

Caroline Wake

After Effects: Performing the Ends of Memory:

An Introduction to Volume I

In 1983, Ronald Reagan claimed to have seen the concentration camps during World War II. When it became clear that he had not done so, that at most he had seen footage of the camps, the condemnation was swift and sharp. However, in her article 'Performance and Death: Ronald Reagan', Peggy Phelan takes a more generous approach, arguing that Reagan's response opens up a profoundly paradoxical space in which to think through ethics, aesthetics, spectatorship and trauma. 'Performance', she argues 'asks its spectators to become witnesses to events that are simultaneously real and indicative, simultaneously empirical and phantasmatic' (1999: 118). For this reason, there is a 'profound ethical challenge and an important possibility in proposing that performance might provide a model for witnessing a historical real that exists at the very edge of the phantasmatic – events that are both unbearably real and beyond reason's ability to grasp: events that are traumatic' (118). The scene of Reagan's false witnessing and the possibilities that Phelan sees within it go to the heart of this double issue of *Performance Paradigm*, which investigates themes of trauma, testimony, and witnessing as well as notions of liveness, mediatisation, and recording; ethics, aesthetics, and politics; empathy, identification, and imagination. More specifically, this first issue is dedicated to the figure of the witness – Reagan, Phelan, and all who follow – and the function of their witnessing.

In an earlier version of this introduction, I opened with another spectator – the one who appears, rather suddenly, in historian Geoffrey Hartman's essay 'Shoah and Intellectual Witness.' Hartman is explaining the notion of the 'intellectual witness' when he states that:

The position of those implicated in this way can also be compared to that of a spectator in the theater. This analogy, though it may seem offensive, is challenging and suggests how intrinsic art is to moral perception. Spectators go to see a tragedy and their judgement remains active despite the sympathetic imagination provoked by what unfolds on stage. The distance between the spectator and tragic action is bridged, if at all, without psychological transvestism (permitted and even necessary for the actors); yet most viewers, while they might not feel pain, would not admit taking pleasure from a suffering that is known to have been actual rather than

imaginary. In fact, we find it so difficult to value the feeling of pleasure, or seeming mastery, that comes from the ability to face painful events through thought or mimesis, that we justify this voluntary witnessing as a kind of labor. (38-39)

Here Hartman implies what Phelan simply says – that ‘performance might provide a model for witnessing . . . events that are traumatic’ (118). Yet the models they offer are very different. For Phelan’s spectator, which is to say Reagan, witnessing involves collapsing the spatial and emotional distance between himself and the event and overidentifying to the point where witnessing starts to resemble hallucinating.

For Hartman’s spectator, on the other hand, witnessing involves maintaining spatial and emotional distance so that their ‘judgement remains active,’ refusing identification (‘psychological transvestism’), and taking no particular pleasure in the work or ‘labor’ of witnessing. How can we reconcile the febrile, overinvolved figure in Phelan’s account with the cool outsider in Hartman’s? Can they both be called witnesses? Or is it only in and through this impossible reconciliation that witnessing emerges?

Hartman’s analogy aside, theatre and performance are conspicuously absent from what we might call the ‘trauma canon.’ Indeed, in their seminal text *Testimony* Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub seem to analyse everything but, drawing on literature (Camus and Dostoevsky), poetry (Mallarmé and Celan), psychoanalytic texts (Freud), critical texts (de Man), documentary film (*Shoah*) and video testimonies from the Fortunoff Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale. Likewise, in her monograph *Unclaimed Experience* Cathy Caruth investigates psychoanalysis (Freud and Lacan), philosophy (de Man, Kant, and Kleist), and film (*Hiroshima mon amour*). Even more recent volumes such as those edited Ana Douglass and Thomas Vogler (2003) and Frances Guerin and Roger Hallas (2007) decline to deal with performance or to draw on the perspectives offered by performance studies. Yet, as the Hartman anecdote indicates, theatre and performance – not to mention their siblings theatricality and performativity – actually underpin many accounts of testimony and witnessing. Indeed, Felman herself defines testimony as ‘the performance of a story which is constituted by the fact that, like the oath, it cannot be carried out by anybody else’ (1992: 206). Similarly, Diana Taylor has said of Laub’s work that ‘the transmission of traumatic memory from victim to witness involves the shared and participatory act of telling and listening associated with live performances’ (2003: 167). But despite this dependence on notions of theatre and performance, trauma studies often continues to overlook them. Even more strangely, it sometimes displays a distinctly ‘antitheatrical prejudice’ (Barish, 1981) and Hartman’s concern that his analogy is ‘potentially offensive’ is only one such instance where theatre is both relied upon and rejected. [1]

Though trauma studies may still be coming to terms with performance, performance studies has been investigating the affiliations of trauma, testimony and theatricality for some time. Or perhaps that should read traumas since there are so many registers of trauma at work within the discipline: structural, historical, social, cultural, and personal trauma, for a start.

Though not strictly dealing with trauma, Anthony Kubiak anticipates much of the work of Caruth, Felman and Laub in his book *Stages of Terror*, where he defines terror is that ‘which is unspeakable, and unrepresentable’ (1991: 11). His definition of terror comes close to Phelan’s description of trauma as ‘untouchable,’ by which she means ‘it cannot be represented. The symbolic cannot carry it: trauma makes a tear in the symbolic network itself’ (1997: 5). Beyond the structural trauma of subjectivity, Phelan also investigates ‘public traumas’ such as the excavation of the Rose Theatre (19) and ‘more personal one[s]’ such as the death of a friend. Similarly, Timothy Murray’s work also traverses structural, historical, and social traumas as he writes about subjectivity, sexuality, poverty, addiction, and violence (1997). For her part, Diana Taylor has pursued the relationship between performance and collective trauma in the Americas (1997; 2003), while Ann Cvetkovich (2003) has investigated less “spectacular” manifestations of social trauma in the queer archive.

This issue of *Performance Paradigm*, then, builds on the work of Kubiak, Murray, Phelan, and Taylor, among others. Like those before them, the authors in this journal do not seek to “apply” trauma studies to performance, nor do they seek to “cure” trauma through performance as some applied theatre models might have it. Rather, they ask what performance (as a theoretical “object”) and performance studies (as a theoretical field) might bring to trauma and memory studies. To rephrase Judith Butler, this issue asks ‘What does performance bring to theories of witnessing’, ‘Where do we find performance within theories of witnessing?’ and ‘What form of witnessing do we find *in* performance?’ (Butler, 2009: 23). [2] The timing of the issue is not insignificant – it arrives almost twenty years after trauma studies first emerged and approximately ten years after Phelan’s provocative reading of Reagan. For this reason, it can be read as both a retrospective reading of the field and a prediction for it; a belated reply to Phelan as it attempts to think through both the ‘ethical challenge’ and the ‘important possibility’ of witnessing and performance, something she’s still working on of course. This separation of the ethical and the possible is not to imply that they are mutually exclusive but rather to acknowledge that not all possibilities are ethical and that not every ethical ideal is possible. Phelan herself insists that ‘We need to develop an ethics whose first allegiance may not be to the empirically true, an ethics that requires a radical conception of what it means to remain “alive to” the event, even when the wire service, the original source of the information has ceased’ (1999: 119).

The mention of the wire service brings us back to issues of liveness and mediatisation and to the first article of the issue: Geraldine Harris’s ‘Watching Whoopi: The Ethics and Politics of the Ethics of Witnessing.’ Harris has at least three different encounters with Whoopi: the live (though highly mediatised) performance of *Whoopi: Back to Broadway the 20th Anniversary Show* in January 2005; the DVD recording of this performance, which arrives in Harris’s mailbox more than a year later in April 2006; and finally the recording of the “original” performance from 1984- 5, *Whoopi Goldberg: Direct from Broadway*, which is included on said DVD. Harris points out that none of these performances would currently be considered under the rubric of witnessing, in part because of their dubious “liveness” and in part because of their dubious cultural status as both commercial and mainstream.

Yet, despite this, Harris argues that Goldberg's performance is no less capable than any of the more canonical performances of producing witnesses. That is, like Warhol's *Shadows* or Abramović's *House*, Goldberg's *Back to Broadway* promotes a multiplicity of unstable and unsettling meanings and in doing so it enables the mutual transformation of performance and spectator. Indeed, Harris details the ways in which the three performances have not only transformed each other but also transformed her and how she, in turn, has transformed these performances through her viewing, re-viewing, and research. Having gleaned so much from such an apparently insignificant show, Harris suggests that performance studies privileges particular mediums, forms, and genres at its peril. Moreover, in doing so performance studies overlooks its own insights into the very notion of "liveness." More seriously, this wider 'generalisation of the discourse of witnessing' also risks the conflating 'the ethics (and politics) of aesthetics' and 'the aesthetics of ethics (and politics)' and in the name of ethics, performance studies may find itself practising a rather exclusive representational politics.

Like Harris's second and third encounters with Goldberg, Christine Stoddard's encounter with Orlan's performance *Omniprésence* is both belated and mediated. In her article 'Towards a Phenomenology of the Witness to Pain: Dis/Identification and the Orlanian Other' Stoddard reads video documentation, textual description, and photographs, in order to argue that witnessing is an unstable and oscillating mode of spectatorship in which the subject over-, under-, counter, mis- and dis- identifies with the injured Orlan. In this way, the witness sustains a position that is both 'empathetic and critically distant'; a position that Stoddard calls 'dis/identificatory.' By articulating a theory of witnessing through José Esteban Muñoz's notion of disidentification, Stoddard does three things. First, she begins the important task of bringing theories of witnessing into conversation with theories of spectatorship, which are strangely absent from the current debate. Second, she introduces identity and identity politics into a discourse that can sometimes tend towards the universal. Third, by introducing the slash into disidentification – to produce dis/identification – Stoddard not only references the slash and suture of Orlan's performance, she also inserts phenomenology into a discourse that has been dominated by psychoanalytic approaches. Taken together, Stoddard and Harris do nothing less than argue for the ethical potential of the recording, thus making and marking a significant shift in the discipline's thinking about precisely what sort of performances produce witnesses.

From the electromagnetic trace of the video to the intricate trace of the filigree, Petra Kuppers runs her eyes over the large-scale silhouettes of Kara Walker and the photographic imprints of Berni Searle in her article 'Identity Politics of Mobility'. Like the work of Dwight McBride (2001) and Saidiya Hartman (1997), Kuppers' paper sits at the intersection of slavery, trauma, and performance studies. Like them, as well as the artists she investigates, Kuppers is interested in how to respond to and represent what Hartman has called 'scenes of subjection' without creating another. In the case of Walker's work, the spectator is at first seduced its beauty and intricacy only to realise, upon closer inspection, that these scenes depict rape, murder and other acts of extreme violence. This ocular involvement becomes corporeal as well when Walker literally incorporates the spectator by throwing their shadow alongside those of the silhouettes. In contrast, Searle's work keeps the

spectator at more of a distance – her flesh is first stained by spice, then pressed by glass, photographed and finally displayed. In this way, the spectator finds themselves objectifying and scrutinising a body that, because it is black, bruised and female, has already been thoroughly objectified and scrutinised by history. In both cases, witnessing is characterised by what Brett Ashley Kaplan has called in another context ‘unwanted beauty’, which is to say an ambiguous aesthetic pleasure that potentially ‘opens traumatic historical event[s] to deeper understanding’ (2007: 1). In thinking through unwanted beauty, and the visual, emotional and intellectual ‘mobility’ and restlessness it promotes, Koppers comes to think through the witnessing work of criticism itself, arguing that at its best, critical activity partakes in this cycle of repetition, addition, association, improvisation, and identification.

Jen Webb also investigates the ethical and political potential of the replay, though in her case she considers the “replay” function of documentary and verbatim theatre. Her article ‘Sentences from the Archive’ provides a useful overview of how writing practices have changed since September 11 2001. In the same way that novelists have moved away from fiction towards non-fiction, playwrights have moved from fictional plays towards documentary and verbatim practices. In other words, they have abandoned the “play” in favour of the “replay.” Of course, these writers often undo these very divisions, as Webb points out, arguing that though documentary theatre draws its script directly from the archive, because it reorganises, reinterprets and reenacts this material, it also subverts the authority of the archive. Contrariwise, verbatim theatre enables testimony to enter the archive, especially when those plays are published. For Webb, as for Diana Taylor, performance sits at the intersection of the archive and the repertoire (2003).

Here the issue comes full circle to my article ‘The Accident and the Account: Towards a Taxonomy of Spectatorial Witness in Theatre and Performance Studies’, which argues there are currently two concepts of witnessing at work within theatre and performance studies. One school of thought, broadly associated with the sort of performance art that Stoddard analyses, positions the spectator at the scene of trauma or the accident. The other school of thought, more usually associated with the documentary and verbatim theatre practices that Webb discusses, positions the spectator at the scene of testimony or the account. Like Harris, I am concerned with ‘the *generalisation* of the discourse of witnessing across the field’ and in order address this I offer a taxonomy of spectatorial witness. Beyond providing a more precise vocabulary of witness, this taxonomy also encourages us to reexamine our habitual definitions of witnessing as a mode of ‘active’ or ‘ethical’ spectatorship. Rather than being a ‘mode’ of spectatorship, I argue that witnessing may in fact be an after-effect, even an after-affect, of spectatorship.

Finally, Julia Austin interviews Claire Bishop, whose own arguments about the ambiguous ethics of contemporary artists have provoked much debate. Her concept of ‘delegated performance’ refers to performance artists who use the bodies of hired, non-professional participants to function as “authentic” signifiers of subaltern subjectivity. Speaking about the work of Santiago Sierra, and specifically about his pieces *Workers Facing a Wall* (2002) and *Worker Facing Into a Corner* (2002), Bishop states that ‘Despite their simplicity, these were very tough pieces. Being invited to scrutinise these people . . . produced a difficult

knot of affect.’ For Bishop, this knot includes guilt, complicity, identification, disgust and awkwardness. Yet it is precisely in this ‘production of bad affect’ that Sierra’s achievement lies.

Of course, there is a sense in which to edit a journal issue is to orchestrate a delegated performance. In asking other scholars to think through issues of trauma and performance, we have outsourced the labour of thinking and benefited from their insights. One can only begin to imagine what Reagan or Hartman might make of Sierra or indeed of the critical performances within the virtual pages of *Performance Paradigm*. For now, though, we delegate again; this time to you, the reader, spectator, interlocutor, witness.

Endnotes

[1] Other occasions might include Felman praising of de Man, when she writes ‘This witness, unlike a confession, is not personal; it is not directed, in the exhibitionistic way a theatrical (confessional) performance would be, toward an audience’ (1992: 160), or when Hartman, again, admires the video testimonies of the Fortunoff Archive for having ‘No theatricality or stage-managed illusions’ (1996: 123). The words ‘exhibitionistic’ and ‘illusion’ suggest that theatricality is not clearly distinguished from spectacle, mimesis, or even realism within trauma studies.

Indeed, it is possible that what appear to be glimpses of an anti-theatrical prejudice are in fact part of a more pervasive (and ironically modernist) anti-mimetic prejudice within the discourse. This attitude seems to be based on a very broad and generalised understanding of mimesis, which is yet another reason for trauma studies to engage more thoroughly with theatre and performance studies. This might give additional momentum to the work already being done by Andreas Huyssen on Adorno and mimesis (2003: 122-135) and Michael Rothberg on the concept of ‘traumatic realism’ (2000).

[2] In her contribution to the TDR comment ‘Concerning *Theory for Performance Studies*’, Butler writes ‘any book that sought to think about critical theory for performance would have to really start with a different beginning: What does performance bring to critical theory?; and, Where do we find performance within critical theory?; and, indeed, my favourite, What form of critical theory do we find *in* performance?’ (2009: 23).

Works Cited

- Barish, Jonas. *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley University of California Press, 1981).
- Butler, Judith. ‘If the Commodity Could Speak ...’ *TDR: The Drama Review* 53.1 (Spring 2009): 22-23.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).
- Cvetkovich, Ann. *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).
- Douglass, Ana, and Vogler, Thomas A. (eds.) *Witness and Memory: The Discourse on Trauma* (New York: Routledge, 2003).
- Felman, Shoshana, and Laub, Dori. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992).
- Guerin, Frances, and Hallas, Roger (eds.) *The Image and the Witness: Trauma, Memory and Visual*

- Culture* (London: Wallflower Press, 2007).
- Hartman, Geoffrey. 'Shoah and Intellectual Witness', *Partisan Review* 65.1 (1998): 37-48.
- . *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).
- Hartman, Saidiya V. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
- Huyssen, Andreas. *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).
- Kaplan, Brett Ashley. *Unwanted Beauty: Aesthetic Pleasure in Holocaust Representation* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007).
- Kubiak, Anthony. *Stages of Terror: Terrorism, Ideology, and Coercion as Theatre History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).
- McBride, Dwight. *Impossible Witnesses: Truth, Abolitionism, and Slave Testimony* (New York: New York University Press, 2001).
- Murray, Timothy. *Drama Trauma: Specters of Race and Sexuality in Performance, Video, and Art* (London: Routledge, 1997).
- Phelan, Peggy. *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories* (London: Routledge, 1997).
- . 'Performance and Death: Ronald Reagan', *Cultural Values* 3.1 (1999): 100-122.
- Rothberg, Michael. *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).
- Taylor, Diana. *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's 'Dirty War'* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).
- . *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

Editorial Note

Performance Paradigm issues 1 to 9 were reformatted and repaginated as part of the journal's upgrade in 2018. Earlier versions are viewable via Wayback Machine:

http://web.archive.org/web/*/performanceparadigm.net

© 2009 Caroline Wake



Except where otherwise noted, this work is licensed under a Creative Commons AttributionNonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-ncsa/4.0/>