I retired a few months ago, and since then I have found myself obsessively calculating how little I can, if necessary, live on. For years I've lived on a professor's salary, unconcerned about income because I was secure in the knowledge that the amount coming to me would increase in a way roughly proportionate to the cost of living. But now that my income is tied to the stock market, it can go up or down, and my new obsession seems to be a response to that new uncertainty. I don't worry: I know that it will take a genuine economic catastrophe affecting many millions of people for me to be reduced to dire straits. But the thought is with me; and I recognize in its presence the return of a sense of precariousness that I can only have picked up from my parents in the first decade of my life, during the Depression. They too were reasonably secure, although poorly paid. But they had experienced a payless payday or two and they saw the misery around them. I'm sure they never discussed their feelings with their children, but we weren't for that reason impervious to them. And here they are now, showing up a lifetime later in me. Protected as I was from the economic trauma of the 1930s, it returns in me in the form of an irrational obsession.

But to be the site of such a return, one doesn't need to have been personally exposed to an original catastrophe. It is enough for that catastrophe to have been a collective one. I've been working for some years on a book about testimonial writing as a twentieth-century genre and its place in modern culture as a vehicle of counterdenial, in relation to the collectively traumatic events that in most cultures are subject to effects of denial. My case studies concern the literature of trench warfare.
in 1914-1918 Holocaust writing—most particularly, HIV/AIDS testimonial in Western countries. In doing so, I’ve not been unaware that this work displaces my consciousness of the quite bitter debates that have arisen recently in my native Australia around the tragic history of that country’s colonial settlement and, in particular, the fate of the indigenous population as the new settlers took over the land. And so, a few years ago, I was reading the report, entitled *Bringing Them Home*, of an official inquiry into the policy that existed well into the second half of the twentieth century of forcibly taking children of mixed ancestry from their Aboriginal families and sequestering them in “boarding schools” where they were supposed to learn European (read: white) ways of thinking and behaving, the goal being to hasten the elimination, thought to be inevitable, of Aboriginal people and their cultures from Australian life. *Bringing Them Home* is full of verbatim testimony by the survivors of this cruel system, who speak of the disruption of their lives, the abuses to which they were subject in the schools, the impoverished and demeaning education they received and the mental and psychic disarray in which, as a consequence, they still find themselves. It makes painful reading. As I read, I learned that, without having known anything of this practice, which must have had something of the status of what Michael Taussig calls a “public secret” in white communities, I had in fact lived as a child within a few miles of one of the New South Wales boarding schools for Aboriginal children, and later something less than eighty or one-hundred miles from the other.

I didn’t expect, though, to be visited by Shesdy. Shesdy was a small, elderly, Koori woman who had lived, seemingly completely alone, in a tiny cottage a short distance from the schoolhouse in which my family had lived in the second of these two towns, a small farming township in the Southwest of the state. When my family moved yet again, soon after my ninth birthday, I quickly forgot Shesdy—but the evidence is that I hadn’t in fact forgotten her at all, since she now returned to me quite vividly as I recalled how we children had loved her. She must have helped my mother out with baby-sitting and other household chores, I now surmise, since the role of cheap domestic help was normal for Aboriginal women in the bush in those days. Her official name must have been Mrs. Shepherd, which itself speaks of the generation of indigenous Australians who were forced, often by being cut off from water, to “come in from the bush” and become something akin to indentured servants to the white settlers. Shesdy’s isolation in the community in which she now lived must have been intense; she appeared to have neither children, nor other kin,
nor friends. It was her isolation, I surmise, that motivated her return to my
mind after so many years and made her a figure, simultaneously met­
onymous and metaphoric, for the fate, in which I am implicated, of a whole
people.

Memory works strangely, even uncannily, when it recalls in this way
and forces us to acknowledge traumatic experience that, because it has
been socially denied, we thought we had no knowledge of. Such instances
of return draw our attention, quite forcibly, to the quite particular, and
even peculiar, conditions of traumatic aftermath, in which pain and
violence that are believed to have happened in the past and to be over turn
out not to have passed at all, but to be still present and active among us,
in forms both actual and phantom. The profound and painful injustice
from which Australia’s indigenous population historically suffered is
still being suffered materially in the conditions of existence of most
Aboriginal people today. Return memories like the visitation I received
from Sheshy, for all their psychic significance to the individual host,
aren’t simply phenomena of individual psychology; they are symptoms
of a general consciousness (a consciousness often repressed) of the
continuance of past injustice—a shared consciousness, that is, of our
being the survivors of traumatic events in the sense that we live in those
events’ continuing aftermath. And testimonial or witnessing writing,
which seeks in the presence of continuing injustice to exert on readers a
rhetorical effect comparable to that of a return memory—the effect of
recognition known in another context as anagnorisis—is similarly symp­
tomatic. It’s like a cultural reminder or wake-up call that brings home to
us the fact we would like to ignore: that we are not innocent of the past
or safe from history, but exposed to their effects.

In the West, where new treatments for HIV disease have been
available since 1996, we find ourselves in a curious situation. We aren’t
really in a situation of aftermath, since AIDS is in no sense over. People
continue to die; infection rates are rising; minority populations continue
to bear the brunt of the epidemic; the treatments themselves, even when
they are efficacious, are highly toxic and in many cases produce horren­
dous side-effects—moreover, their long-term effects are unknown and
meanwhile, because the treatment regime is complex and compliance
therefore iffy, drug-resistant strains of HIV are emerging. Finally, the
global situation is disastrous, and it must eventually impact the West both
socially and economically, as countries with ravaged populations fall into
disorder. In many non-Western countries—especially those in the equa­
torial belt represented by South and Central Africa, South and South-East
Asia, Brazil and the Caribbean—infection rates are unimaginably high and prevention and treatment programs totally inadequate.

Yet, these facts are so effectively denied, and the effects of the epidemic so abated in Western countries by new treatments, that the current situation "mimes" a situation of aftermath. Although the epidemic continues, it is regarded as noncritical, and its continuing effects and the threats they pose for the future are ignored, as if the AIDS crisis were over. One consequence of this situation of pseudo-aftermath is that the flood of AIDS testimonial writing that was published in the West (and principally in North America, France and Great Britain) during the period of 1986-96 has dwindled to almost nothing. Texts may still be being written, but they are not being published. Jamaica Kincaid's *My Brother*, published in 1997, and Clifford Chase's *The Hurry-Up Song* (1999) are possibly the most significant examples of AIDS writing to have appeared in the United States since dramatic announcements were made at the international AIDS conference of 1996 in Vancouver that were widely, albeit mistakenly, taken to herald the "end of AIDS." This, then, is the state of affairs in which, during the summer of 2002, Elizabeth Stone's *A Boy I Once Knew* quietly appeared, like a return of memory in the culture of AIDS testimonial. It brings to mind Mallarmé's often quoted line from his "Tomb for Edgar Poe": "calme bloc ici-bas chu d'un désastre obscur," a line that describes a tombstone metaphorically as a "calm block fallen to earth from an obscure disaster."

Once, a book such as this might have passed relatively unnoticed in the spate of supposedly more "direct" testimonials written by people living with AIDS themselves or by their immediate survivors, such as lovers or close friends. It might have been classified—along with writing by physicians, nurses and bereaved parents—as interesting and even important documentation concerning the impact of AIDS on social sectors thought of as not specifically at risk, or only slightly at risk—needle sticks in the caring professions aside—from the epidemic. Now it is the very remotesness of the book's narrative subject, whom I'll call Elizabeth, from its biographical subject, whom she herself calls Vincent, that gives *A Boy I Once Knew* its slightly uncanny effect as a return of testimonial memory, for, perhaps needless to say, this returning narrative concerns a case of such an unexpected return and tells the story of its impact and its consequences.

Because it's about return in this way, Stone's text extends the range of what emerged historically, after an early plethora of AIDS diaries, as the most widespread genre of AIDS witnessing writing, which I call "dual
autobiography." This genre probably owed its popularity to its flexibility as a way of combining a (usually eyewitness) account of what it meant to live with AIDS and to die of its effects with an account of the effect of such a disaster on survivors who may themselves be HIV positive or HIV-negative: bereaved lovers themselves faced with a similar death; former lovers who may or may not be in similar circumstances; close friends or other friends more remote but drawn into the circumstance, often at the dying person's express request, as its chronicler; siblings (like Cliff Chase or more remotely Jamaica Kincaid); mothers (I don't know a case of a bereaved father writing an AIDS testimonial in the form of dual autobiography or any other form); physicians; and so on. In dual autobiography, however, it's always the closeness of the relation of the narrative subject to the biographical subject, whose life/death story blends into the story (of surviving the death of the other) that the narrating subject has to tell, that gives this genre its point as a mode of aftermath writing. It does so by dramatizing both the continuity and the fatal discontinuity that connects the sufferer and the survivor, the person who has succumbed to the traumatic event and the person whose writing demonstrates that person's inability to emerge from that event and to consign it, by a successful act of mourning, to the past. Such closeness may of course be a given from the start; or alternatively it may develop as the narrating subject is drawn into the death of the other and experiences the aftermath of that death in his or her own person. What Stone does, then, in extending the relation of narrative subject to biographical subject to the affectionate but distant connection between a teacher and her former student, and in substituting for the narrator's personal knowledge of the biographical subject's life the kind of information and insight that can be derived from reading a set of personal diaries, is well within the logic of the dual autobiography at the same time as it stretches its limits, by adapting the genre to the circumstances of a return—the return of a collective trauma to a person supposedly remote from the collectivity concerned and assumedly unaffected, therefore, by the trauma.

As it happens, generic adaptability and bricolage of this kind is a practice entirely characteristic of testimonial writing. This is because its subject-matter is of such a kind that it is definitionally never culturally expected or foreseen; as part of the apparatus of denial, indeed denial's principal mechanism, the set of genres that constitute a culture fails to include a genre or genres that would be dedicated to representations of experience regarded as culturally alien. Thus, standard autobiography becomes dual under pressure from a need to represent what it must be like
to undergo an untimely and untoward death; and dual autobiography itself evolves under pressure from a need to bring home to others the relevance of such a death to those who remain alive. But as a result of this bricolage, a sort of generic catachresis, readers of testimonial may experience a form of anxiety or cultural discomfort that's readily reinterpreted as being due to the vividness with which the subject-matter is represented. Generic catachresis amounts in this way to a form of hypotyposis—the vividness of a return, or the effect of a visitation, as opposed to memory’s usually less acute representations—and such hypotyposis can in turn lead some readers to welcome such a text and others, in the grip of denial, to reject it. Certain readers are more hospitable than others to such an alien experience.

The necessity of generic adaptability thus places testimonial under a rhetorical requirement. The phrasing of the generically adaptive text as well as its structure of address need to be designed in such a way as to produce what is termed a captatio benevolentiae, providing readers with, say, a degree of reassurance and a stimulus to read that might command their instinct to deny the text their attention, rejecting it for example as clumsy or crude or alien and unacceptable. To my mind, the extremely urbane style of Stone’s writing, its simplicity and limpidity, enlivened by wonderfully unexpected metaphoric turns of phrase and combining with both the intimacy of her address and the reassuring ordinariness of the lives she describes (hers as a teacher, wife, and mother in suburban New Jersey, Vincent’s as an ordinary gay man living in San Francisco), amounts to such a rhetorical etiquette. Readers are drawn easily into a narrative that then turns out to be informed by less familiar knowledge: that our livings and dyings commingle; that an ordinary teacher’s life is subject to visitation, therefore, by a kind of phantom requesting that it be given life; that such a visitation can lead in turn to a kind of drivenness amounting almost to possession—the very knowledge, that is, a knowledge of trauma and its aftermath, that prompts the writing of testimonial in general, no less than this particular act of witnessing, as an act of counterdenial.

So, I’ll argue in this paper that a testimonial text such as A Boy I Once Knew is teacherly in kind—teacherly in that it works rhetorically to create a sense of connection between ordinarily oblivious readers and the trauma of AIDS—and that what it seeks to teach its readers is a readerly form of hospitality corresponding to the writerly hospitality Elizabeth displays in agreeing to bring Vincent’s diaries into her life and the life of her family, and in rewriting them in such a way as to give life to Vincent,
for us. And I’ll ask what teachers of testimonial texts might learn, therefore, from the teacherliness of this text, what it might say to us about the specific conditions of teaching testimonial texts that themselves teach openness to, not rejection of, vivid representations of traumatic experience, in the classroom environment and for the benefit of young students, for schools are among the more important gate-keeping institutions of culture: it’s at school, as well as (for example) in front of the TV set, at church and in daily life, that we learn both what it is that we don’t wish to know, and what, instead, we have an ethical and ultimately political interest in learning to (ac)know(ledge).

In Stone’s narrative, there are two determining moments out of which the text is generated. One represents her earliest memory of Vincent, the other her receipt of his diaries following his death from the AIDS syndrome; one is a scene of teaching, the other a scene of return or visitation and ultimately of hospitality, a threshold scene in every sense. The scene of teaching shows Elizabeth, as a young high school English teacher, introducing a ninth-grade class in Bensonhurst to an O. Henry story, in which a loving husband sells his gold watch in order to buy, as a Christmas gift for his beloved wife, an ornate set of combs—even as she sells her long hair so as to buy him a platinum watch-fob. Apparently missing the point of O. Henry’s irony, Vincent, aged fourteen, declares “The Gift of the Magi” a “stupid story.” He has evidently given gift-giving careful thought. “If you love someone,” he says, “you want to get them something they really want”; and conscious of the reciprocity entailed in the practice of gifting, he adds: “And you want them to get you something that you really like, too” (6). Stone will reflect in her memoir on teaching as a mode of reciprocal gift-giving, and her reflection asks to be extrapolated to the dynamics both of writing, and of reading, testimonial.

But it is the arrival of Vincent’s gift in the form of his copious diaries (the scene of return) that activates, first, a dynamic of mutual giving and receiving between Vincent and Elizabeth—that is, between a teacher and her former student, between a person now dead of AIDS and a survivor formerly oblivious of AIDS (but not of death), between a returning phantom and a person henceforth possessed: “At my front door was the mailman, who handed me a large carton, its return address in blue block letters telling me it was from Vincent in San Francisco. This was odd” (3). Notice the particular oddity, here, that the return of Vincent, now dead, invites a “return address” to Vincent: Vincent being dead, the return on the address should normally be in the name, not of Vincent, but of
Vincent’s friend Carol, its actual sender. This can’t in fact be the oddity to which Elizabeth is referring, for she has neither forgotten Vincent (in the way that I had forgotten Sheshy), nor does she know that he is dead. She has even received annual reminders of Vincent in the form of laconic Christmas cards, offering the merest hints about his life; and thus she knows basically that he has left Bensonhurst and is living in San Francisco, where he has a job in an insurance company. The oddity to her, then, is not the detail of the return address but the fact of receiving from a fairly casual and infrequent correspondent a bulky package; and it’s the unexpectedness of this event that’s doubled for her by another untimely intimation when she opens the package and discovers the diaries along with a cover letter from Vincent, a typed note with a blank space left where his signature should be that now signals his death: “How could a living man tell me he was dead? And how could a dead man tell me he would ‘always’ feel regret?” (9).

Putting the oddities together, it seems that, if the arrival of the package at breakfast time (Elizabeth is still in her robe) is an untimely event of return, the untime it entails—the “threshold” experience her reading of his writing gives her of an uncanny fusion of life and death—is the product of an act of mediation. A living man can tell Elizabeth he is dead, and a dead man can tell her he will “always” feel regret, only because Vincent’s letter, dictated to and typed by Carol, has been sent by her, with its absent signature indexing Vincent’s death (which prevented him from signing the letter), along with other writings by Vincent in the form of his diaries, by US mail—the whole bearing a “return address” that names Vincent as its sender as though he were not dead but alive, or both dead and alive. The implication is that Elizabeth’s writing of Vincent’s life/death story, her return gift to the sender, will be a similar act of mediation to the one performed by Carol, a relay of Carol’s mediation. And, indeed, her writing is addressed to anonymous readers (such as, say, myself) and expects of us—as our return to its sender (Vincent)—the gift of our own attentive and hospitable reading of Elizabeth’s writing as an account of Vincent’s diaries. So the further implication appears to be that it is only through the mediation, by means of writing like Elizabeth’s (or Carol’s), of such a reciprocal reading-writing (or gift-giving) relation, that the dead may achieve the kind of life that permits them to continue to speak. Only thus are they able to “tell” us that they are dead and that they will “always” feel regret, and thus to participate in a cultural conversation from which they would otherwise be rapidly excluded, consigned to oblivion. This is the condition of their return through
testimonial. But we should also bear in mind that, if this highly mediated character of the death/life relation and of the conversation it permits is the sign of a phenomenon of aftermath, it may well also be subject to the kind of mutually self-canceling irony, as opposed to Vincent’s ideal of gift-giving, that we might call “O. Henry’s law.”

Now, it’s exactly the “flatness” of the dead in the memory of the living—the lack of mediation from which they suffer following their death—that Elizabeth tells us she is bothered by. That, presumably, is why she’s quick to see that, in exchange for the gift of the diaries, Vincent is asking her (via Carol) to “mediate” him, to provide him with a new and unassailable, three-dimensional life, one that the survival of the diaries, given their character as premortem writing, does not guarantee. And soon she will see that this in turn means rewriting the experience chronicled in the diaries as “something with a plot,” a story “where he could live forever after” (88). This project has in turn as its precondition that she immerse herself in the diaries, so as to come to know something that to her is unfamiliar: the existence of a gay man in San Francisco during the years of the “plague.” What she perhaps doesn’t foresee is that, thanks to this immersion, Vincent in his new postmortem life will come to invade Elizabeth’s placid, suburban, heteronormative, family-oriented existence, occupying material space in the house and mingling a bit promiscuously with Elizabeth’s husband and children. She will have taken him in only to have him, rather spookily, take over. One day, to her surprise, she finds that she has absentmindedly used a ticket-stub from one of Vincent’s European trips as a bookmark; another time she borrows a dollar he had stuck in his diary for 1990 to pay a pizza delivery boy; on a third occasion she discovers a lost insurance-claim of her husband’s between the pages of Vincent’s 1986 diary. “I didn’t like that. It made my stomach drop” (90).

Notice, then, that if in response to her hospitable reading of the diaries Vincent has become a member of the family, enjoying a new life in that capacity, there is something excessive about his take-over; it goes beyond the limits of guest-behavior prescribed by normal hospitality practices. Vincent is extending, indeed stretching, the limits of a genre, in this case the genre of hospitality. Soon, the house is full of Vincentiana, and the husband and children are joking with more than a hint of resentment about the boy who came to dinner, and stayed, and stayed. “When are you going to be done with him?” Elizabeth’s youngest son asks plaintively (150). Hospitality extended to a phantom entails a kind of possession, it seems: not just a visit but a visitation, or as Elizabeth puts it a “migration.” When
the flattened dead return, as Vincent does and as Sheshy’s return taught me, they return through mediation but they return to stay; and the excessive character of their stay is a sign that, if their mediated return is governed by laws of hospitality, it simultaneously transcends certain of the conventional assumptions associated with hospitable practice.

In order to return in this mediated way, they must die. It’s their death, requiring that their return be mediated, that gives them the power to haunt (inhabit) the world of the living. Or, as Elizabeth puts it, in a way that now explicitly recalls the O. Henry law, in order to gain a life Vincent must lose his life; while reciprocally, and for her part, “I could get to know the man [the man of the diaries], but it might cost me the boy” (46). So if, as she says, she and Vincent form an “O. Henry couple,” it’s a “surreal” version of the O. Henry dispensation that they’re experiencing, precisely because their reciprocal gift-giving takes place across the gulf of death. The phrase that summarizes her own participation in this dispensation seems odd, though, because its symmetry with the price Vincent is described as paying is not immediately evident. By contrast with gaining a life by losing a life, and by contrast with sacrificing one’s watch in order to buy a set of combs for someone who has sold her hair in order to buy you a watch-fob, gaining a man at the risk of losing the boy is both relatively trivial, especially because it isn’t even a complete certainty, and it fails to enact the trademark O. Henry irony of forming a self-canceling chiasmus. I’ll need to develop a slightly extended argument to show (a) that there is a similar chiasmus in the reciprocal gift-giving of Elizabeth and Vincent, although (b) perception of the chiasmus depends on understanding the phrase about Vincent’s losing his life in order to gain a life in a particular sense, and finally (c) that the stakes entailed in Elizabeth’s fear of gaining the man at the price of losing the boy are far from trivial.

“To let the dead live, you must let the dead die” is the way she formulates the wisdom Vincent learns on the occasion of his friend Eddy’s AIDS death (161). It sounds like a restatement, from the point of view of the living, of the axiom that from the point of view of the dead, it is necessary to lose one’s life in order to gain a life. Thus, it completes the chiasmus more obviously than having to lose a boy in order to gain a man. But it turns out to mean in the first instance only that, in order to remember the dead as they were in health, it’s necessary to forgive them the indignity of their dying (which is perhaps what “flattens” them in postmortem memory). And for that reason, Vincent’s return to life through Elizabeth’s reading and rewriting of his diaries is paired throughout her narrative with the story of her mother’s flattening into death, as
she loses her memory and sense of identity ("Am I still me?" she asks) to a disease that sounds like Alzheimer's (152). Forgiving her mother this indignity—-I almost wrote this betrayal—will enable Elizabeth to remember her mother, after her death, in the "unflattened" way that now, through the diaries, she knows.

But this parallel doesn't quite work, because forgiving Alzheimer's seems to be not exactly the same, for Elizabeth, as forgiving a death from AIDS. It's her mother's whole identity she hopes to regain by "letting her die" of Alzheimer's, whereas in Vincent's case "I might get to know the man, but it might cost me the boy." Vincent the man is a gay San Franciscan who contracts HIV disease, lives with it, and eventually dies an AIDS death; Vincent the boy is an adolescent who lives in Bensonhurst and is . . . what? presumed straight? of undeclared sexuality? of declared but as yet undisclosed sexuality? The "boy I once knew," we've learned, is a ninth grader with an expression "at once sweet, sour and sorrowful," but also "urgent but undefined hungers"; the man Elizabeth comes to know is an adult of defined, and declared, hungers—and there, it seems, is the rub, for letting Vincent die means forgiving him not only his AIDS but also the sexuality that, in Elizabeth's eyes as least, is indissociable from it (12-13). And it's regaining an unflattened Vincent in this way, by recognizing his San Francisco life in order to forgive it (by "letting him die"), that may therefore entail losing the boy whose hungers were as yet undefined—a boy presumed innocent, if you will. In Elizabeth's mother's life as we learn of it, there's nothing that corresponds to this disjunction between boy and man, childhood and adulthood. The mother's life is, for all intents and purposes, all of a piece until the declining years of her slow dying. (Of course, it's relevant that Elizabeth cannot have known her mother as a girl.)

Elizabeth's unwillingness to pay the price of losing Vincent the boy seems, then, to underlie the squeamishness about gay sex that she displays in her account of Vincent-the-man's life in San Francisco. It's worth noting that, in his cover letter, Vincent had felt obliged to forewarn her about the "raunchy and shocking" details invoked in his diaries, as if he foresaw that "some of these details" may disturb her and that, consequently, for him, the O. Henry trade-off might entail gaining a postmortem life at the expense of losing a sex life. This apprehension would exactly parallel her fear that gaining the life of the man may entail losing the boy she once knew, for he goes on to define his "life for the past ten years" in terms precisely of those raunchy and shocking details. "I probably should just destroy them," his letter says, "but they contain my
thoughts, feelings and desires of my life for the past ten years.” The grammatical antecedent of the pronoun “them” is the raunchy and shocking details, although the verb “destroy” seems to refer more generally to the diaries themselves; and this slippage in Vincent’s mind, in the last days of his life, between the diaries as a whole and the sexual life recorded in them is of course itself highly suggestive. But as a consequence, Elizabeth’s tiptoeing around such details, as she transforms his diaries into her story—the story destined to enable him to “live forever after” and of which he is to be “the star,” but over which she has authorial control—is in visible contrast with the importance Vincent’s own writing gives the same details, an importance that arguably makes them definitional of his life (88, 195). That said, and to be fair, the letter does go on to give Elizabeth nearly absolute carte blanche concerning the nature of the “book” she is asked to produce. But it does so, nevertheless, in a phrase—“otherwise I leave all the details up to you”—that troublingly returns us, precisely, to the question of those details (8).

So, it seems that the evacuation of Vincent’s sexuality that occurs in the course of his migration from the diaries into the published narrative is of a piece with the implication of the one passage in which his sex life is evoked at all vividly (or, if you prefer, in any detail). Reading in an early diary that Vincent had allowed himself to be “fucked without a rubber,” Elizabeth slams the book shut, flings it into a desk drawer and leaves Vincent for a time “stranded in solitary” (84–85). One appreciates the honesty of this anecdote; but it does also betray a certain failure of empathy on her part and, more significantly perhaps, some ignorance of the identitarian importance of sex, as a token of sexuality, to gay men such as Vincent. And the episode is symptomatic also in that it casts light on a comment made later, in the passage I’ve already partially quoted in which Elizabeth explains Vincent’s need for his diary-existence to be turned into a story. Here is the passage in extenso:

Whatever I wrote about him, it was not going to be a eulogy or an elegy either. I think what Vincent wanted was for me to find him his words, even between the lines. Then he wanted me to write him a story he could live in just as I had once told him I might. He would be the star, and at the end, I would leave him alive, recognizable and recognized. Another ending, just what he wanted for the couple in O. Henry’s story so long ago.

The other ending Vincent at fourteen wanted for the O. Henry couple was that they give each other appropriate gifts, as opposed to grand but
mutually self-canceling ones. If, in Elizabeth's formulation here, another ending means a (narrative) life that for Vincent would cancel out the fact of his having died of AIDS, and do so at the price of annulling or evacuating his sex life, it's not clear that such is the other ending Vincent would himself have wanted, although it might well be what Elizabeth would most like for him. Vincent, perhaps, would have appreciated a more appropriate gift. It's of the very nature of dual autobiography, of course, that it give rise to this kind of tug-o'-war between what I'll call the rights of the biographical subject, whose story is told, and the needs but also the powers that the narrative subject, telling a story that includes the biographical subject's story, derives from the simple fact of being the survivor who lives to tell the tale.

Another way of pointing to what is at issue in this tug-o'-war would be to say that A Boy I Once Knew raises questions concerning the nature of community. Vincent's "carelessly self-destructive" ways in sex, Elizabeth says, make her feel like a "member of the chorus in Greek tragedy, knowing the suffering and pain that lay ahead for him, unable to halt it" (80). It's an apt comparison, but the role of the Greek chorus is more conventionally understood as being partly to interpret the events for the audience, and partly to interpret those events in the perspective of a community. Both these questions, of course—that of the narrative's assumed audience and that of the community whose viewpoint should prevail in telling Vincent's story—are at the heart of A Boy I Once Knew; and, indeed, they tend to be definitional for testimonial writing generally. Both the audience the book seems to assume, however, and the communitarian perspective it adopts are very largely at odds with the gay communitarian perspective, one for which sexual detail can't so readily be dismissed or toned down because for so many gay men sex functions, in a highly symbolical way, as the token of a community that is actually grounded in sexuality.

The degree and importance of this difference of perspective can be illustrated by a quick look at the history of "safe sex" itself, the very issue that so bothers Elizabeth. What is now called safe, or more cautiously safer, sex was invented in the early years of the epidemic, not by the Centers for Disease Control, nor by physicians or politicians (all of whom were enthusiastically but unrealistically recommending abstinence to the sole community then recognized as affected), but by two gay men in San Francisco who came up with a brochure entitled "How to Have Sex in an Epidemic." Not how to be safe, or how to protect yourself, but how to have sex—where having sex is sub-culturally understood as synonymous with
“having community,” continuing to have a community, that is, in the midst of a frightening epidemic that threatens to wipe it out by destroying its individual members. Community in this sense is defined by its exposure to danger, and condom use is recommended as a way to preserve a community so exposed by protecting its other members as well as oneself. It was only later, when the term “safe sex” was popularized and widely recommended by official agencies and taught in sex ed. classes, that the terms in which it was presented set aside these communitarian issues and gave priority to self-protection alone. It’s in accordance with that sort of view of condom use that Elizabeth, addressing an audience allegedly unattuned to gay ways, gay understandings and gay assumptions—assumptions of the kind to which Vincent in his life appears to have held steadfastly, if doubtless unreflectively—falls into a protective, quasi-maternal attitude toward Vincent. She would like, retrospectively, to save him from himself so that his life might have another ending—her ending. So, as we’ve seen, when it comes to light that he has been “fucked without a rubber,” her instinct is the parental one of sending the wayward, irresponsible child to his room, to think things over “in solitary.”

Her model of community, then, is domestic and familial. That’s why, failing to grasp (or at least to come to grips with) the significance of Vincent’s sex life, she sees him as a loner—one who learned to “open up” to others and to build himself an ad hoc community only at the very end of his life, when his friend Eddy died and he worked with a group of mainly women friends on a quilt panel destined to “recognize” his friend’s life (172). The quilt-panel community is one that doesn’t have sex as its mode of symbolic binding and for that reason draws an approving nod from Elizabeth. Moreover, the quilting for Eddy is recognizably a model for the narrative—neither a eulogy nor an elegy—into which Elizabeth is transforming Vincent’s diary: *A Boy I Once Knew* is, in its own way, a quilt panel to recognize Vincent’s life. If so, the quilting group represents the sort of community the narrative presupposes and into which it introduces him: the protective and familial community implied by her taking him into her home and introducing him as a quasi member of her family.

In introducing Vincent into such a community, Elizabeth inevitably domesticates him, providing him with a home in which to live, but simultaneously taming him, by redefining the life he led, first as a protoqueer boy and then as a gay San Franciscan. She discounts and misrecognizes what seem fairly clearly, reading between the lines, to have been Vincent’s own self-identifications. And this, then, is the other
sense, corresponding to the other ending Elizabeth provides for Vincent’s life, in which he can be said to have had to lose a life in order to gain one. It corresponds plainly to Elizabeth’s fear of having to lose the boy in order to get to know the man in that it preserves her sense of the boy at the man’s expense. The man she gets to know is a man always already deprived of his life in that his sexual and community identity is so largely evacuated from it, while the life Vincent gains in exchange is a sort of continuation or reprise of the protoqueer Bensonhurst boy, as if in becoming a man he never joined the gay community but remained the loner he had been in English class.

Having mentioned the likelihood that Vincent foresaw this outcome in making Elizabeth the gift of his diaries, I should acknowledge again also that her soft-pedaling of his sex life and her censorious response to that particular mode of “opening up” to a community can and should be understood as part of the author’s rhetorical etiquette, her chorus-like address to an audience. The audience she wants to reach might well reject a frank representation, let alone a sympathetic one, such as Vincent. After all, anyone who wants to read the diary version of his “thoughts, feelings and desires” is free to consult the documents themselves, which are available, as one learns from the Acknowledgments page, at the San Francisco Public Library. And indeed, if my analysis is correct, there can’t be an act of testimonial that isn’t mediatory and hence obliged to accommodate itself to some sort of rhetorical maneuvering, under pain of failing in its project as a cultural intervention, the sort of cultural intervention I’ve characterized here, for brevity’s sake, as return. All that being said, however, the irony of Vincent’s having to lose the life with which he identified, the life he had chosen, in order to gain the narrative life accorded him, as an act of hospitality and love, in A Boy I Once Knew, is nevertheless both intense and unsettling. Is that how hospitality really works? It’s impossible not to recall that at fourteen it was Vincent who rejected O. Henry’s clever story as “stupid,” and that he did so because he wanted gift-giving to be less ambitious, and more thoughtful. “If you love someone, ... you want them to get you something you really like too” (6).

So the question I want to raise in concluding is this: is it inescapable that losing one’s life in order to gain a life (in dual autobiography, always the story of every biographical subject) should signify (as the contribution made by the narrative subject) the domestication of the biographical subject’s experience of exposure to danger, as that experience “migrates” and comes to inhabit a culture addicted to self-protection? Does the
inevitability of mediation imply that O. Henry’s law is universally operative, forcing us to understand testimonial writing as a reciprocal expression of love that takes the form of self-canceling gift-giving? What would an alternative theory of testimonial mediation look like—one that might preserve and transmit, to admittedly protected and self-protective readers, some sense not only of the exposure to danger that others have suffered, but also of their own exposure? And as a secondary issue, how do these questions, suggested by testimonial as a practice, apply to the kind of practice we call teaching, and specifically to the teaching of testimonial writing? Do the ethical responsibilities of a teacher—which surely include a degree of protectiveness toward immature, developing students—require of teaching testimonial that it be a domestication of the dangerous? Or is there a place, as I hope, for teaching that leads to some sense of the limits of protectedness and works against the force of denial, not only by giving the young some sort of apprehension of what I am calling our exposure to danger, but also by encouraging in them, as part of their own ethical responsibility, a degree of hospitable openness to intimations of the kinds of experience that culture banishes to the very limit of what it can acknowledge: the liminally alien?

My response to these questions is pretty inchoative, and space is limited. It turns on the idea of hospitable reading, and whether such reading inevitably amounts to a domestication of what I just called the liminally alien. In order to approach that issue, I’ll make a start by considering the two modes of mediation that are available for the practice, common to testimonial and to the teaching of testimonial, that—as an alternative to what is understood by domestication—I want to call: bringing it home. For if some sort of lenifying, domesticating rhetorical maneuvering is inevitably part of bringing something “home,” the sense of the expression nevertheless refers to the work of counterdenial. Rather than taming the dangerous, the culturally liminal, and the alien for domestic consumption, bringing something home works against domestication, as if its model were Vincent’s slightly spooky take-over of the house in New Jersey and the way, having been invited in, he stayed on beyond the welcome of Elizabeth’s family, if not of Elizabeth herself. This model transcends conventional assumptions about hospitality in a way that parallels, but also negates, Elizabeth’s domesticating appropriation of the same conventions; and my claim will be that genuinely hospitable reading doesn’t require that the alien be domesticated in order to be taken in, but rather welcomes the readerly equivalent of a Vincent-like take-over.
The two options for mediating experience that is culturally liminal are figuration—putting a recognizable face ("figura") on the alien by troping, in Laurent Jenny’s sense of the figural as "singular speech"—and what Michael Taussig calls defacement and I disfiguration. My vocabulary is intended to emphasize the solidarity of these two mediating practices. Clearly, one can disfigure only that which already has a cultural face, while figuration is therefore always subject to exposure, by defacement, of its cultural conventionality. Figuration functions as a rhetoric ally hospitable, guest-like masking or veiling of the alien, which nevertheless remains recognizable; because it is intriguing without being threatening, it invites a hospitable, host-like reception in the form of reading. But disfiguration exposes the figure’s conventionality by tearing away the veil so that the truly alien character of what it is about can be glimpsed—glimpsed, that is, not in itself, but by contrast with the relative familiarity of the figural representation. Readers faced with a rhetorical effect of disfigurement tend to flinch; hospitality in such a case is less easily offered. Over time figuration, which is always already culturally acceptable, although it may be odd, tends to lose its rhetorical efficacy through habit, becoming increasingly conventional. The rhetorical advantage of disfiguration, then, is that defacing the conventional face of a figure has the power to make it strange again. Thus, it restores, and even intensifies, the figure’s original power to signify alienness, so that the danger the figure represents becomes vivid again. There is thus a point of convergence at which the rhetorical power of disfiguration/defacement supports and strengthens that of figuration, which suggests that figuration in turn approaches the power of disfiguration when it is at its most striking—that is, its most singular and its least conventional. Disfiguration is itself a powerful act of troping, while figuration, for its part, harbors the potential to produce an effect comparable to that of defacement (a "defacement effect").

But defacement is an act of violence; it’s the violence inherent in acts of disfiguration that gives them the power to cut through a figure’s culturally acceptable and ultimately conventional aspect to restore its power. An extreme example of defacement/disfiguration was the attack on the World Trade Center of September 11, 2001, an attack that suddenly revealed to many Americans that the Twin Towers enjoyed a kind of sacred status, so that their symbolic power became greater as a result of the mode of their destruction than it had been before. So violent was the effect of disfiguration that it completely ruled out a hospitable reading of the violence that was unleashed. But disfiguration needn’t be so violent.
in order to exert its effect, and in that case a hospitable reading becomes
more plausible. Imagine a monument to the dead of the 1914-18 war,
constructed perhaps in the 1920s. It mobilizes conventionally heroic
tropes, and is now surrounded by the peaceful everyday life of a village
in, say, Great Britain, France, or Germany, where its presence is largely
ignored. Its significance is no longer legible. But a group of high-spirited
kids defaces the monument, adorning it with toilet paper or obscene
graffiti that mock its militaristic representation of heroism—the conven­
tionalizing and so euphemistic precondition, originally, for such ability
as the monument might once have had to refer to the hell that was trench
warfare. Suddenly the monument is there again, it returns with its former
legibility restored and reinforced, including its ability to remind us, in
2003, of what, in say 1923, would have been much more readily read­
able—the stylized heroism notwithstanding—to most of the population.
Similarly there again, although perhaps less violently still, is the trinket
that once belonged to your great-aunt that has been sleeping at the back
of a drawer. It was once a treasured memento, until time did its work and
you forgot it. But it has just been (re)discovered by a prying child, who
has dropped it and broken it. As you pick up the pieces that have now
become, once more, metonymic of your long-dead great-aunt and meta­
phoric of her loss, you have tears in your eyes.

Where disfiguration is measurable on a scale of greater or lesser
violence, then, figuration is measurable on a scale of more or less
conventionality. Synchronically, the scale goes from strikingly anoma­
lous phrasing that invites active readerly engagement to actual cliché, like
the war-memorial heroism that was already highly conventional in 1920.
But a truly striking figure, I contend, has power comparable to, although
different from, that of defacement itself. By ostentatiously failing to name
or to describe that which it seeks to bring home to us, its draws us in,
forcing us to supply, from our own unrecognized knowledge of the
culturally liminal, its unspecified referent. This power of the figure to
“mention,” culturally, what is otherwise unstatable can even feel to the
reader, on occasion, like an effect of return; it’s in that respect that it is
capable of producing a vividness of response comparable to that brought
about by acts of disfiguration, although it does so without reproducing the
material violence that is more characteristically the hallmark of deface­
ment. Its own violence, in the form of that very vividness of recognition,
is psychic and emotional. Figural power of this kind, I submit, is the very
stuff of the most graphic testimonial writing; and by way of illustration,
I’ll simply cite here, without further gloss, the ingenuity of Art
Spiegelman's *Maus*, or the vivid tropes of Charlotte Delbo in Holocaust writing; or in the area of recent testimony in relation to 1914-18, Bill Condon's film *Gods and Monsters*, which gives us to read the classic horror movie of the 20s and 30s as a trope for the carnage in the trenches.

So the irony of testimonial, from a rhetorical point of view, is that even the most striking figural invention, over time, can move historically in the direction of cliché and become gradually domesticated. The device of introducing "Tommy talk" into the diction of Edwardian verse made the war poetry of Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen eloquent testimonial writing; but this device has lost its edge by now, and become indistinguishable from modernist poetic devices in general. The role of the teacher of testimonial must be, therefore, to find ways of countering this familiarizing or habituating effect of time, by somehow "defacing" the once striking figure that was Tommy talk. But sometimes teaching can itself exacerbate the problem and speed up the work of time. Over-teaching of certain favorite texts—*Maus*, for example, or Elie Wiesel's *Night*—has arguably begun to get the better of this once striking and compelling writing, and to make it tame and respectable, like a classic. Short of selecting other less familiar and less domesticated texts, the teacher's only recourse in cases like these is to find ways of producing a "defacement effect" on works that, in this way, are becoming monumental, like so many World War I memorials—but to do so, of course, without actually damaging them. Defacement has to strengthen the text, not disfigure it. One such device, for example, is to pair the canonical writing with less canonical writing such as Delbo's.

But on the other hand, and conversely, testimonial texts that now enjoy a certain classic status—college students, for example, may recall meeting them in high school or at Hebrew school—can be extremely helpful in extending the hospitality threshold of such students when they encounter writing that is more recent, more provocative, more akin to disfiguration in its rhetorical effect, and so more graphic—AIDS testimonial, for example, such as John Greyson's *Zero Patience* or Tom Joslin's video diary, *Silverlake Life*. Not coincidentally, these are texts that my students sometimes describe as "too in your face" for them—too close, that is, to being rhetorical acts of defacement. So just as it may be necessary for a teacher to restore their unfamiliarity and rhetorical power to certain texts, there is a need in other cases to help and encourage students to face up to figural representations that their inexperience as readers may lead them, self-protectively, to want to reject.
Texts such as these last, or Delbo’s—and this too is not coincidental—bring us back squarely to the question of community. Reading texts is a communitarian practice, and the hospitality of reading can entail, at one end of the continuum, domestication into a community modeled on protective family relations, and at the other, something approaching the shared sense of exposure that is the hallmark of communities that arise out of the sense of disaster. I take it as axiomatic that it’s the latter mode of hospitality, with its corresponding communitarian dynamics, that both testimonial texts and teachers of testimonial aim to foster. Texts like Delbo’s, Joslin’s, or Greyson’s strongly resist the possibility of their being domesticated into the placid, protective, and protected atmosphere of the average classroom; they do it by combining an ethical commitment to a communitarian understanding forged out of exposure to the traumatic with an aesthetics of frankness that makes many unprepared student readers, as well as adults, flinch. And therein lies their value to a teacher anxious to teach reading as a practice of hospitality extended not only to the familiar and the reassuring—I call it “easy” hospitality—but also to the culturally liminal and the alien, “hard” hospitality. But therein also lies the delicacy of that task, given the readiness with which hospitality and understanding can turn into hostility and rejection when not only young people (but perhaps especially young people) feel threatened.

My point, by now, is I hope obvious. What it takes to be a teacher of testimonial is a kind of rhetorical nimbleness, a maneuvering along the pole of conventionality-singularity inherent in figuration and even, perhaps—albeit with much more caution—along the pole of symbolic (psychic or psychological) violence inseparable from disfiguration, so as to make the testimonial effect of what I began by calling return more readily available to a given group of students and/or to given individual students, taking into account the fact that these young readers’ capacity for hospitality to the alienness inherent in culturally liminal experience is likely to vary widely, as a function of their previous educational and personal history (in the family, within institutional environments, in relation to ethnic groups, religious and political commitments, aesthetic experience, and the like). Such nimbleness is perhaps easier to come by in practice than it is to describe in detail or to theorize beyond a few axiomatic remarks of the kind I’ve risked here. Not that it isn’t intellectually demanding, though, and—to judge from my own experience—physically and emotionally exhausting. An “art of doing,” as Michel de Certeau calls such everyday practices, it requires constant attention, immediate responsiveness, and unfailing flexibility. One rarely feels one
has succeeded. I don’t take this to mean, though, that teaching testimonial is a talent one either has or doesn’t have, period. Rather, it’s a goal toward which everyone can work. And such a goal, I suggest, is or should be subtended by a permanent understanding that what one is doing is attempting to raise, and to develop, one’s students’ capacity for hospitality toward experiences of reading that they may well find disturbing and alien.

Elizabeth Stone’s rhetorical techniques in *A Boy I Once Knew* are such, in my opinion, as to give Vincent a face recognizable to the most protected students. She seeks to domesticate him for a heteronormative majority in the way that, in the book’s narrative, he becomes domesticated into her household. If I were to teach this text, I’d want to pair it, therefore, with some gay writing about AIDS that subscribes to less familial understandings of community, including the communitarian relation of text and reader, than one finds here. But I *would* want to teach *A Boy I Once Knew*. In particular, I’d want to teach it because its very rhetorical approachability offers me a chance to draw attention to the way the story it tells enacts issues of hospitality, as these affect the writing but also the reading of testimonial, and thus to make explicit my own project, as a teacher, of teaching reading as a practice of hospitality. The barbed comments of Elizabeth Stone’s family about the boy who came to dinner, and stayed, and stayed would enable me to suggest, for example, that such hospitality may be less about being nice, less about love, less about mutual gift-giving—the kind of assumption Elizabeth makes and that most students are likely to subscribe to without further thought—than it’s a culturally beneficial practice: that of overcoming and controlling one’s perfectly understandable cultural hostility to the alien other, in view of the benefits to oneself and to one’s own culture that flow from openness to alterity. By first drawing attention to the kinship of hostility and hospitality, I’d try to launch a discussion that could be guided in the direction of an agreed catalog of some of the benefits that arise from choosing to be hospitable rather than hostile.

But I’d also want to make a second point, a more specific one about hospitable reading per se: whereas social hospitality is a practice that doesn’t assume that a visit may turn into a visitation or a migration—a taking-over by the other as much as a taking-in of that other—hospitable reading as openness to the culturally alien means playing for keeps. Its outcome is more likely to be a longterm and perhaps permanent migration than a mere visit. Cases of return such as Vincent’s return to Elizabeth (or Sheshy’s return to me) flout the conventional rules of hospitality in two
ways: first, by the untimeliness of the return, its uninvited quality; and then (most significantly) by the returnee’s readiness to take up residence—that is, to haunt. Thus, the history of Vincent’s untimely arrival and extended stay is an apt allegory for the way in which phenomena of reading, like phenomena of memory, while they doubtless have hospitable openness as their pre-condition, transcend the conventional generic conventions and expectations that attach to social hospitality, because they are forms of return. In hospitable readings of testimonial, the untimely, alien message is taken in, not rejected, and having been taken in it doesn’t depart again; it lingers in the mind, sometimes to the point of possession. And as this possibility of possession indicates, the lingering has little to do with domestication, however much it may depend on the rhetorical face testimonial writing puts on the alien. Rather, I’d say, it’s a becoming-intimate, or a case of familiarization, in the now antiquated sense in which one could once talk of a “familiar spirit”—that is, of one who haunts by coming to inhabit the same intimate space as oneself, and becoming a permanent companion of one’s thoughts.

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Notes

1. This essay refers to arguments made at greater length in a book currently under consideration for publication under the title Untimely Interventions. It extends these arguments as a result of my more recent thinking about two books: Stone’s A Boy I Once Knew, and Taussig’s Defacement.

2. Hospitality has the odd character of being both a genre itself, and a set of relational prescriptions that may substitute for the normal relationality that prevails in other genres. Certain interactions derive their character from a mutual understanding that they are acts of hospitality. Others, say “having lunch with a friend,” may be regarded as entailing hospitality on certain occasions (it’s the friend’s birthday or she has just returned from a long trip), and on other occasions not (“today we’re just having lunch together”).

3. Dictated by a man close to death, typed by a friend and now reproduced in Stone’s narrative, Vincent’s letter is full of communicational “noise,” owing particularly to the slips it contains. This noise indexes for readers the situation of extremity from which the letter emanates; it’s a readable sign of death’s proximity. Thus, the ambiguous anaphora of “I probably should have just destroyed them” continues into the following paragraph: “I was hoping that a book could be made into them.” Here, reference to the diaries rather than the details becomes clearer. But the further lapse (“into” substituted for “out of”) again suggests Vincent’s apprehension that the book he wants written might
supersede the diaries themselves, with their details. This further slip, by emphasizing the “making” of the book, suggests a reversal of temporal order that makes the diaries derive from the book, rather then vice versa—which, of course, is exactly the status the diaries have in the eyes of readers of Stone’s book.

4. Oddly, the defacement of the Pentagon does not seem to have had the same impact. Why?

5. Notice that to introduce Tommy talk into Edwardian poetic diction was simultaneously an act of defacement, “disfiguring” the conventionally poetic, and a figure—the figure of interruption (asyndeton)—that put a recognizable face on the horrors of war. When the figure was still new, it demonstrated a convergence of striking figuration and rhetorical disfiguration.

6. When I entitled my 1996 book on AIDS diaries Facing It, I was unaware of the significance that the metaphors of the face would come to have for me in relation to testimonial. One could readily imagine a study of testimonial rhetoric and its reception that would be framed by an ethics of the face-to-face like that of Emmanuel Lévinas.

Works Cited


