RESEARCH

Relating Someone Else's Story: A Comparative Reading of Jonas Hassen Khemiri's *Everything I Don't Remember* and Édouard Louis' *Histoire de la violence*

Per Myren-Svelstad
Norwegian University of Science and Technology, NO
per.svelstad@ntnu.no

The article is a comparative reading of *Everything I Don't Remember* by Swedish author Jonas Hassen Khemiri, and *Histoire de la violence* by French author Édouard Louis. The main theoretical framework is Deleuzian/Guattarian affect theory, coupled with Adriana Cavarero's analysis of storytelling and selfhood. Both novels depict a narrative situation where a person has their story told by someone else, and thus provide striking accounts of how individuals relate and affect each other. Moreover, the narrative form of the novels presents identity, solidarity, and love not as predefined categories language can represent, but rather as troubled and unstable phenomena produced and altered through stories.

How does it feel when someone else narrates the story of your life? How may narrative form produce, but also challenge, one's understanding of oneself? Swedish novelist Jonas Hassen Khemiri (b. 1978) and French author Édouard Louis (b. 1992) both treat vexed questions of individual and collective identity, the inescapability of politics, and how to remember and accurately portray someone's life story. This article proposes a comparative reading of Khemiri's novel *Allt jag inte minns* (*Everything I Don't Remember*, 2015) and Louis' novel *Histoire de la violence* (2016), from the combined perspective of Deleuzian/Guattarian affect theory and Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero's view of the fundamentality of storytelling for identity and selfhood. Building on Hannah Arendt's definition of politics as "the scene upon which 'human beings appear to one another not as physical objects, but *as* men'," (2000, p. 21) Cavarero explains how someone's *self* appears and gains meaning in the process of being narrated by others.

The first part of the article consists of a short discussion of the two works and their authors. While both are often read from the perspective of identity politics, the next part argues that affect theory and the philosophy of Cavarero provide a more useful approach for discussing how Khemiri and Louis depict identity as a question of relational storytelling, constantly affecting and being affected by the stories of others. A particularly interesting aspect of both novels is how they depict what Cavarero (2000, p. 17) calls "the paradox of Ulysses", consisting in "the situation for which someone receives his own story from another's narration". The term refers to book VIII of Homer's *Odyssey*, in which the disguised Ulysses (Odysseus) listens to a rhapsode, unaware of the presence of the Greek hero, singing the tale of his feats at Troy. In Cavarero's view, the actions an individual performs reveals *who* she is, but this revelation is invisible to the individual him- or herself. It is thus only when someone else tells the individual her story that she has a chance of realising its *meaning*. Based on this claim, the remaining parts of the article discuss and compare key passages from the novels.

Literature as Identity Politics

The plot of *Everything I Don't Remember* revolves around a triangle of desire involving three Swedes of mixed ethnic background. The two young men Samuel and Vandad are close friends, and while the former is a political scientist with a safe but dull job in the ministry of foreign affairs, the latter takes odd jobs and is involved in semi-criminal dunning. To Vandad's dismay, Samuel enters into a relationship with Laide, a head-strong and educated idealist a few years older than her boyfriend. Their relationship ends after the couple has established an illegal dwelling for paperless refugees in Samuel's grandmother's house, resulting in the devastation of the house in a fire.

   After visiting his grandmother in her retirement home, Samuel crashes into a tree and dies. In the end, the grandmother reveals that she believed Vandad – whom she had never met, and whose gender she was una-ware of – was Samuel's lover. The hard-boiled and now imprisoned Vandad vehemently denies this, and the reader is faced with the choice of whom to trust. Moreover, it remains unclear throughout the novel whether Samuel's death was an accident or a suicide. The narrative technique of the novel is original: The people close to Samuel are interviewed by the main, intradiegetic narrator, an author apparently seeking the true story of the events. For the bulk of the novel, the narrator stays in the background, distributing the narration to his interviewees. Thus, utterances from different speakers are cross-cut and the speakers themselves are normally left unintroduced. The discourse of this novel is thus polyphonic, following Mikhail Bakhtin's clas-sical definition of this phenomenon as a narrative with "[*a*] *plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses*" where the characters are "*not only objects of authorial discourse but also subjects of their own directly signifying discourse*" (Bakhtin, 1984, pp. 6–7). Khemiri lets each character make sense of Samuel's life and death in his or her own way.

   Histoire de la violence is Louis' second novel and depicts the traumatic experience of rape. The main char-acter and first-person narrator, Édouard, brings Reda, a young man of Kabylian descent, home with him on Christmas Eve. At first, the two men make love, but when Édouard accuses Reda of trying to steal his cell phone, Reda rapes him and threatens to murder him. Similar to how the story of Samuel is filtered through the many narrators in Khemiri's novel, much of the narration in Louis' novel is distributed to Édouard's sister. Édouard surreptitiously listens to her telling her husband the story, interspersing the discourse with his own memories of the night in question as well as stories from his childhood. Here, too, a conflict over the meaning of the rape, of Édouard's actions and his life and that of those around him arises through the distributed narration and the intertwined life stories.

   Thanks to the subject matter of their books, as well as their public personae, both authors have encoun-tered a popular and academic reception focusing on their representation of minorities. According to literary scholar Magnus Nilsson, Khemiri represents one of several contemporary Swedish writers whose work is read as *a literature of identity politics*, which he defines thus: "literary texts by authors with 'exotic ethnic identities' are regarded as expressions of – and demonstrations of an effort to validate – these exact identi-ties …".[1] Already in his debut novel, *Ett* öga *rött* (*One Eye Red*), however, Khemiri parodies the idea of ethnic authenticity through the unreliable narrator Halim (Nilsson, 2010, p. 108). One might therefore claim that instead of assuming that Khemiri is out to *represent* members of a clearly defined identity category, one might more usefully analyse how his novels explore the ways in which identity and attachments between people are formed and de-formed.

   The reception of Louis' debut novel, *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule*, offers a similar problem. As Norwegian scholars Kjerstin Aukrust and Kristian L. Sandberg remark, there is a tension in parts of the reception between an identity-political viewpoint, praising Louis' honest depiction of homophobia in the French working-class, and a Marxist critique of what some perceive as a contemptuous depiction of that class (Aukrust & Sandberg, 2018, p. 142). Thus, while Louis is generally lauded as an important new voice in French literature, there is definitely a more derisive counter current. German scholar Markus A. Lenz's comparative analysis of *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule* and *Retour à Reims* by Louis' close friend Didier Eribon provides an example of a Marxist critique concluding on a moralising and paternalistic note:

> A comparison of these works is possibly unfair to the extent that analytic distance from a man in his
> late twenties, an absolutely necessary reconciliation with his environment of origin, including his par-
> ents, can be anticipated just as little as the clear historical perception of the experienced sociologist.[2]

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[1] My translation from Swedish: "… litterära texter av författare med 'exotiska etniska identiteter' betraktas som uttryck för – och manifestationer av en strävan efter erkännande av – just dessa identiteter … " (Nilsson, 2010, p. 26).

[2] My translation from German: "Möglicherweise ist ein Vergleich beider Werke insofern ungerecht, als eine analytische Distan-

Lenz thus simplistically equates Eddy the character and Édouard Louis the author, while also misreading key aspects of the novel. For example, he claims that the novel leaves it unclear whether or not the protagonist continued to be the victim of homophobia after moving away from the small town to pursue upper secondary education (2019, p. 173). On the contrary, however, *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule* concludes with a homophobic remark addressed to Eddy by one of his new schoolmates. Moreover, Louis was 22 when his first novel was published, not in his late twenties. Such inaccuracies arguably demonstrate the pitfalls of readings that start from predefined social categories such as class, ethnicity, and sexuality, and equally predefined ideas of how such categories should be represented. And is not the call for a more positive depiction of the working class also its own form of identity politics?

Contrary to the identity political perspective, this article focuses on the processes in which identities and relations are formed and de-formed. Both novels provide striking, polyphonic accounts of modern Western European countries, and one might well claim that the societies Khemiri and Louis describe form part of what sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has called a liquid modernity, where "little is predetermined, even less irrevocable" (Bauman, 2000, p. 62). In other words, assuming which societal group either author should "validate", and how, entails begging a whole series of questions. As the analysis below will demonstrate, the striking aspect of these novels is not how they produce unambiguously positive or negative images of certain groups in society. Rather, they give fascinating accounts of how different people interact, one moment feeling solidarity, love, and friendship towards one another, and scepticism, fear, or hate the next.

Assembling Affective Relations

To capture these processes of changing relations and perceptions, the analysis will build on affect theory. Referring mainly to the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Canadian philosopher Brian Massumi equates affect with *intensity* (Massumi, 2002, p. 27). Affect is distinguished from emotion in that the former is embodied, unqualified and autonomic, whereas the latter is encoded in language, and thus frozen in a linguistic structure, so to speak. This approach contrasts with models of cultural theory that presuppose social structures in that it draws attention to the processes of change that necessarily precede such structures. Or, as Massumi puts it, categories such as gender, race and sexual orientation "have ontological privilege in the sense that they constitute the field of emergence, while positionings are what emerge" (ibid., p. 8). Looking for affects, then, means paying attention to *events*, understood as "the collapse of structured distinction into intensity, of rules into paradox" (ibid., p. 27).

Moreover, American gender and postcolonial scholar Jasbir Puar (2012) convincingly argues that this represents an alternative to – though not necessarily a replacement of –feminist intersectionality theory. Puar brings in another concept from Deleuze and Guattari, namely *agencement*, which in English can be translated as both *assemblage* and *arrangement*. Guattari refers to this as "a conceptual chemistry distinct from any axiomatic idea" (2009, p. 24), and uses concepts of class as an example. Such concepts become unclear once one pays attention to the many intersections between groups. Guattari states that the idea of assemblage is useful in this context, "because it shows that social entities are not made up of bipolar oppositions. Complex arrangements place parameters like race, sex, age nationality, etc., into relief. Interactive crossings imply other kinds of logic than two-by-two class oppositions" (ibid., p. 26). As social theorist Manuel DeLanda explains: "The identity of any assemblage at any level of scale is always the product of a process (territorialization and, in some cases, coding) and it is always precarious, since other processes (deterritorialization and decoding) can destabilize it" (2006, p. 28).

From this line of thought, Puar develops an alternative to the assumption that "representation and its recognized subjects, is the dominant, primary, or most efficacious platform of political intervention", simultaneously criticising how "the complexity of process is continually mistaken for a resultant product" (2012, p. 50). Thus, she considers identity categories as being affectively formed; they are "events, actions, and encounters between bodies, rather than simply entities and attributes of subjects" (ibid., p. 58). Hence, the very categories representational theories take for granted are "secondary and derived" back-formations (Massumi, 2002, p. 8). Identity categories result from practices that could also be understood *as* practices involving affective relations between individuals.

As mentioned, Cavarero's theory of storytelling and selfhood provides a useful bridge between affect theory and the analysis of polyphonic narratives. In her view, every human being is a *who*, a unique self constantly exposed to others in community, whose existence is dependent on there being someone else

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zierung von einem End-Zwanziger, eine dringend notwendige Versöhnung mit dem eigenen Herkunftsmilieu, auch mit den Eltern, ebenso wenig wie der historische Scharfblick des erfahrenen Soziologen erwartet werden kann … " (2019, p. 177).

to whom the individual appears (Cavarero, 2000, p. 89). Furthermore, she cites Bonnie Honig's claim that "'identity is not the expressive condition or the essence of action, but rather its product'" (Cavarero, 2000, p. 23). In Cavarero's view too, then, an identity is not a pre-existing category to be defined in philosophical language, but something that appears, unfolding over time in relations between people. It is not a question of the individual's internal core, but of what in a Deleuzian/Guattarian framework could be called "relations of exteriority" (cf. DeLanda, 2006, p. 10). This also means that "who" someone is, depends on whom the individual appears to, which has implications for how one can interpret an individual's story.

To Cavarero, the *who* as unique and unrepeatable is opposed to the *what*, i.e., a definition placing the individual in a universal category. Here, the myth of Oedipus and the Sphinx serves as an example: Oedipus knows *what* he is, a part of the category "Man", but his tragedy consists in his ignorance of *who* he is – revealed to him in the story of someone else, namely the blind Teiresias (Cavarero, 2000, pp. 9–13). While philosophy is the discourse of the *what*, storytelling is the discourse of the *who*; "[n]arration," writes Cavarero, quoting Arendt, "is a delicate art – narration 'reveals the meaning without committing the error of defining it'" (ibid., p. 3). An individual cannot himself reveal who he is, because one cannot appear to oneself, nor can he regard his life retrospectively after his own death. This impossibility of knowing oneself autobiographically is at the core of the "paradox of Ulysses." The meaning of the actions that reveal someone, their unwritten life story, can only be constructed by someone else, in their absence (ibid., p. 137). Thus, identity can only arise after the fact of the actions, as they are retrospectively narrated by another.

Importantly, when a narrator is telling someone's story, revealing their *who* by providing actions with meaning, the narrator also reveals him- or herself (Cavarero, 2000, pp. 12, 76). This implies that one person's narration of someone else's actions is also an *act* which the reader rends meaningful in a further act of interpretation and hence narration (ibid., p. 124). These relations, between narrator, narrated, and narratee are therefore assemblages in their own right. In the novels in question, these assemblages constantly change: Who tells the story, about and for whom is it told, and whom is the reader most likely to believe? The answers to these questions change incessantly. This is a question of politics, not the least because it forces us to look past universals – what someone is: straight, gay, native, immigrant – and instead pay attention to *who* someone is or potentially can be in relation to others.

Who's in a Name?

The narration of *Everything I Don't Remember* consists almost entirely of responses given by those close to the deceased Samuel, at the request of the main narrator. However, the reader never gets to see his questions. At times, this has a curious effect, such as when Samuel's mother answers a series of numbered questions by e-mail: "7. Yes. Without a doubt. Who said otherwise?"[3] (2016b, p. 29). It is up to the reader to fill such gaps in the discourse, and so she is constantly forced to participate in the construction of meaning. However, in the third and final part of the novel, the main narrator mixes his own story with those of the others, revealing that his motivation for writing the novel is an attempt to cope with the loss of a friend of his own.

The first piece of text places the main narrator in relation to Samuel's life: "The neighbor sticks his head up over the hedge and asks who I am and what I'm doing here"[4] (2016b, p. 3). The question, posed by a neighbour of Samuel's grandmother, is in the first place a synecdochical depiction of environment and character. The son of a Swedish mother and a North-African father, Samuel has grown up in a petit-bourgeois suburb of Stockholm, where privacy is guarded behind taut hedges. Here, people mind their own business, a *leitmotif* in the description of Swedish society in the novel. Perhaps as importantly, however, the neighbour's question seemingly remains unanswered. As Cavarero points out, "everyone responds immediately to the question '*who* are you?' by pronouncing the proper name, even if a thousand others can respond with the same name" (2000, p. 18). The point is that while the proper name is not unique, it is a sign of the individual's uniqueness. However, the narrator does not reveal his proper name to the reader. The question is left hanging, indicating that the identity of this narrating *I*, almost imperceptibly delegating the narration to everyone else, is also a central issue in the novel. While his name remains a secret, his doings are revealed through the selection and presentation of the voices of others.

Furthermore, the importance of proper names is signalled by the novel's epigraph, the chorus from a Rihanna hit song: "*Oh na na what's my name?*" Since the song is a duet between Rihanna and her former

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[3] "7. Ja. Utan tvekan. Vem har påstått något annat?" (2016a, p. 39).
[4] "Grannen sticker upp huvudet bakom häcken och frågar vem jag är och vad jag gör här" (2016a, p. 11).

boyfriend Drake, this is connected to love. Indeed, one might regard it as an allusion to "the love that dare not speak its name", Lord Alfred Douglas's famous metaphor for love between men (cf. Douglas, 1990 [1894]).[5] The novel is saturated with the problem of properly naming people, relations, and events, something which is especially prevalent in the narration of Vandad, the focus of the following analysis.

The parts narrated by Vandad betray a conflict between him and the narrator. The latter apparently wants Vandad to speed up his tale, in order to focus on Samuel's death. But Vandad prioritises describing his friendship with Samuel in rich and elaborate detail. This represents his attempt at controlling the narrative: "… everything I've told you up to now plays an important role in what happens later on"[6] (2016b, p. 71). Moreover, this underlines how someone who seems to play a secondary role in reality ends up taking most of the space; the narrator's account of someone else also entails the narrator revealing *himself*. Vandad's attention to detail also indicates how someone's life cannot be reduced to simple facts, to an enumeration of *whats*, but is in need of a story in which everything plays a role.

Samuel's grandmother's neighbour advises the main narrator to keep it simple, and to tell "what happened – no frills"[7] (2016b, p. 14). In contrast to this naïve belief in mimetic representation, Samuel is characterised by an extremely unreliable memory. While able to remember enormous amounts of seemingly useless trivia, he quickly forgets events from his own life. As Vandad meets Samuel for the first time at a party, Samuel instantly associates Vandad's name with an obscure Persian chief. This recognition and the ensuing conversations practically *reshape* Vandad:

> We never brought up jobs, addresses, or backgrounds. … Mostly Samuel was the one doing the talking, and I listened. But when the girl whose party it was came into the kitchen and saw us standing there, super deep in conversation, it was as if she started seeing me in a different light. I liked the way she was looking at me[8] (2016b, p. 12).

Vandad's proper name, then, is also important, as it facilitates the assemblage of him and Samuel. Importantly, the conversation with Samuel is one of the rare occasions where he feels acknowledged. As Christian M. Gullette notes (2018, p. 108), several of Khemiri's characters in other novels identify with historical figures from the Middle East. Here, this assemblage with Samuel means that Vandad is no longer only the dark-skinned and daunting presence the white partygoers perceive him as. Indeed, the nascent friendship with Samuel makes him realise other capacities and develop into a different person.

The Imprecision of Emotions

The two young men move in together and fill their lives with parties, computer games, and cheap dinners. However, this comes to an end when Samuel falls in love with the sophisticated Laide. Her name, too, a nickname for "Adelaide", is important. It has obvious ironic connotations in the French-speaking world, something she comments upon herself, having worked in Brussels and living in Paris in the present of the novel (Khemiri, 2016b, p. 155). This francophone connection also creates a bond between her and Samuel, the son of an immigrant from the old French colonies of North Africa.

Vandad is jealous of Laide. His friendship with Samuel has helped him cope with the loss of his younger brother, killed in a car accident several years earlier. But when Samuel only prioritises his girlfriend, Vandad has trouble sleeping, which in turn jeopardises his job. On her part, Laide is unable to trust Samuel, and eventually breaks up with him. Ironically, it is the untrusting Laide who breaks the most important promise between them by failing to keep the makeshift refugee centre in his grandmother's house a secret. The act of allowing anyone who asks to stay there is the indirect cause for the devastating fire that troubles Samuel's relation with his family – which *may* have led to his possible suicide. The novel thus suggests that Laide feels guilty for Samuel's death.

Vandad's reaction to the death of his friend is illustrative of how his appearance reveals his being – and this being must be understood in relation to Samuel. Just before Samuel's death, Vandad has obtained a

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[5] Using symbolic lyrics from pop songs to make the reader question the truth of what the novel represents is common in Khemiri's work, e.g. in his second novel (Karlsson, 2014, p. 32). It is perhaps also relevant that Rihanna could be considered a icon in the gay community.

[6] "… allt som jag har berättat hittils spelar en viktig roll i det som kommer hända sen" (2016a, p. 82).

[7] "vad som hände – rakt upp och ned" (2016a, p. 23).

[8] "Vi nämnde aldrig job, addresser eller bakgrunder. … Mest var det Samuel som pratade och jag som lyssnade. Men när hon som hade festen kom in i köket och såg oss stå där i värsta djupa samtalet så var det som om hennes sätt att se mig på byttes ut. Jag tyckte om hennes blick" (2016a, p. 21).

new job as the driver of a sightseeing train. "The train looked like a toy train but it went on tires instead of rails and it had a steering wheel and a stick shift, just like a bus"[9] (2016b, p. 289). His new job thus connotes something childish, far removed from his tough-guy image. The train is not a real train, symbolically underlining how Vandad is not his old self, having at this point lost contact with Samuel.

It is Samuel's friend Panther, a female artist living in Berlin, who calls Vandad and tells him that their friend has apparently collided with a tree in Stockholm. About to set off with a group of tourists, Vandad instead speeds through the streets of the Swedish capital to reach the crash site. Even this, he describes in detail: "… the pre-recorded guide voice kept speaking as if we were headed back to Skansen. As we passed the pool hall in Zinkensdamm the guide voice said, 'To the left we can catch a glimpse of the famous restaurant where the Swedish Academy have their weekly meetings' …"[10] (2016b, p. 296). Given the content of the story, Vandad's attention to detail produces a bizarre impression, underlining the insufficiency of linguistic categories, an effect that is heightened when he reaches the site of the collision. There, Samuel's body has already been removed, and Vandad squats next to the wreck. A stranger sits down next to him to try and comfort him, but Vandad is unable to answer – the grief he feels cannot be put into words. This is how he describes the scene to the main narrator:

> It felt good to have his arm there, I felt his warmth, smelled his sweat smell, in the background I heard the guide voice starting over, the actor's voice welcoming the tourists to this guided tour and when the train was meant to be crossing the Djurgården bridge instead of sitting at the edge of the road in Solberga, the voice said 'Stockholm. Look at her. Isn't she beautiful'[11] (2016b, p. 298).

The contrast between the staccato imperative of the taped voice and Vandad's description seems grotesque. However, while the word "beautiful" is seemingly inappropriate, it could nevertheless describe Vandad's grief and his love towards his lost friend. Vandad's love for Samuel never appears in verbal categories, in *whats*, but exclusively in the affects and constantly shape-shifting relation between them. This assemblage continues even after Samuel's death, as Vandad retrospectively reveals the meaning of Samuel's life to him. However, the meaning of his own actions remains invisible to Vandad himself, to the majority of the characters of the novel, and to the reader. Conceptualised emotions, the novel seems to say, merely amount to a tenuous and imprecise verbalisation of affects.

A Genderless Love Story
The point where the story reaches Samuel's death is also the point where Vandad starts losing control of his tale. As their relationship is no longer confined to their shared flat, but is rather something Vandad exposes to an audience at the crash site, his autobiography turns into a *biography*, an account perceived from the outside. Admittedly, his inability to fully control the story is signalled several times in the discourse, as his richness of detail sometimes forces him to pause and rewind:

> Sometimes when I walk into the bathroom in the morning and see his toothbrush beside mine I think that we have grown awfully close in an awfully short amount of time. That this closeness is – Delete that. Delete all of that. Just write that the rest of the year is like a stroboscopic slideshow of rumbling basslines, clinking glasses, nods at people we don't know but recognize, sticky dance floors, rubber coat-check tags in my back pocket …[12] (2016b, p. 72).

Vandad here gets carried away and almost loses control of his story. Note, for example, the stylistic virtuosity in his speech. On the one hand, this underlines his development from a marginalised, taciturn second-gener-

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[9] "Tåget såg typ ut som ett leksakståg, men det gick på bildäck istället för på räls och hade en ratt och växselspak, precis som en buss" (2016a, p. 313).

[10] "… den förinspelade guiderösten fortsatte som om vi var på väg tillbaka mot Skansen. När vi passerade biljardhallen vid Zinken sa guiderösten: 'To the left we can catch a glimpse of the famous restaurant where the Swedish Academy have their weekly meetings' …" (2016a, p. 320).

[11] Det kändes bra med hans arm där, jag kände hans värme, hans svettlukt, i bakgrunden hörde jag guiderösten som startade om på nytt, skådespelarrösten välkomnade turisterna till denna guidade tur och när tåget borde ha korsat Djurgårdsbron istället för att stå vid vägkanten i Solberga sa rösten: 'Stockholm. Look at her. Isn't she beautiful?' (2016a, p. 323).

[12] "Ibland när jag kommer ut i badrummet på morgonen och ser hans tandborste stå bredvid min tänker jag att vi har kommit väldigt nära varandra på väldigt kort tid. Att den her närheten är. Stryk det. Stryk allt det. Skriv bara att resten av året är som en stroboskopisk slideshow av mullrande basgångar, skålade glas, nickningar mot folk som vi inte känner men känner igen, klibbiga dansgolv, gummigarderobsbrickor i bakfickan …" (2016a, pp. 83–84).

ation immigrant to someone who, because of his acknowledgement by Samuel, believes that his story is worthy of interest. On the other hand, one could read this as a play with narrator reliability, typical of Khemiri: Given how Vandad is portrayed, can we believe in his eloquence, or is this rather the main narrator's choice of words? In the latter case, Vandad's language could be seen as a reminder that literary language is invented and artistic, just in the same way the sociolect of Khemiri's other ethnic minority characters is a literary device (cf. Myhr, 2018, p. 84). Whatever the case, the potential transgression of a heteronormative boundary of masculinity, revealed here by the toothbrushes as a symbol of living as a couple, breaks off into a hectic listing of activities proper to bachelors. This, then, does not imply that Vandad is "really" in the closet, but that he strives to avoid being defined as a man who loves another man, a definition that would force him into a *what* at odds with his heteronormative performance.

Here, Arendt's distinction between self-*presentation* and self-*display* is relevant. While the former consists in "the active and conscious choice of the image shown", the latter "has no choice but to show whatever properties a living being possesses" (1981, p. 36). As Vandad is invited to account for Samuel's life, his conscious presentation gives way to a nostalgic, emotional tale, describing their shared life in great detail, slowly homing in on words that must remain unspeakable lest Vandad reveal more than he wants. His account, therefore, is defined by being surrounded by other, exhorting and contesting utterances; its capacity for meaning, one might say, is defined in terms of its relations to the *assemblage* represented by the visible as well as the hidden utterances of other characters. In this way, it is political in Cavarero's sense as it shows how one's *who* appears in constant, affective interplay with others, troubling any easy group identification.

The constant play of authority and control in the narration culminates in the novel's conclusion, where the main narrator speaks to Samuel's grandmother. Even though her grandson is of North-African descent through his father, she is presented as xenophobic, in addition to suffering from dementia. Just as the reader's impression of Laide is subject to change, however, so the portrayal of the grandmother becomes far more nuanced in an intense part of the text where her short answers are cross-cut with Vandad's objections (to increase readability, the latter are italicised in the following):

> 'Is Vandad a man or a woman?' Samuel's grandma asks.
>   'A man.'
>   ''Well, look at that,' said the optician to the fly.'
>   *
>   …
> 'But I'm sure Samuel talked a lot about Laide, too?' I ask.
>   'Who?'
>   *
> *But it was never anything more than friendship.*
>   *
> 'Vandad,' she says again. 'Samuel went on and on about that Vandad. And the way he said that name, I knew it was something more than friendship. You can't hide that sort of thing. Not from your grandma.'
>   *
> *You can decide for yourself who to believe — me or an old lady. The guy with a photographic memory or the woman who can barely remember her own name.*
>   *
>   …
> 'I think he loved him.'[13]
>
> (2016b, pp. 304–305).

At this revelatory point in the novel, the paradox of Ulysses comes to the fore. While Vandad's actions, the way he appears, stay the same as such, their *meaning* changes according to who is narrating them (cf. Cavarero,

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[13] − Är Vandad en man eller en kvinna? frågar Samuels mormor. − En man. − Ser man på, sa optikern till flugan. * … − Men Samuel pratade väl ganska mycket om Laide också? frågar jag. − Vem? * *Men det var aldrig något mer än vänskap.* * − Vandad, säger hon igen. Samuel pratade jämt om den där Vandad. Och han sa namnet på ett sätt som gjorde att jag förstod att han var något annat än bara en vän. Sånt där går ju inte att dölja. Inte för sin mormor. * *Du väljer själv vem du ska lita på − mig eller en gammal tant. Jag som har fotografiskt minne eller hon som knappt minns sitt namn.* * … − Jag tror han älskade honom (2016a, pp. 330−331). A more apt translation of the Swedish "lita på" would be "trust"—trustworthiness, not choosing whether to believe Vandad, is the issue here.

2000, p. 12). His objection concerning grandmother's memory is a rhetorical decoy, hiding the fact that at stake here is not what he remembers, but what he is willing to admit – the irony also being that his memory has revealed itself as far from photographic.

Suffering from dementia, cut off from quotidian dealings, and placed in a retirement home, grandmother has a different vantage point, allowing her to interpret Samuel's talk of Vandad in a different way. Her question of Vandad's gender is related to his *name*, harking back to the Rihanna quote opening the novel. She does not know *what* is in the name of Vandad – a man or a woman – but she is aware of *whom* it refers to: A person about whom Samuel could not stop talking, telling stories, as an expression of his love.

Thus, grandmother comes across as a variation on the blind seer, Teiresias, who is not witness to the actions as they unfold, but "sees, with his blind eyes, the story that results from these actions – because this story is present to him in the invisible form of memory" (Cavarero, 2000, p. 25). Furthermore, "the blindness of the poet comes to underline the necessity of the *lack of relation* [*l'irrelazione*] on the narrative scene" (ibid., p. 99). Death is the ultimate form of irrelation; Samuel cannot be presented with his story. But Vandad can be presented with his own, and with the completed, unchangeable story of his deceased friend.

The meaning constructed through the story of Samuel's and Vandad's relation, then, is love, but as an action and not as a category. The main narrator reveals that he started interviewing Samuel's acquaintances after giving up on another project entitled "*The Genderless Love Story*"[14] (2016b, p. 290). The book he ends up writing is thus a true genderless love story, even more so because the relationship between Samuel and Vandad is not pushed into the box of "homosexuality". In fact, during his friendship with Vandad Samuel tried to define what love is, by walking up to strangers in bars asking for their take on the question. The annoyed Vandad finally provided the following definition: "Love is when things that are chill get extra chill because the person you're with is so chill" (2016b, p. 82). Samuel, then, is looking to define a *noun*, a philosophical category against which he can measure his own relations. However, the particular relation of love is rather an assemblage, which is more fundamental than the concept that can only inaccurately describe it. By contrast with Samuel's question, Vandad's definition focuses on relation and process: love has no meaning outside of a relation where a situation gets, i.e., *becomes* "extra chill."[15]

Assembling Memories

Arguably even more troubled kinds of love are at stake in Louis' *Histoire de la violence*. Already the first paragraph establishes two of the main problems to be explored in the novel, as the main narrator, Édouard, listens to his sister Clara telling the story of his rape and attempted murder to her husband, who are both unaware of him listening:

> Je suis caché de l'autre côté de la porte, je l'écoute, elle dit que quelques heures après ce que la copie de plainte que je garde pliée en quatre dans un tiroir appelle *tentative d'homicide*, et que je continue d'appeler comme ça, faute d'autre mot, parce qu'il n'y a pas de terme plus approprié à ce qui est arrivé et qu'à cause de ça je traîne la sensation pénible et désagréable qu'aussitôt qu'énoncée, par moi ou n'importe qui d'autre, mon histoire est falsifiée, je suis sorti de chez moi et j'ai descendu l'escalier (2016, p. 9).

The first problem is, again, that of the paradox of Ulysses. Like Teiresias and the grandmother, Clara has not seen the events she narrates. But the paradox is doubled, because Clara and her husband are likewise unaware of Édouard listening. Both parties are "blind" to each other, and while Clara reveals Édouard's story, Édouard's story in turn reveals meaningful assemblages between the people figuring in it. The second problem is Édouard's feeling that the act of telling, of reducing the events to words, renders the story false, invalid, and distorted – all of which are connotations of the French *falsifier*. The novel is thus an attempt to gain control, to define the *meaning* of the events for himself. It will, however, prove to be a meaning that can be sought, encircled, and modified, but never reached.

The opening paragraph bewilders the reader with its parataxis and changing temporalities. We encounter Édouard almost a year after the event in question, where the long sentence presents us first with his anxious feeling due to the impropriety of the way the story is told, before jumping analeptically back to the reaction

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[14] "*Den könlösa kärlekshistorien*" (2016a, p. 313). Gullette (2018, p. 112) misreads this part of the novel by assuming that *Pantern* is the one working on the abandoned novel.

[15] The Swedish reads: "Kärlek är när det som är soft blir extra soft för att personen som du er med är så pass soft" (2016a, p. 94). "Blir" carries a strong connotation of becoming.

immediately after the "*tentative d'homicide*". As in *Everything I Don't Remember*, the problem of hearing one's story told by someone else generates unlikely and affective relations across time and space. The spatiotemporal distance between the intellectual Parisian Édouard and his sister who has stayed behind in proletarian Picardie is one such relation, here rendered in Clara's direct speech: "… alors j'ai répété à ma mère que j'avais dit à Édouard: T'aurais au moins pu essayer, c'est pas difficile bordel t'aurais pu le faire, t'aurais pu m'appeler ce jour-là" (2016, pp. 14–15). The act of horizontally distributing the narration to Clara means that her understanding of the events nuances and at times contests that of Édouard. Throughout the novel, the story is either told by Édouard, entirely distributed to Clara, or distributed to her with Édouard's tacit, interjected objections in italics: "Il parlait avec Reda de ses origines arabes *(elle se trompe, il n'était pas arabe)* …" (2016, p. 84). This contributes to the temporal shifting noted above, while also underlining the social and emotional distance between Édouard and the family from which he is now estranged.

The narrative organization of this novel, as well as the relations between the characters, illustrates several of Cavarero's claims regarding storytelling and selfhood. In this family, women do the emotional labour of not only relaying news but also using the stories of others to bring about reconciliation. Édouard notes several times, with wonder, how Clara's husband remains completely quiet during her story. Here, then, is a point in common between Clara and the grandmother in *Everything I Don't Remember*, since women in both cases are verbalising their experiences from the vantage point of an outside spectator, a verbalisation which in turn affects the selfhood of the person narrated. From a Cavarerian standpoint, this is crucial because "women are usually the ones who tell life-stories" (Cavarero, 2000, p. 54). To her, a care for the particular, accidental, and unique is a contrast to the masculinist discourse of the universal. In this way, one could regard the telling of life stories as a "womanly" form of understanding, counteracting the suppression of relation, process, and uniqueness in the way an individual appears. In both novels, women represent the paradox of Ulysses, but these are also "unlearned" women, excluded from philosophic or high literary discourse. The role accorded to these female tellers has political implications since, based on Cavarero's feminist analysis, they make visible the suppression of particularity occasioned by masculine philosophical discourse – a suppression also found in the identity political readings of the authors, as discussed above.

While Clara is first established as the "Teiresias" of the novel, Édouard in turn becomes the blind spectator of Clara's tale in an act of silent listening synecdochically representing his (felt) exclusion from his biological family. His thoughts and objections are not vocalised and can do nothing in the actual situation to correct what he perceives as mistakes or lies in Clara's narration. He no longer takes part in their language, depicted as a broad sociolect in contrast with his learned Parisian vocabulary. Nevertheless, he is still *affected* by their language, culture, and understanding.

Moreover, Édouard's ability to be affected by the actions of another is also one of the reasons why he lets Reda into his apartment. Chronologically speaking, the story begins as Reda approaches him on the street, and while Édouard is reluctant at first he yields as the former persists: "… peut-être qu'il avait décélé la faille dans ma voix et dans mon regard fuyant, ce rien qu'il fallait pour me faire dire oui, ce geste microscopique qu'il aurait fallu pour me faire capituler, basculer …" (2016, p. 59). Édouard and Reda here form an unlikely assemblage, indicating the troubled solidarity between them that will constitute an ethical problem for Édouard in his reporting the subsequent rape and attempted murder to the police. Affects, small changes in intensity apparent in nonverbal gestures, are Reda's way of entering into Édouard's life.

However, their relation abruptly changes when Édouard comments that his phone is missing. When Reda feels accused of having stolen it – a crime of which he is in fact guilty – he attacks his host. Even though their brawl is interspersed with periods of calm conversation, Reda both rapes and almost strangles Édouard before leaving. Édouard's initial reluctance to seek police and medical help is explained by several factors. Fear plays a role, but so does an understanding of the way Reda is and will be positioned by society. This prefigures an anti-racist critique of the judiciary system, which will be commented upon below. He even excuses Reda for his use of homophobic slurs during the violence: "*Il desire et il déteste son désir. Maintenant il veut se justifier de ce qu'il a fait avec toi. Il veut te faire payer son désir*" (2016, pp. 137–138). Thus, Reda's characterization as dark-skinned, threatening, and unwilling to admit to same-sex desire places him in an analogous position to Vandad in Khemiri's novel. But where the meaning of Vandad's actions is revealed retrospectively to him by grandmother, Reda's actions are only analysed by Édouard as they occur: "*Il veut se faire croire que ce n'était pas parce qu'il te désirait que vous avez fait tout ce que vous avez fait … que vous n'avez pas fait l'amour, mais qu'il te volait déjà*" (ibid., p. 138). The more Olympic, authoritative view from the first-person narrator in Louis' novel at once shows the way in which someone appears to another, as Reda to Édouard, and the futile difficulty of finding a language to make one's story of an other known to that person.

Narration versus Epistemic Violence

In this light, the novel could be regarded as an attempt to narrate life stories that offer a redeeming function in creating unexpected assemblages. This, of course, is a potentially political move, in Guattari's sense of an opportunity to create more complex and interactive cartographies (Guattari, 2009, pp. 26, and cf. above). For in addition to delegating the narration to Clara, Édouard also refers to Reda's story of *his* father, in indirect speech. Reda's father arrived as a refugee from Kabylia, facing the challenge of recreating himself under harsh conditions in France. This causes another affective assemblage, where Édouard empathises also with Reda's father: "Il avait dû penser qu'en partant il pourrait se défaire de son passé, … que sans passé, sans histoire et donc sans honte, il aurait pu prendre toutes les allures et toutes les poses qu'on veut prendre secrètement mais qu'on réprime …" (2016, p. 66). Such self-styling is exactly what Édouard has attempted, in order to gain distance from his place of origin, and therefore provides a reason for identification.

This is followed by yet another affective turn, that of Édouard's sudden memory of the outcast Ordive as Reda tells the story of his father: "… les images d'Ordive me sont venues à la tête, je ne contrôle pas le flux des souvenirs qui réapparaissent quand on me parle …" (2016, p. 71). Ordive is despised in her and Édouard's hometown Hallencourt for two unrelated reasons: She was allegedly a prostitute for a German soldier during the war, and people blame her for the death of her granddaughter. This is gossip, another example of unphilosophical storytelling often associated with women (cf. Spacks, 1982). While Édouard earlier joined the rest of the town in despising her, he is now more understanding: "… les personnes détestées finissent toujours par être détestables, c'est connu" (2016, p. 75). Like the adages of Samuel's grandmother, the proverbial tone of Édouard's view of Ordive carries great implications. It creates affective interrelations between Édouard, Reda, Reda's father, and the *deplorables* of Hallencourt.

However, this is not a question of voicing the concerns of one group over the other. On the contrary, because the people of Hallencourt are depicted as nationalist and homophobic, and Reda as violent, empathy and identification are always troubled. As Cavarero notes, "The stories that result from the self-exhibiting of unique beings within a plural scene are already inextricably interwoven with one another" (2000, p. 124). The intermingling of these stories therefore represents *events*, in Massumi's understanding as "the collapse of structured dimension into intensity, of rules into paradox" (2002, p. 27). Thus, it is not a question of either belonging or not to a group. Rather, belonging is an event, uncontrolled, changing the field of virtuality again and again. By depicting these troubled relations, the novel shows violence as a *process* occasioning empathy as well as abjection. As literary scholar Adriana Margareta Dancus notes, commenting on the ways in which Édouard identifies with Reda: "A fantasmatic gratification emerges as the author fabricates a story for his rapist, a story with which he can paradoxically identify" (2020, p. 12). But at the same time, this fabrication is precarious as it in turn becomes a story told by Clara and potentially everyone else to whom Édouard appears.

As in *Everything I Don't Remember*, the waxing and waning consideration for the other is difficult to verbalise, even more so as defining the other as a certain *kind* of other ("what") arguably is the opposite of taking their uniqueness ("who") into account. Moreover, the question of what society considers politically legitimate utterances is thus a question of how they are framed – of the hermeneutic vantage point of the interpreter. Clara's account in *Histoire de la violence* is characterised by her distance towards her brother and his inexplicable reluctance to act during and after the encounter with Reda. Likewise, Édouard's sudden understanding of Ordive hinges on a similar distance, the ability to affectively relate past experiences from Hallencourt with those of Reda. A similar point can be made with respect to Vandad's desperate journey to the crash site, which only reads as an expression of more than friendly love after the grandmother has presented her interpretation.

As Puar notes, many identity categories "are the products of modernist colonial agendas and regimes of epistemic violence, operative through a Western/Euro-American epistemological formation through which the notion of discrete identity has emerged" (2012, p. 54). "Epistemic violence" does seem like an apt term to describe the behaviour of the police officers Édouard encountered as reported by Reda:

> La copie de plainte que je garde chez moi, rédigée dans un langage policier, mentionne: *Type maghrébin*. Chaque fois que mes yeux se posent dessus ce mot m'exaspère, parce que j'y entends encore le racisme de la police pendant l'interrogatoire qui a suivi le 25 décembre, ce racisme compulsif et finalement, toutes choses considérées, ce qui me semblait être le seul élément qui les reliait entre eux … puisque pour eux *type maghrébin* n'indiquait pas une origine géographique mais voulait dire racaille, voyou, délinquant. … le policier qui était là … triomphait, il était, je ne dirais pas *très heureux*, j'exagérerais, mais il souriait, il jubilait comme si j'avais admis quelque chose qu'il voulait me faire

dire depuis mon arrivée, comme si je lui avais enfin apporté la preuve qu'il vivait du côté de la vérité depuis toujours …(Louis, 2016, p. 23).

The polyphony of the novel and the complexity of the assemblages depicted go against the language of the police which has the power to construe an ethnic term – *maghrébin* – as synonymous with juridical and racist concepts. The police are caricatured as simple and childish, triumphantly crowing the words that confirm their racist assumptions, the only affective bond that unites them. A police examination is in principle an institutional frame that represents the search for truth – "du côté de la verité" – similar to the main narrator's journalistic project in *Everything I Don't Remember*. As we have seen, however, both novels privilege the idea of meaning as process rather than a "truth" reducible to simple concepts.

However, the expectation that working class-people (in the case of Louis), immigrants (Khemiri), or gay men (both) should be represented a certain way is also arguably a form of epistemic violence as it is not interested in who appears, but in what is represented. In this sense, the anti-universalism and attention to particularities in both novels is a highly political way of writing, as it lets characters and their relations appear instead of being suppressed in philosophical discourse. At the same time, this implies that one's sense of self is never one's own, but always part of an assemblage, something which, for better or worse, one is not in control of. A story cannot be retracted; the same way Vandad's repeated loss of control over his tale constitutes a *telling* speech act in its own right, Édouard realises that his story is lost to himself once it is told to others (Louis, 2016, p. 99). Taking the risk of appearing, then, is potentially hurtful, but also a necessary fundament for the political action of drawing attention to a particular story.

Interestingly, towards the end of the novel, Édouard refers to a quote from Arendt on the power of lying. Arendt claims that the capacities for lying and acting are connected in that both have the imagination as their source. Therefore, we are free to change the world and introduce something new into it. From this, Édouard concludes: "Ma guérison est venue de là. Ma guérison est venue de cette possibilité de nier la réalité" (Louis, 2016, p. 209). One could read this as a realization that lying is a type of action where truth or objectivity is not the important question, but rather the extent to which the lie makes new stories possible. Following Cavarero who, as we have seen, bases her account on Arendt, one could claim that the lie becomes part of the life story. It is a way of introducing something new into the world, a way of appearing, and represents an opportunity to become a new "who" for someone else.

Édouard creates new meanings by relating the stories of people such as Reda's father and Ordive. "Relating" should here be taken in the double sense of *telling* and *creating relations*, i.e., using these stories in new assemblages. In the same way, Édouard exposes his own appearance by relating it through the unphilosophical, who-focused narration of his sister. This could be regarded as an attempt to regain control of his story, but also as a way of highlighting the impossibility of controlling a life story which only exists in the extent to which it is constantly exposed to others.

Concluding Remarks

The above reading has sought to demonstrate how the novels portray identity as *process*. Any settled identities and alliances slip through the reader's fingers. Identity is here primarily *becoming*, always retrospectively contested and changed through the paradox of Ulysses. Both novels represent a toilsome work of memory, remembrance, and piecing together meaning from events of which the characters are blind spectators. Vandad's and Samuel's relation, and the lives of Reda and Ordive, represent stories whose meanings fail to appear within a conventional framework of concepts. Arguably, the process of encircling, the unending search, is what is worthwhile because it forces the reader to partake in the creation of meaning. For this reason, pre-formed categories such as sexuality, gender, and ethnicity fail to aptly describe the processes going on. Instead, these novels, as protracted, polyphonic narratives, demonstrate the impropriety of naming, revealed to be a process reducing the fullness of the *who* into a *what*.

While this analysis has paid little attention to the autofictional elements of the novels, it is nevertheless relevant that both authors tease their readers, so to speak, into questioning to what extent the stories are "real". In addition to the insecurity surrounding Samuel's life and death, there is also a question of whether the novel has anything to do with Samuel at all, or if indeed the narrator has projected his own experience onto the characters: "… not even his words could be trusted because as he neared the end he realized that every time a hole appeared in Samuel's story he had used his own memories …" (2016b, pp. 300–301). The reader is left to ponder whether the novel is a fictionalised account of Khemiri's own experiences. Louis, too, is well-known for using his own real name, and that of his friends. He has also spoken openly in interviews about the experience of rape and his reasons for writing the novel (e.g. "La grande librairie", January 7 2016).

If we consider these "epitexts," *Histoire de la violence* comes across as biographical fiction, and thus represents another "paradox of Ulysses": it tells what might be real stories concerning his family and acquaintances, who have few opportunities to object. The crucial point, however, is that such "autofictional traces" (Karlsson, 2014) can also be understood as an artistic device that fundamentally questions the possibility of controlling one's own life story.

Competing Interests
The author has no competing interests to declare.

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