Come*, p. 117

⁵³ Munro, *South Africa and the Dream of Love to Come*, p. 119.