

# Plagiarism and the ends of reading

Essay by Rosalind C Morris

The contemporary culture of letters appears to be in crisis. Its faltering status is evident in the rising tide of accusations of plagiarism, made against writers both new and established: Darrel Bristow-Bovey, William Mervin Gumede, Pamela Jooste, Antjie Krog and Cynthia Vongai (not all have been proven). Beyond the individual merits of any given case, journalistic accounts of plagiarism in South Africa raise a number of significant ethical questions. They nonetheless tend to frame the issue in terms of naïvely simplistic oppositions: plagiarism either exists or it does not; individual texts are either wholly original or stolen; authors are either honest or dissimulating.

As with many discourses of crisis and 'criminality', that about plagiarism tends to exceed actuality. Moreover, it is the proliferation of accusation (rather than of crime itself) that most often suffices as evidence of a social failure.

Consider, for example, Ferial Haffajee's claim that "the greatest threat to media freedom... comes from within, in the form of inaccurate reporting and plagiarism". As reported by Deirdre Donnelly, Haffajee cites a statistic according to which, "of all the threats made to the Press Ombudsman, over 70% are simple acts of inaccuracy".<sup>1</sup>

By far the numerically dominant concern of the Ombudsman, one notes, is inaccuracy. Yet plagiarism somehow looms as a sign of what ails the Fourth Estate. One therefore needs to ask why plagiarism functions so effectively as a sign of ethical failure. What does it represent about the current status of literature and the author within society?

The obvious answer is that plagiarism entails intentional dissimulation, hence culpability, whereas inaccuracy is a merely erroneous representation. This may be true in individual cases, but the significance of 'plagiarism discourse' cannot be understood solely in terms of its own categories. It needs

been accused of improperly acknowledging her sources in *The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys*, and the Law School's Charles Ogletree, who has confessed to plagiarising the work of Jack Balkin in his book, *All Deliberate Speed: Reflections on the First Half-Century of Brown v. Board of Education*.

A more politically-charged case has been made against Ward Churchill, a faculty member at the University of Colorado, who was initially investigated following his publication of a controversial essay on the events of 9/11 and who was subsequently accused of research misconduct. The university affirmed Churchill's free speech rights, and refused to censure him for the content of his essay but found, upon review, that the misconduct charges had basis. On 9 May 2006, they issued a report indicating that Churchill was guilty of plagiarism and of "failing to comply with established standards regarding author names on publications".<sup>2</sup>

These highly visible episodes provide the representative forms for what is widely perceived to be a general and growing phenomenon. By July 2006, a quick Google search of the word plagiarism turned up 30 400 000 references. Estimates of the prevalence of plagiarism in American colleges suggest that anywhere between 40% and 80% of students may be misappropriating material from other sources.<sup>3</sup> There are no comparable statistics for South Africa, but university administrators express concern that they might be comparable.

There is also a burgeoning economy associated with plagiarism, and several electronic detection services are available online, including CopyCatch, EVE2, EduTie, TurnItIn, and Plagiarism.com (some of which are used in South African universities). According to James Purdy, none of these engines is more effective than Google, but they are lucrative businesses in and of themselves, and royalties from the patented software is a source of

The point is that copying lay at the origin of literature. Authorship emerged not when writers began to invent or even alter already existing stories. Journalistic accounts of plagiarism in South Africa raise a number of significant ethical questions. They nonetheless tend to frame the issue in terms of naïvely simplistic oppositions: plagiarism either exists or it does not; individual texts are either wholly original or stolen; authors are either honest or dissimulating. One has only to hurl the epithet of plagiarist at a writer, and the content of a work of art is reduced to words and phrases searchable on a computer. In fact, it suggests that the problem of plagiarism reflects a crisis in the culture of reading as much as it reveals the debasement of the written word.

to be understood in its social and historical context, so that its ethical force and its political functions can be understood. And this requires asking about the economic structures that encourage it, but also about the ideological conditions within which individual accusations of literary misappropriation work to both occlude institutional forms of plagiarism and to substitute for other kinds of criticism.

South Africans are not alone in their concern about plagiarism, of course. Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code* is undoubtedly the most visible of the recent international cases, but there are countless others. In the United States, the case of Harvard sophomore Kaavya Viswanathan has also attracted much attention. Her precocious first novel *How Opal Got Kissed, Got Wild and Got a Life*, is now known to have incorporated large portions of two separate works by Megan F. McCafferty.

At Harvard, Viswanathan shares the status of copyist with such renowned figures as historian Doris Kearns Goodwin, who has

considerable income for the companies (and some universities) which generate them.<sup>4</sup> Even more occult economies may be at work, however. Purdy also suggests that some of the detection services may also have links to the mills that sell such papers to students in the first place.

Although there can be no doubt that plagiarism in schools is a problem, Brian Martin has suggested that the frenzy of accusation directed against students might provide something like an ideological screen behind which institutional plagiarism, such as ghostwriting and bureaucratic authorship in which only the senior official is credited, remain obscured.<sup>5</sup> An acute version of this dynamic can be seen in the Viswanathan case. Little, Brown had signed Viswanathan to a \$500 000 two-book contract when she was only in high school but she shared copyright (equally) for the work with an entertainment company, Alloy Entertainment.<sup>6</sup> Supplanting both authors and editors, ghost writers, packaging companies, and book doctors are increasingly called on by publishers

to help convert an idea into a saleable book, or simply to increase its likely market share.

Alloy Entertainment's parent company, Alloy Media and Marketing (which has an annual operating budget of nearly \$200-million), promises clients seeking the youth market that it can "connect with consumers through targeted, unavoidable platforms that elevate brands as a part of daily life". In the book market, it works by transforming the function of the author into that of celebrity endorsement.

This most recent transformation of the author function culminates the brief history of a unique form of individuality, one that emerged only in the modern era of capitalised publishing. In the early histories of literature, the book was an object of copying, whose unity was guaranteed not by the author but by the title of the work. Books were compiled of stories told and retold, and they were often published anonymously. Many copyists in the European Middle Ages could not even read, never mind claim to be the originators of the texts.

### A very modern authorship

Authorship in the modern sense emerged when the unity of the book (and hence the commodity status of the book) became linked to the author, rather than the publisher, through connection to a readership. Or, as James Siegel says of literature in Indonesia, it occurred when the writers of texts began to address their readers as consumers. The rhetorical trace of this emergence can be seen in the "dear reader" moments of early European novels. According to Siegel, it can be seen in Indonesian literature when the author begins to title his work, "A Story that Actually Happened".<sup>7</sup>

No doubt there are as many forms in which authorship has emerged as there are languages. The point is that copying lay at the origin of literature. Author-

ship emerged not when writers began to invent or even alter already existing stories, but when, for largely economic reasons, they began to claim that their contributions to the form of the story added something new and unique to it.

### A relation with others

It is important to recall here that the concept of intellectual property, on which plagiarism depends as a category, refers less to the relationship between a person and the thing (however abstract) which they possess, than it refers to a relation with others. When enforced by the state, this relationship excludes others from deriving revenues and/or benefits from the property that one claims – including intangible benefits, such as credit for authorship, and cultural capital.

As much as the law governing copyright, patents, and trademarks, the regime of intellectual property is sustained through the discourse of plagiarism. This is why it is so central to the project of moral education. For, students today are not merely taught to recognise the elements of their cultural traditions, or to appreciate the unique concatenation of words and literary forms by which a story becomes a piece of literature. Indeed, too little of such teaching occurs now. The moral education to which they are subject also renders them appropriate consumers for the market place of intellectual property.

To be sure, students need to learn to identify and adjudicate sources of knowledge. They must also learn the protocols of professional practice, including those of citation. But one can imagine that there are other discourses – not based in the logic of property – through which they might acquire these important skills.

Education is a matter of organising desires. This is why, today, the valorisation of the author works by rendering her or him as a celebrity – someone with mass recognition, someone who is the object of either identification or desire – or both. It demands

reading engagements, interviews and photogenicity as much as skill with words.

But what kind of criticism is enabled by such a system? In contexts where authorship takes the form of celebrity (the 'genius' of the televisual age), criticism tends to concern itself with biography. The writer – his or her literary skill and knowledge, political commitments, and, increasingly, historical representativeness – rises to the fore in such contexts. Thus, a novel may be analysed to reveal the operations of its aesthetics, or to disclose the political structures animating it but, in the end, it is the writer who will be held culpable for these accomplishments or failures. The social milieu whence the writer emerged becomes mere context.

Rare today is the criticism which attends

to the work as an autonomous semiological system. And just as well. For, such criticism always runs the risk of an arch aestheticism and a naïve, if not disingenuous, politics of non-intervention. Nonetheless, the present moment has seen a perversion of the old ideological criticism. Now, instead of a criticism which takes the work as its object, *ad hominem* accusation is practised as a kind of end run around reading itself. One has only to hurl the epithet of plagiarist at a writer, and the content of a work of art is reduced to words and phrases searchable on a computer database. The totality of the work, and with it the very possibility of literature, threatens to vanish in the ether.

### Claims to legitimacy

I am not saying that writing should not be scrutinised if it displays evidence of misappropriation or fraudulent misrepresentation of sources. Nor that writers should not be held accountable for these improprieties, particularly when they are enjoying the fruits of misbegotten credit. But the growth in plagiarism – in all domains of bureaucratic and artistic life – and the need for its regulation cannot lead us away from the equally significant question about what is lost when criticism is reduced to this form of highly personalised accusation.

Many editorial comments about the Watson/Krog affair represented it as the expression of ethno-linguistic competition and/or resentment, belying the possibility that the accusations were less about plagiarism than about a claim to political legitimacy in the new South Africa. There were also economic motivations in the case, of course, with Watson's charges expressing legally dubious proprietorial claims to derivative rights emanating from the /Xam poetry and its transliterations.

In the Ward Churchill case at Colorado, accusations of

plagiarism clearly stemmed from a desire to find some publicly-recognised form of malfeasance, after efforts to restrict Churchill's political speech failed.

A backdoor critique deployed when all else fails, charges of plagiarism can be made when there is a reproduction of mere phrases – even when these would not be eligible for copyright on creative content grounds. Copyright law does not protect the material form of ideas when the ideas are generally held and/or there are such limited ways in which an idea could be expressed that some repetition in phrasing by speakers of the same language becomes inevitable. Moreover, it recognises the possibility of simultaneous and independent origination – in other words, coincidence of formulation.

Why then, do we hear so much about plagiarism on the basis of relatively minor repetitions? Mainly, because search engine technology, which makes plagiarism so eminently plausible to so many students and lethargic writers, also makes the spurious accusation possible. And this is because literature is increasingly construed as a searchable rather than a legible text. The implications of this fact may be more profound than the so-called ethical crisis of plagiarism. The reader, it appears, is being displaced by the 'Googler'. This does not mean that literature is dead; but it does suggest the need for a different approach to the problem of plagiarism.

In fact, it suggests that the problem of plagiarism reflects a crisis in the culture of reading as much as it reveals the debasement of writing. The Googler cannot distinguish the mere repetition of phrasings from conscious intertextuality. Worse still, he is limited to the texts searchable within a given engine. On this basis originality becomes a position in the database (no longer even an archive). The earliest entry is as far as the Googler can go in the archaeology of an idea.

One might ask why, in a nation in which the idea of social welfare, or social good, has been used in arguments against patents, and their protection under the Trips (Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights) agreement, the proprietary rights of the author seem to loom so large, even to the extent that the threat of their violation overshadows the question of truth.

### Socially responsible criticism

Criticism ought to begin by asking not only "Which elements of the text have appeared before?" but rather, "In what ways, or to what extent, does the new text deploy its many constituent elements to say something new, and to do so in a way that is not wholly

dependent on a prior writer?" This question acknowledges, as all socially-responsible criticism should, that the work of every writer relies on knowledge of the tradition that precedes him or her. The writer and the text are in and of the world. But this question also demands readers who share knowledge of the world and traditions within which a writer works. And here is the real political demand of criticism – which must proceed even in silence: namely, general education for all people in the habits of reading, and not merely Internet searching. Plagiarism must be managed, but we will only be able to resist its politically-instrumental deployment if there are readers who know the difference between citation and intertextuality, invocation and misappropriation, text and database. ■

...s, but when, for largely economic reasons, they began to claim that their contributions to the form of the story added something new and unique to it. issue in terms of naively simplistic oppositions: plagiarism either exists or it does not, individual texts are either wholly original or stolen... computer database. The totality of the work, and with it the very possibility of literature, threatens to vanish in the ether. ent of writing. The Googler cannot distinguish the mere repetition of phrasings from conscious intertextuality.

ship emerged not when writers began to invent or even alter already existing stories, but when, for largely economic reasons, they began to claim that their contributions to the form of the story added something new and unique to it. To understand the accomplishment of the author therefore required a knowledge of the tradition—literary and cultural—whence it emerged. This is why, as Friedrich Kittler says, it is the emergence of a mass readership that makes possible the cult of the author.<sup>8</sup>

In Europe that development occurred only at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In many parts of the world, which have only recently been subject to market economies, international copyright treaties and the aesthetic conventions of authorship, this history may reach back less than a century. But it took some time for the state to assume the burden of protecting authors' rights to the work. Only when these economic rights were secured by the coercive apparatus of the state, did the problem of copying – at least as old as Plato – become a problem of authorship (and the economic rights subtending

1 Donnelly, Deidre. "A shift in gear: a review of Ferial Haffajee's lecture on the state of the media ten years into democracy." [www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs/default.asp?11,22,5,424](http://www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs/default.asp?11,22,5,424).

2 Report and Recommendations of the Standing Committee on Research Misconduct Concerning Allegations of Research Misconduct of Professor Ward Churchill, [www.colorado.edu/news/reports/churchill/download/ChurchillStandingCmteReport.pdf](http://www.colorado.edu/news/reports/churchill/download/ChurchillStandingCmteReport.pdf)

3 For a list of these estimates see [www.plagiarism.org/plagiarism\\_stats.html](http://www.plagiarism.org/plagiarism_stats.html).

4 Purdy, James. 2005. "Calling off the Hounds: Technology and the Visibility of Plagiarism." *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture*. 5(2): 275-295.

5 Martin, Brian. — "Plagiarism: A Misplaced Emphasis." *Journal of Information Ethics*. 3(2): 36-47.

6 Mehegan, David. 2006. "Viswanathan book deal raises more questions." *Boston Globe*, 29 April.

7 Siegel, James T. 1997. *Fetish, Recognition, Revolution*. Princeton: Princeton University Press: 24-26.

8 Kittler, Friedrich. 1990 [1985]. *Discourse Networks, 1800/1900*. Trans. Michael Metteer and Chris Cullens. Stanford: Stanford University Press.