Testimony as Voice: Ethical Challenges and Aesthetic Alternatives[1]

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Democratic theory has long recognized the need to broaden political processes of deliberation and decision-making to include marginalized communities and positions. Moreover, it increasingly acknowledges that formal inclusion is no guarantee of real participation in practice, as the "discursive hierarchies" within civic engagement structure relative access for some people over others (Fraser 1992: 118; Young 2000: 38-40; Warner 2002; Dahlberg 2005: 114). More than merely the predominance of a specific speech culture, exclusions are also effected by forms of epistemic violence that can essentialize, appropriate, and conflate difference seeking entry into politics (Spivak 1987). Those who, as Homi Bhabha states, have been "overlooked – in the double sense of social surveillance and psychic disavowal – and, at the same time, overdetermined – psychically projected, made stereotypical and symptomatic" – must find ways to communicate that can contend with and do not lend themselves easily to these pressures (Bhabha 1994: 236).

This makes clear that *how* we represent difference is as significant as if we do at all. And yet despite the centrality of this issue to democratic engagement in diverse societies, surprisingly little work has yet been done on the specific political and epistemic effects of various forms of political communication. It is not simply a question of 'voice,' as formulated in so much of democratic theory, by what *kinds* of voices are able to be heard across social difference and political inequality? How does the 'noise' of

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marginalized difference – what is yet-salient, yet-emergent in dominant terms of meaning-making, what challenges prevailing terms for identity and politics – become 'sound' on the terrain of public discourse? How do conventional modes of political communication perhaps inadvertently limit the representation of, accountability to, and transformation in light of such marginalized positions? And how might alternative modes of communication structure understanding and interaction differently; what resources might they offer to more effectively communicating marginalized difference?

Testimony is among the most prevalent forms of voice employed to articulate marginalized positions, values and claims. It is, by definition, the representation of absent and as-yet pre-discursive experiences and claims, before an audience of what Gayatri Spivak calls "a less oppressed other," for the purposes of correcting the historical record and rectifying historical wrongs (Felman 1995: 16; Yúdice 1996: 44; Spivak 1998: 7). And yet, while testimony has been used effectively to such ends, recent critiques across postcolonial, trauma, and conflict theory find that testimony is fraught with its own risks; even as it gives voice, the particular *kind* of voice that testimony offers can lead to overexposure, misrepresentation, and the reinforcement of existing asymmetries. A study of these risks and their discursive roots points not only to previously neglected political effects of a common form of political voice, but to alternative forms of representation that handle such challenges differently.

Testimony: How the Medium Affects the Message

As Angelia Means and Iris Young argue regarding narrative more generally, testimony provides a means to articulate what is in excess of current frames of reference, and so helps to 'bring difference to the table' (Felman 1995: 16; Young 2000; Means

2002). Indeed, the recent popularity and academic interest in testimony emerged out of a growing concern over "the recuperation of voices and traumatic experience deemed lost through state, academic, cultural or literary discourses" (Cubilié and Good 2004: 4).

As such, it is a common means to represent what can be challenging or painful to hear. In doing so, testimony, unlike spectacle, requires a receptive audience as witness much as a gift requires a recipient: it is constituted as testimony through the hearing, and requires a particular reciprocity to occur. As Heather Lash notes, it is addressed "specifically to *me*, it implicates *me*" (2006: 222). Such personal narratives are thus more than individual confession; they are, rather, social and political acts that concern the interface of the individual with what Ori Avni calls "the narratives and values by which this community defines and represents itself" (Avni 1995: 216).

And so, demands are made of both speaker and listener. To hear such a speaker, the listener must be open to the challenge testimony presents to their understanding of the world and their place within it; it is to open oneself to potential implication and radical change. At the same time, the speaker runs their own emotional and political risks, as they labour to represent experiences that defy the terms of dominant discourse, and in the process expose themselves to possible indifference, unsympathetic scrutiny or reactive defense, as well as the emotional impact of recalling trauma. Both "to speak the unspeakable" and to listen in this way therefore entail responsibility and risk (Park-Fuller 2000: 24).

Certainly, this form of giving account has played an essential role in correcting the historical record of colonialism, racism and other forms of violence and exclusion whose dominance often comes with – and is legitimized through – erasure and denial. The facts

matter: such evidence has enabled the development of collective counter-narratives that cannot be denied, and so has provided marginalized communities both catharsis and leverage for political and structural redress. Thus testimony is often defended as means by which those who are 'voiceless' may not only represent themselves but also engage in politics – in other words, sites where 'noise' may potentially become 'sound.' Certainly, this conviction explains the dramatic increase in the use of testimony in recent years – particularly in the form of truth commissions worldwide (Gilmore 2001; Cubilié and Good 2004); in fact, the possibility of a truth commission has been entertained in almost every state that has transitioned from authoritarian rule or civil war, and even in those still fraught with violence and oppression but hopeful of transition (Hayner 1994: 23).

And yet, despite common conceptions of testimony as a means to 'break the silence' and 'speak truth to power,' this mode of representation, like any, is not inherently liberatory or conciliatory. Such unproblematic notions of the voice testimony provides overlook how it structures understanding and engagement across difference in particular ways. The question becomes, then, as Sidonie Smith asks of autobiography, "If to take up the [testimonial] mode is to take up certain discourses of selfhood and truth-telling, what are the performative liabilities and possibilities?" (Smith 1998: 38). How do the discursive dimensions of testimony affect our ability to both speak and listen in the ways it requires of us?

Those who have analyzed this form of voice find that this particular mode of giving account can lead to objectification, conflation, and appropriation by dominant listeners of what is represented, replicating asymmetries and perpetuating misrepresentations and harms even when the intention is to challenge and redress these selfsame processes. This

potential for epistemic violence explains common experiences of violation and disempowerment expressed by trauma survivors, who often note that court testimonials have been a source of retraumatization (Herman 1997: 72-3, 165; Gustafson 2012). It may also lie behind the increasing turn to theatre processes by those frustrated with truth and reconciliation commissions in South Africa, Cambodia, Sierra Leone and elsewhere, so much so that these theatre processes run parallel to and are often better attended than the commissions themselves.

Any form of representation always entails certain closures, however contingent and open to contestation. Such closures are "necessarily fictional, but also the fictional necessity…which makes both politics and identity possible" (Hall 1987: 45). However, with every closure of representation, there runs a risk of forgetting its performativity and with it the exclusions on which it is made possible. The literal language of testimony can exacerbate these risks. In the particular ways the literal discourse of testimony is conceived and employed to 'tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth,' such language presents itself as an objective, transparent and exhaustive account of what it seeks to represent. As a result, rather than gesture to and leave room for what remains unrepresented, multiple and in process, it can lead to essentialist and reductive readings of individual and group identity. Rather than maintain a crucial distance between self and other that is essential to encountering difference as difference, it can overlook its own limitations through the illusion of direct access. And rather than foreground the agency of the speaker, it can privilege the listener as interpreter of the other as object of knowledge. It is for these reasons that trauma victims, postcolonial scholars and therapists alike argue that the literal discourse of testimony can, in these contexts, be a source of violation for

the speaker even as it makes listening difficult.

"To tell the truth…": Risks of Essentialization

Though testimony always entails a certain dramaturgical element, this form of public address tends to mask its own performative dimensions. Its discursive demand to 'tell the truth' often equates and restricts such truth to the 'facts,' facts that are understood as objective, bounded, stable, and independent from both speaker and audience (Park-Fuller 2000: 26). Testimony is thus often constrained by what Leigh Gilmore calls an "almost legalistic definition of truth telling…[a] preference for the literal and verifiable, even in the presence of some ambivalence about those criteria" (Gilmore 2001: 3). Consequently, the aesthetic dimensions of such acts are not only downplayed but are often interpreted as working at cross-purposes to and indeed, if too pronounced – much like emotional or rhetorical displays in deliberation – undermining the validity of their truth-claims (Tierney-Tello 1999: 79-80; Waterson 2010: 513).

How does this literal, assertional mode of address affect meaning-making and the possibilities of representation? As Spivak's now-famous work on whether the subaltern can speak argues, even with a highly receptive and respectful audience who admire, celebrate and seek to understand the other, the gesture of listening to others often presumes this 'other' to be a stable, bounded, and essential identity that 'we' can come to know. When this is the case, our efforts to give voice to or understand 'the other' actually reduce the multiplicity, dynamism and open-endedness of identity to narrow, simplistic and prescriptive categories (Spivak 1999).

There are three ways that testimony can feed into such essentialisms: first, by such declarations being taken as 'authentic' – as expressions of stable, coherent,

pregiven identities transparent to both speaker and listener; second, by such declarations being taken as representative – 'speaking for' a broader identity category; and third, by the identities so declared being defined by their victim status, by the experiences they represent rather than the complexity, agency, and open-ended 'becoming' of identity.

In the first instance, by implicitly claiming direct, bounded and stable referents, by asserting itself as faithful account of the factual, by its presumed opposition to and ostensible absence of rhetorical or aesthetic modalities, such literal discourse *erases its own absences.* As such, it not only fails to represent the totality of its referents but in the same gesture its structure implicitly claims to *do* precisely this, a tendency that reflexive speakers must toil against with careful caveats and qualifications. As Della Pollock argues, literal speech "displaces, even effaces 'others' and 'other-worlds' with its partial, opaque representations of them, not only not revealing truths, meanings, events, 'objects', but often obscuring them in the very act of [representation]" (Pollock 1998: 83). As a result, literal language lends itself to representation and interpretation in these terms, facilitating a misreading of what Spivak calls "the text's desire as its fulfillment in the text" and Julie Salverson calls the "lie of the literal": creating the illusion of an authentic and unmediated account of concrete experience (Salverson 1996; Spivak 1998: 21).

Moreover, testimony's emphasis on the literal and verifiable for truth-telling can create within this genre what Sophie Tamas calls "portals [that] are too narrow and…demands [that are] too restrictive"; testimony that tends to positivist renderings can essentialize and simplify the complexity of experience and meaning that defy a single bounded identity and at times don't make sense at all (Tamas 2009). Particularly when

giving an account of experiences of trauma or marginality that have yet to prove salient within dominant discourse, testimony can entail "telling our messy, unreasonable stories in a tidy, reasonable voice" that, as Tamas and Gilmore argue, can be "an exercise in alienation" (Tamas 2009; Gilmore 2001: 3). And in their reception, the notion of the 'authentic' can invite judgments that are a source of further harm, as it opens the speaker to accusations of lying, embellishment, or evasion, the possibility of which can keep speakers in continued silence. In these ways, an emphasis on the literal and verifiable within personal narrative can introduces certain risks associated with assumptions and policing of authenticity.

Moreover, when truth is declared and interpreted as 'authentic' in this way, these declarations can be taken as representative, and are readily transformed into what Wendy Brown, in her compelling analysis of silence, calls "a regulatory truth about the identity group: confessed truths are assembled, deployed as 'knowledge' about the group" (Brown 2005: 91-2). Hence the personal narrative of testimony is often taken to 'speak for' absent others as a kind of native informant. Though such individual narratives are, in a sense, representational, when the specificity and partiality of such accounts is lost from view these representations work to exclude the heterogeneity of group identity and silence those whom it seeks to represent (Spivak 1998: 9; Sommer 1994: 535-6; Park-Fuller 2000: 32; Hantzis 1998).

Lastly, the tendency to essentialism in testimony has often privileged the category of 'victim,' reducing the speaker to the sum of their marginal experience; to use Wendy Brown's poetic phrase, "temporally ensnaring" them by defining them through their past, and reinforcing asymmetries between speaker and listener (Benton 1995;

Brown 2005: 92). Spivak's example of Halima Begun demonstrates this keenly, whose

articulate account of the violence of western industry and her own acts of resistance were

reduced to

> a byte of sensationalist human interest; a faint victim's voice providing proof, yet
> again, that the South needed precisely the kind of aid that this woman was
> resisting. It is in the context of hundreds of such examples that it may be said: the
> subaltern often cannot accede to testimony. (Spivak 1998: 9)

When representations of experience can be read as direct and transparent, the agency of

the speaker and complexity of experience too easily disappear from view. Whether taken

as the unproblematic sum of individual experience, representation of an essential

collective experience, or signal of victimhood rather than subjectivity and struggle, this

literal mode and the positivist 'truth' it is taken to represent introduce significant

challenges to the articulation of marginal positions and the challenge to dominant

discourse they often seek to incite. Thus in these various ways, the particular discourse

of testimony can lead to essentialization of 'others', where the speaker and the truths

they represent are construed as objects of knowledge that are stable, bounded, and

coherent.

"…the whole truth…": Risks of Conflation

Critics of testimony have also repeatedly argued that this mode of address

facilitates a collapse of the distance between speaker and listener. By using language that

declares it is 'the whole truth,' even the truth of personal experience rather than general

claim, the listener is granted the illusion of direct access (Sommer 1993: 141-3; Tierney-

Tello 1999: 83). This presumption of one's ability to truly grasp another's experience

essentially closes the gap between self and other, another's experience and our

understanding of it, that is essential to encountering difference as difference.

This has two effects on the ability to listen well. The first is a crude and even imperialistic form of empathy that is an overidentification with the other. Sophie Tamas makes the significant point that the scientific discursive norms of testimony that privilege clarity, reason, and the literal can cause a clinical distancing from the affective dimensions of experience, hence preventing an empathic response that motivates us to act (Tamas 2009). But personal accounts that use such language can, where affect is engaged, also foster a form of empathy rooted in the assumption that one 'grasps' or 'apprehends' another's reality, that one 'feels with' the other so represented. When we identify with others in this way, we seamlessly substitute "the 'you' with the 'as-if-it-were-me'," losing a sense of the specificity of the other, the need to appreciate their alterity, and one's own limits in understanding them (Sommer 1995: 925; Taylor 1998: 10; Diamond 2007). Doris Sommer, who has at length questioned presumptions of easy access in conditions of asymmetry, notes that rather than incite a sense of co-implication and responsibility, often this "rush of short-lived sentimental identification that over-steps the bounds of positional propriety…lasts hardly longer than the [telling]" (Sommer 1994: 535, 529). This is the form of empathy against which Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin, Seyla Benhabib and others warn, for it is the distance between self and other that make politics possible and allows the 'concrete other' to emerge (Arendt 1963: 69-90; Benjamin 1969: 253-64; Benhabib 1992: 168).

John Beverley notes, with others, that it is precisely "[t]he erasure of authorial presence in the *testimonio*, together with its nonfictional character" – in other words, its implicit claims to give an unmediated and exhaustive account – which allow onlookers the presumption of "rationality, identification, and comprehension"; which makes this

conflating form of empathy possible (Beverley 1992: 97; Tierney-Tello 1999: 84).

Dramatic realism has been critiqued for similar reasons: by creating a reality that

collapses the space between representation and referent, it positions its viewers to

recognize and verify it as such (Salverson 1996; Diamond 2007: 406-7).

Intimately linked to this form of empathy, the second effect is what Diana Taylor

(1998) calls 'percepticide' or self-blinding regarding anything that exceeds the terms of

reference with which the other is conflated. Rather than fostering mutual accountability

or reciprocity, this collapse of distance means that the other is only known through

folding them into one's own terms, "overwhelming unfamiliar voices to repeat sounds of

the self" (Sommer 1998: 171). Here, what demands attention in a democratic moment

can only remain white noise. In both cases, the listener's ability to listen well – to attend

to the excess of difference that defies one's present terms, and thus unsettles the

naturalized authority of these terms – is truncated, as the other is conflated with the self

and the limits of understanding disappear from view. These presumptions not only

preclude meaningful engagement with others in their difference, as a democratic ethos

demands, but also enable the 'benevolent imperialism' against which Spivak and others

warn. Thus, we come to see how the particular discourse of testimony can also lead to

conflation of difference where listeners may assume they *can* know the other in their

entirety, through a myth of neutrality and transparency that erases the distance between

one's experience and another's understanding of it.

"…and nothing but the truth.": Risks of Appropriation

As many scholars have noted, there is a power asymmetry inherent to the

testimonial mode as much as within many forms of democratic engagement across

difference. While testimony seems to entail a certain reciprocity and responsibility on the part of the listener that is meant to guard against the voyeurism of spectacle, this responsibility is a demand rather than inevitability, and may or may not be taken up by the culturally dominant audience. Even if one has a receptive and responsible audience, testimony is by definition articulated on uneven ground wherein one seeks to make marginalized experience comprehensible to a dominant listener. Thus testimony can, as Salverson and others observe, "reproduce a form of cultural colonialism that is at the very least voyeuristic" (Salverson 1996: 181).

This potential is exacerbated by the procedural norms of many testimonial processes. As Brian Gustafson notes, often what victims need is in sharp contrast to what the courts provide: rather than telling their story in their own way, they are required to answer yes or no questions; rather than control over the process, they are given no control, at times minimal understanding of, the process; and when they would often prefer no direct confrontation, they are placed in competition with their aggressor (2012).

And yet here, too, testimony's literal mode of address can also increase this risk. Given the tendency of such truth-telling to signal a transparent account of experience, knowledge production within this dynamic can privilege the listener as interpreter:

> The situation is not unlike the old anthropological one…The production of testimony is also not unlike the classic psychoanalytic situation. The analysand is persuaded…to give witness to his or her own truth, to which the analyst has access by virtue of tracking the graph of the metapsychological machinery… (Spivak 1998: 7)

For this reason, Spivak goes so far as to say that "[t]he subaltern's inability to testify is predicated upon…a failure of responsibility in the addressee," wherein the agency of the speaker is usurped by the notion of the passive victim interpellated and

verified by the listener (Spivak 1998: 9). Knowledge produced in this way, even if it is knowledge of marginalized experience, can have the adverse effect of allowing listeners to, as Doris Sommer argues, "presume mastery and maintain a sense of superiority" (Sommer 1993: 141-3). If truth is conceived as an object of knowledge represented directly through literal speech, within such asymmetrical relations these truths and their speakers can too easily become objects for the listener to actively 'grasp' through their knowing rather than subjects that look and speak back to their audience, which would challenge the very premises of the status of the listener upon which the power to grasp depends. Thus, testimony can facilitate an asymmetrical and unidirectional gaze that sees 'nothing but the truth,' denying or limiting the agency of the speaker as it hails the other into being through interpellation.

These critiques show that testimony, though often assumed to be and used for purposes that are progressive or interventionist, is not inherently so, and many of the ethical dangers that occur have been linked to literal language's particular form of truth-telling (Spivak 1998: 9; Cubilié and Good 2004: 6). As such, rather than generating the conditions for productively 'unsettling' encounters with difference that democracy demands of us, these accounts of marginal positions can reinscribe rather than disrupt dominant discourse and the asymmetrical relations they maintain (Alcoff and Gray 1993; Park-Fuller 2000). When this is the case, the very truths seeking resonance on the discursive terrain remain so much noise – ironically or perhaps poetically, in part due to this very emphasis on a literal mode of truth-telling.

While this is not to say that testimony necessarily functions through or reinforces this form of nonreciprocal seeing, it is clear that *how* we represent and engage difference

is as crucial as *if* we do at all. It cautions us that unproblematic notions of voice overlook the role that discursive conditions play in engagement with difference. And it is an invitation – perhaps a demand – to investigate alternative modes that might work somewhat differently, and so offer generative modalities for democratic engagement, as well as implications for how such engagement might be configured within more conventional sites.

Aesthetic Alternatives

If these are the risks of testimonial forms of address, what possibilities do alternative modes offer? Given the connection made by critics of testimony between these risks and the genre's literal form of account, the more *evocative* modes of performative practices might hold certain potentials that are as yet undertheorized in democratic theory. Performative practices communicate – they are by definition a communicative engagement between creator/performer and audience. Moreover, the meanings they generate, while diverse and open-ended, are by no means arbitrary or limitless. But the nature of such communication is notably different from conventional forms of political voice. In all artistic forms of representation, meaning-making processes tend to be evocative more than literal; exploratory rather than argumentative; generative rather than determinate. Meanings are represented as interpreted, and likewise the reception of such meaning is a creatively interpretive act. It is for this reason that, as art scholar Jill Bennett argues in the case of trauma-related art, performance is "best understood as *transactive* rather than *communicative*," where 'communication' stands in for faithful translation or representation of "the 'secret' of personal experience" (Bennett 2005: 7).

The question becomes, then, as Gilles Deleuze asks, not 'What does it mean?' but "How does it work?" (Deleuze 1995: 21). In what follows, I draw attention to three aspects of performative practices that distinguish them from the 'confessional' or literal modes of giving account that characterize not only testimony, but most conventional political processes. I contend that in contrast to tendencies towards essentialization, conflation and appropriation in literal modes of address, performative practices provide the means to signal the situated and necessarily limited nature of communication and understanding, keep in view the agency of the speaker, and mediate such encounters to facilitate receptivity and revisability, thus enabling forms of encounter that testimony demands and yet often elude it.

Performance Draws Attention to Itself: Foregrounding Contingency and Fostering Complex Empathy

While more literal forms of representation tend to mask their own contingency, artistic renderings present them – foreground them – in exactly these terms. As Nietzsche notes, there is a rare honesty in this (1967: 153). Performances are "habitats of singularities," that do not presume to speak for all of what it might participate in, nor even the entirety of the artist's identity or positionality (Guattari and Negri 1985). Moreover, as highly situated, interpretive and thus evocative rather than determinate of meaning, even as it opens worlds of experience it alludes to what is left out of the picture. In this way, performance makes explicit the inevitable 'excess' and 'absence' of communication – that it always generates more and perceives less than intended (Phelan 1996: 2). This can foster a reflexivity regarding the inability to claim one 'knows' the creator of the work any more than one's work captures reality in its entirety.

This is enhanced for the viewer via the concrete situatedness of one's experience of performance, where it is tangible and visible how the particular angle of one's position in the audience and how one's gaze constructs the piece from the composite elements moving on stage shape and limit one's perspective. In fact, given the particularity of each viewer's constitutive gaze and interpretation of performance, certain performance theorists have argued that each reception might be considered a distinct work (Danto 1981: 120; Rubidge 1996: 221). This is not to claim that interpretations are arbitrary or limitless, shaped and limited as they are by the particularity of the work, but it speaks to the active role the viewer plays in constructing meaning and the interpretive, and thus perspectival and limited, nature of that lens. While not all performance produces this effect, it can, by the foregrounding of its interpretive nature, generate a "different scopic economy":

> What becomes immediately visible are the specificities of our position and the ensuing limits to our perspective. We can't see everything; we can't occupy the visual vantage point of those located somewhat differently in the frame. What we see is clearly a function of where we happen to be standing – literally, politically, economically, and metaphorically. Though mutuality can be profoundly disconcerting and uncomfortable...it stops us short, obliging us to rethink and look again. This pause...is not a bad thing if it encourages us to question easy notions of free access and rights of passage.   (Taylor 1998: 183)

Moreover, as "performance calls attention to itself," it can show identity to be in process, a practice of citation, and "above all movements between and across, restless movements rather than secure arrivals" (Phelan 1998: 14, 16; Martin 1998: 187). Telling one's story in this way – rather than represent 'authentic' experience or give the illusion of fully grasping the identities so represented, as Angelia Means has argued (Means 2002: 230, 237) – can gesture to the processes of meaning-making themselves, and the power

relations and material effects that work through them. Performance artist Guillermo

Gomez-Peña describes this aspect of his work in such terms:

> Performance has taught me an extremely important lesson that defies all
> essentialisms: I am not straight-jacketed by identity. I have a repertoire of multiple
> identities...My collaborators and I know very well that with the strategic use of
> props, make-up, accessories, and costumes, we can actually reinvent our identity
> in the eyes of others, and we love to experiment with this unique kind of
> knowledge...Our audiences may vicariously experience other possibilities of
> esthetic, political, and sexual freedom they lack in their own lives. (2005: 25)

Thus, the explicit artfulness of meanings so rendered moves away from discourses

of 'authenticity' that mine for truth even as subjugated positions are given voice.

Connected to this, the evocative enables articulation and engagement of meaning and

identity in the absence of certainties: unlike literal discourse in which such collective

inquiry often requires that knowledge be "a fixed, knowable, finite thing," to be evocative

in meaning is also, as Julie Salverson and other argue, to generate a container in which a

space or 'gap' exists that can represent "risky stories…in such a way that the subtleties of

damage, hope and the 'not nameable' can be performed;" it can, as Augusto Boal argues,

"tell the truth, without being absolutely sure" (Salverson 1996: 184, 188; Boal 1995: 39).

In this way, the aesthetic provides a container spacious enough for meanings to be

collectively engaged and worked through even before they are coherent or clear in the

way literal language requires: as Tamas says in the context of traumatic memory, "I might

use creative methods, not in order to be clever, but because I myself don't know the story

that is sliding around in me, looking for an opening" (2009). Here, the 'noise' of

difference can be evoked and engaged even before it meets the demands of literal

discourse.

This ability to hold meaning and identity without "too tight [a] container" also provides a psychic distance between experience and representation for the speaker (Salverson 1996: 186). The significance of this psychic distancing cannot be overstated, particularly when the process involves marginalized communities and representations of personal trauma. As collective fiction, as character, as crafted scene, these mediations of experience work akin to certain ritual objects that Michael Taussig notes are effective insofar as they "display little likeness to the people they are meant to heal or bewitch" (Salverson 1996: 186; Taussig 1993: 51). Whereas the literal mode of testimony can lead to experiences of overexposure and retraumatization, the mediation of such experience in performance maintains the *gap* in resemblance that, as many theatre and trauma scholars note, psychic distance and safety are possible (Landy 1986: 100; Park-Fuller 2000: 31).

This multifaceted, multisensory mode also opens up multiple points of contact: one might connect with, be affected by, find resonance or meaning however divergent one's own experience may be from that of the creator or other observers. Indeed, often movement away from the verbal to more symbolic, visual, or embodied forms of signification can provide an even greater spaciousness for affiliations across profound difference. In sharp contrast to the clarity and directness of theoretical argumentation or literal testimony, here the evocative provides the "opacity and obscurity [that] are necessarily the precious ingredients of all authentic communications," as they offer a space "for the unmarked, or Other, or dissenter, to remain…[a] space across which the familiar and the strange can gaze upon each other" (Lionnet 1989: 4; Salverson 1996: 186).

In so doing, the evocative enables affiliation, even coalition, through what Boal and Cohen-Cruz call "analogy rather than identification," which is attentive to the complexity and particularity of the other's experience even within intense moments of resonance (Boal 1995: 45; Cohen-Cruz 2006: 110). This can work against tendencies of over-identification and appropriation by presenting complex others who cannot be wholly pinned down, whose identities are "diffuse and ungraspable," and open to resignification (Phelan 1996; Tierney-Tello 1999: 84; Park-Fuller 2000: 32). This facilitates more critical and complex forms of empathy – what Kaja Silverman calls "heteropathic identification" and Dominick LaCapra in the context of Holocaust art calls "empathic unsettlement," wherein one feels for another while maintaining a distinction between one's perception and the other's experience (Silverman 1996; LaCapra 2001: 41; Bennet 2005: 8).

This does not necessarily prevent epistemic violence via presumptions of grasping the other's authenticity, whether through negative or overdetermined empathic readings. The unidirectional nature of the gaze within the arts runs the risk of reinforcing a colonizing gaze that appropriates, essentializes and conflates difference so perceived.[2] However, as opposed to more literal modes of representing difference, performative practices are explicitly interpretive and so "self-evidently a *version* of what was, what is, and/or what might be" (Pollock 1998: 80). While this does not necessitate more democratic ways of engaging difference, where works foreground the artfulness of their

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[2] The politics of the gaze have long been interrogated within cultural studies and postcolonial theory, and artistic representations have been found to replicate the illusion of the omniscient eye, the unseen seer, and the other as object. John Berger first identified the assumption of the male gaze in Western visual art, while Laura Mulvey developed this gender critique in the context of film (Berger 1972; Mulvey 1975). Perhaps most famously, Edward Said has shown the Eurocentrism within artistic depictions of racial, ethnic and cultural 'others' and their implication in material and political asymmetries they helped legitimize and maintain (1985), though this has also been demonstrated by countless other scholars.

communicative modes, this makes possible more chastened forms of knowledge-claims and attentive forms of relation.

Creative Agency: To Perform is to Act

The explicit artfulness of performance's form of voice not only fosters sensitivity to the limits of understanding, but also works to foreground the *creative agency* of those employing such modes. While 'overexposing' literal modes can turn marginalized others into objects of knowledge defined by their past and interpellated by the observer, performance represents personal experience through explicitly creative acts. As such, it thwarts such totalizing and voyeuristic gestures by ensuring that the agency of those who represent such experience is never lost from view. Potential for 'overexposure' is tempered by *actors* or *performers* (the titles seems apt) who both surpass the particular account they provide and 'look back' at those who look on, enabling more symmetrical and reciprocal forms of engagement.

When participation is framed through such creative acts, it achieves three things. First, speakers, though representing experiences of marginalization, oppression, and trauma, are not defined solely in terms of these experiences, within an "aesthetic of injury" and victimization that "temporally ensnares" and reduces them to their past (Benton 1995; Salverson 1999; Brown 2005: 92). Those so represented are identified through their struggle and agency as opposed to their experience or an identity category, and in this sense these accounts provide an opportunity to, as Linda Park-Fuller and others argue, "recreate oneself, through oneself – to 'writ[e] back performatively against hardened discursive forms and practices'" (Strine 1998: 314; Park-Fuller 2000: 24-5). Secondly, this is articulated in a mode that, as performative, signals that the 'self' so

represented is one among many possible selves; it leaves a crucial capacity to remain open to future retellings.

And third, this necessarily draws attention to the observed who looks back and one's accountability therein. When intense affective experiences can allow observers to "suffer; but…le[t] us off in the end, exhausted with grief and relieved to have finished," where 'speaking truth to power' can actually open up what is disclosed to the scrutinizing and regulatory gaze of dominant discourse, this capacity to foreground the performative agency of the speaker and thus the reciprocity of the encounter seems particularly significant (Sommer 1996: 125). In this sense, "to perform is to act, in…the sense of…claiming back the autonomy that is stripped from the individual person," and those who employ such modes are construed as active agents rather than docile subjects or objects of knowledge (Alcoff 1991-2: 21; Park-Fuller 2000: 26; Waterson 2010: 522). By foregrounding the creative act, engagement and the potential solidarity it generates is thus "not through pity or a false identity politics but through a recognition that the subject is a producer of culture" (Tierney-Tello 1999: 84).

Artistic Mediation: Spaces for Revisability

Though the means for a more ethical, honest, and generative politics, encounters with difference introduce ambiguity and complexity, unsettling of the 'resting places' that ground, frame, and strengthen us, and threatening our self-assurance and the security it provides. Moreover, it also entails moments of felt implication and shame. While these moments of encounter can open one up to more complex ways of seeing, they can thus also incite fear, defensiveness, deepening entrenchments, and foreclosures – they can either transform or exacerbate unethical and harmful relations with difference.

Democratic politics requires of us the capacity for 'revisability' (Deveaux 2003: 792; Dryzek 2005: 229), and yet this might be the very thing that is most difficult to achieve when one is 'caught out' as the contingency – often implication – of one's account of the world is exposed.

One of the most significant aspects of performative practices in this context is the fact that these dissembling, ungrounding moments are highly mediated. They are mediated in a number of ways: first, they exist in 'liminal zones' apart from everyday existence, and their fictional nature distances them from the specific context in which one is invested; second, the publics they instigate are once-removed from one's own community, such that one is not immediately accountable, or even visible, in moments when one is 'caught out' and compelled to revise; and third, their dynamic of engagement does not require immediate response or action in light of such moments, and so there is 'breathing space' in which the process of revisability can occur.

All artistic encounters generate an "in-between temporality," a "stillness of time and a strangeness of framing" that mediates other realities and possibilities in the specific moment, "bridging the home and the world" (Bhabha 1997: 451). However, it is in performance, which so closely resembles other forms of public engagement, that we can see the distinct contributions such mediated dynamics make to public engagement most clearly. Unlike static art forms and similar to conventional public spheres, performance is a physically and temporally demarcated space where artists and audiences meet; in this way, performance works like other forms of democratic engagement to create a degree of "reflective distance" from the context in which one is usually immersed, and so enabling participants to "revise their conceptions of what is valuable or worthy of pursuit [and] to

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assess various courses of action with respect to those ends" (Baynes 1994: 318).

However, 'liminality' of performative engagements is far more pronounced than in these conventional publics, so much so that the widely held definition of performance is in terms of such liminality – a "spatial, temporal, and symbolic 'in-betweenness' [that] allows for dominant norms to be suspended, questioned, played with, transformed" (McKenzie 1998: 218).

Judith Butler notes the difference between theatrical and social performance in much the same terms, stating that "performances in non-theatrical contexts are governed by more clearly punitive and regulatory social conventions" because they lack performance's theatrical conventions that "delimit the purely imaginary character of the act" (Butler 1990: 278). Some performances admittedly try to break with such conventions, but they nonetheless do so within clearly demarcated parameters.[3] Unlike conventional publics, performance is designed to temporarily suspend the otherwise largely seamless flow of daily performances of identity, norm, and meaning and the material relations they legitimize, and engage in the serious play with possibility. It asks for the 'suspension of disbelief,' and invites the spectator to play with the norms, codes, laws, and customs that govern one's life beyond the stage. Moreover, these invitations take the form of staged enactments that, as evocative, audiences may watch unfold without being told what to think or how to respond. As such, they do not demand specific readings – which would, as Gilles Deleuze, Brian Massumi, Jill Bennett and others argue,

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[3] Invisible theatre is unique in breaking with this; it is theatre performed in public vicinities, the artifice of which unassuming 'audiences' are unaware. Given this lack of awareness, this particular dimension of performance does not apply to invisible theatre; however, it works politically in a different way. We will see this used in chapter four, where this invisibility enabled the 'rehearsal' of and experience of 'success' in a confrontation with police within a protesting crowd, so inciting a sense of courage and hope prior to actual confrontation.

"merely short-circuit critical thought"; they do "not so much *reveal* truth as thrust us involuntarily into a mode of critical inquiry" (Bennett 2005: 11, 90; Deleuze 1972: 161; Massumi 2002).

Secondly, precisely because it is set apart from everyday life and does not directly invoke one's particular context, this invitation is more likely to be met with curiosity and receptivity, and a willingness to experiment. Within performative engagements, my identification with and thus investments in the course of events, the laws of physics and norms of politics are therefore not as great; I do not so easily feel personally attacked when a character with whom I share ground is challenged precisely on that ground. Performance interacts with me obliquely, and through once-removed enactments within a theatrically demarcated terrain, what is normally met with rejection or perceived as noise might very well sneak in through the cracks. Indeed, in these mediated contexts where there is less at stake, so to speak, it becomes just a little more tenable to engage ambiguity and complexity, and it is possible that such encounters might cultivate a 'dissembling' of the association of difference with threat that receptivity and revisability require.

This receptivity is also fostered by the mediated quality of performance's 'publics,' in two ways. Firstly, they are distinguished from one's immediate contexts: the audiences of performance are 'thrown together,' in Iris Young's terms (1996: 126), and as opposed to the communities to which one feels immediately accountable – those in which one would feel most 'caught out' when found to be wrong or implicated – this public at-a-remove provides a certain breathing space for quiet, unsettling, transformative moments, where implication or shame can lead to a turning-towards rather than a turning-away. One has space 'between,' in this liminal zone – often even in the cover of darkness

– to admit to oneself what is difficult to acknowledge publicly. Secondly, this 'public'

does not demand an immediate response. At once "*both real and not real*," these

experiments have "no *necessary* consequence for the audience. Paradoxically, this is the

first condition needed for performance efficacy" (Kershaw 2000: 139; original emphasis).

This is not to say that performance is not "consequential" – performance that I am

interested in here is "meant to make a difference" (Pollock 1998: 95). However, it effects

this change through the way that it opens up spaces for reflection and revision, and it does

this in part *through* the lack of immediate demand on those so engaged. Rather than

immediate response, which so often can encourage knee-jerk reactions that have recourse

to familiar habituated patterns, this creates a temporal breathing space for reflection both

within and following performance; in this way, engagement with art works does not end

with the immediate encounter, but expands into further evaluation, discussion, and

integration. Indeed, perhaps due to the processural nature of the understanding it initiates,

performance presents a means through which such revisability over time is facilitated in a

way that other political forums that demand immediate response have difficulty

achieving. In light of how precarious and difficult receptivity is to maintain in encounters

with difference – particularly those encounters in which we are implicated, feel exposed,

and scramble to shore up our defenses – this ability to depict marginalized experiences

that implicate and invoke the broader community without provoking these usual

responses seems especially valuable.

Objections and Challenges

Certainly, by drawing attention to these dimensions of performative practices, this

is not to argue that such alternatives are inherently salutary, any more than the testimonial

form is inherently liberatory or suspect. Indeed, while these dimensions of performance hold a certain promise, practices vary tremendously regarding how effectively they employ them and to what ends. It is, however, to argue that such aesthetic alternatives offer rich resources for the representation of marginalized voices precisely where more literal modes encounter the most challenges. Whereas literal language can lead to forms of essentialization, conflation, and appropriation of difference, performance practices foreground the interpretive and situated nature of truth-claims and the agency of those use employ them. Moreover, by mediating such encounters both through the evocative nature of these accounts and the liminality of the spaces in which they are given, these practices provide the conditions for greater receptivity and, with it, accountability on the part of the listener.

And yet, performative practices entail their own risks and challenges, many of which lie behind the traditional reluctance in deliberative theory to consider them as legitimate forms of political voice. Seyla Benhabib, perhaps, is the most adamant on this count, who famously cautions that the

> attempt to transform the language of the rule of law into a more partial, affective, and situated mode of communication would have the consequence of inducing arbitrariness, for who can tell how far the power of a greeting can reach? It would further create capriciousness—what about those who simply cannot understand my story? It would limit rather than enhance social justice because rhetoric moves people and achieves results without having to render an account of the bases upon which it induces people to engage in certain courses of action rather than others.
>
> (1996: 83)

Granted, such critiques rest upon a long-standing distinction in deliberative theory between reason and rhetoric, the former defined by Habermas in part by its lack of affect and 'autonomy' from the latter's 'coercive' force (Habermas 1975; Abizadeh 2007). In what has been dubbed the 'rhetoric revival' in democratic theory, many scholars have

challenged this distinction, contending that aesthetics are always-already entailed in all modes of representation, and such dimensions do not work at cross-purposes to substantive meaning, but are in fact integral to it. Tone, volume and pace of voice, facial expression, gesture, affective expression, and rhetorical devices play key roles in conveying and interpreting meaning, such that, as Richard Rorty concludes, the line between rhetorical persuasion and the 'force of argument' "begins to fade away" (Lash 1994; Rorty 1997: 18; Hoggett and Thompson 2002; Massumi 2002: 3; Walzer 2002; Dahlberg 2005: 114-6). Indeed, in this light the dispassionate, clear, and direct "speech culture" that is often taken as a sign of objectivity in testimony and deliberation is revealed to be its own form of rhetoric. The beneficial role of speech's rhetorical dimensions is also acknowledged even by theorists who still posit a clear line between substance and form, as rhetoric is seen to "open people to deliberation, draw them together into a functioning deliberative community, and help transform their opinion into policy" (Gutmann and Thompson 1996; Dryzek 2010; Chambers 2009; Garsten 2011: 163). Moreover, Benhabib may be misplaced in deeming that aesthetic practices give 'no account', as performance is by definition a mode of communication, providing an account albeit by very different strategies.

And yet, while rhetoric may be impossible to disentangle from meaning and while the 'autonomy' of judgment may be a false distinction when we understand that we are persuaded to *feel* an argument's legitimacy just as an affective response *has its reasons*, this does raise a valid concern regarding the capacity for discernment within the dissembling, unruly conditions with which rhetoric and affect persuade us, even move us *in spite of ourselves*. Though it is precisely this dimension of 'dissembling' that allows habitual patterns of thought and action that prevent meaningful engagement with

difference to be unsettled, the democratic or ethical nature of such dissembling is somewhat at the mercy of the intention of the speaker and the perceptual terrain that is so unsettled, the 'force' of such persuasion undermining the hallowed liberal value of free judgment. When we acknowledge the extent to which our orientations, attachments and reasoning are always-already affectively constituted in ways of which we are not always consciously aware, this concern appears on somewhat shaky ground – though the anxiety regarding correct judgment is no less valid. This anxiety regarding aesthetic-affective dimensions strikes me as part of a far broader debate regarding liberal demands for self-determination, the radical critique of its presumption of self-aware subjects, and the liberal rejoinder of who, then, decides what is best if not the individual – a theoretical tennis match for which there may be no resolution, and certainly beyond the capacity of this article to resolve. But even with all of these caveats that undermine the distinction between rhetoric and reason, thought and feeling, manipulation and persuasion, the unruliness of aesthetic-affective modes contrasts starkly to the – all be they intersubjective and affectively and culturally informed – terms and norms of testimony, deliberative reasoning and decision-making.

Perhaps the only clear direction in light of this entanglement and irreconcilable tension between the "force of argument" and "rhetorical persuasion" is the demand to contextually interrogate specific aesthetic practices to determine the extent to which they enact the conditions of democratic engagement, rather than set terms and limits for rhetoric or affect a priori. Certainly, the politics of difference gesture to the inability to achieve the latter without also involving culturally specific and exclusionary practices (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Young 2000; Mohanty and Martin 2003). Here, the 'arbitrariness' of

meaning that vexes Benhabib regarding aesthetic-affective practices is not arbitrary so much as contextually determined, thus extending the very notion of 'intersubjective reasoning' within deliberative models to take seriously the intersubjectivity of a site's 'concrete others' (Benhabib 1992), and in the process even enabling greater self-determination regarding terms and norms as liberal theorists seek to do. Here, the flexible and yet foundational norms of democratic engagement – a care for the complexity of identity/difference, the limits of prevailing terms, and receptive generosity towards the persistent murmur and occasional shout of the difference that exceeds them – provide a normative framework in which accountability does not preclude contextual specificity, and the affective and rhetorical may be held to account rather than dismissed outright.

And yet, perhaps also with the recent and still-burgeoning surge of critical engagement with aesthetic practices, more nuanced, culturally sensitive and rigorous frameworks for evaluating the legitimacy and democratic efficacy of aesthetic-affective modes is also possible. Indeed, by taking seriously the interrelation of reason and rhetoric, meaning and processes of meaning-making, the very terms for 'reasonableness' might be refined and developed in generative ways even within more conventional deliberative processes and liberal paradigms. This has many potential effects: on the one hand, we may come to understand in greater depth the political effects of aesthetic dimensions in all forms of political communication. On the other hand, we may develop a language with which to handle the most 'unruly' aspects of communication – affect, the body, imagery, symbol – to at once make better use of these aesthetic-affective forms and to hold them accountable to democratic norms. The task here becomes one of not bracketing or governing aesthetic-affective communicative modes – as if we could – but

of "mobiliz[ing them] towards the promotion of democratic designs" (Mouffe 1996: 756; 2002; Bennett 2001: 132).

Concluding Remarks

While testimony has been used as a powerful means to give voice to marginalized and as-yet pre-discursive experiences, values and claims, its particular model of truth-telling carries with it the potential for overexposure, misrepresentation, and the reinforcement of existing asymmetries – even when the express purpose is to challenge these selfsame processes. This cautions us to unpack the concept of 'voice' to examine how particular voices shape understanding and relations across social difference and political inequality in particular ways. And it invites us to explore voices currently overlooked in democratic theory, such as those offered within the performing arts. For while these evocative forms of representation introduce a new set of questions for democratic theory and practice, they also hold the promise of accomplishing what democratic politics demands and yet finds most elusive: forms of encounter that foster an attentiveness to difference, the limits of understanding, and the receptivity this requires. By broadening the terms for what counts as democratic engagement to include such practices, I believe we develop the means to broaden political inclusion of presently marginalized voices, as well as the tools with which to better represent and engage social difference with the attentiveness a democratic ethos demands.

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