Cultural Values ISSN 1362-5179
Volume 5 Number 1 January 2001 pp 41-58

Trauma and Ineloquence

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Abstract: *This is a paper about trauma and ineloquence, violence and banality, and the utopian conventions of self-expression in liberal mass society: the U.S. is the scene of the case. The essay pursues relations among the post-traumatic reparative contexts of the law, religion, therapy and popular culture, all under the sign of autobiography. These domains articulate generic conventions of self-expressivity with the formalism of self-reflective liberal personhood. They link norms of expressive denegation to genres that conventionalize, and make false equivalents among, diverse traumatic consequences. When scenes of post-traumatic ineloquence morph into modes of transformative-style rhetoric, does the eloquent form distract from, become a mask for, or intensify the unreachable or inarticulable thought that wants to change the norms of negation? A short history of the soundtrack as a site that marks the centrality of ineloquence to traumatic expression condenses the paradox of the moment, where a post-traumatic desire to become undefensive meets up with pop banality and therapeutic cliché.*

Testimony and Impersonality

'I am in a horrible fear' 'I fear the night' 'I am afraid to go out further than the grocery shop' ' I don't go out' ' I sleep in the house of my friend' ' I cannot concentrate' 'I am sensitive on all the sounds' 'I have fear of mobilization for my brother' 'When sirens starts I feel nauseatic' 'I have lost 4 kilos, I broke down psychologically' ' every night I go to the shelter, I feel bad' 'when I see soldiers on the street I shudder' 'I feel I dropped out from the tracks, everything changed in my life' 'I am worried for my future' 'I am constantly on the sleeping pills' 'I sleep all dressed up' 'Children in the shelter are very disturbed' 'On my work place men started to drink intensively' 'I am nervous' 'I am not afraid of death but I am afraid of sudden sounds' 'It is killing me that I cannot work anything any more' 'My emotional state is changing every hour' 'I

> threw out the TV set, I cannot listen to that language anymore' 'Neighbors are talking apocalyptic gossips all the time' 'I am nervous, I go from the shelter to the flat three times in one night' 'I feel like leaving this country forever, it is so nauseate' 'New fears are coming'
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> Warning Please do not give this info to the press, or when you use any of the facts please do not give the name of the source because it may be dangerous for the author

Communiqués come to my box each day from places under siege – Kosovo, Iraq, Sri Lanka, Texas, Pennsylvania, Chicago. Rarely are they written to me, precisely: some of them I have sought out, while others take my name from networks to which I already belong. They are written to me, impersonally – that is, to me as a stranger in relation to other strangers whose survival requires the recruitment of a type through type. They seek a genre of person who can feel an attachment to others abstractly and yet urgently stake something personal on acting with respect to it. Along with challenging a wholly personalized notion of intimacy and obligation, the testimonial letter explodes standard notions of geopolitical space. Political struggle breeds new and ungoverned spaces, which transform constantly in crisis time, in the interstices of bombs, feedings, police encounters, and the like. The extra-legal nature of these unbound spaces is mimed, in turn, by the author's appropriation of legal rhetoric. The law's multiple genres – evidence, argument, and judgment – appear here twistedly in order to create a counter-public for a regime of justice that does not exist yet. By presuming them, the testimonial also transgresses the rules of these genres, claiming the authority of self-evidence as opposed to the authority bequeathed by institutions and consenting audiences. In this sense, seeking to constitute a popular archive that can be repeated and become the index of social value in contrast to the institutions and norms deemed ordinarily to denote what's right and righteous, the outsider letter also signifies the author's withdrawal of consent from the normativity of the dominant. But one never knows, when one sends out soundings such as these, whether the consequences will be nothing or something. It depends on whether or not the given information turns to communication that wields enough force to be deemed the *knowledge of record*.

This is a paper about trauma and ineloquence, impersonality and intimacy, and the force of testimonial knowledge and expertise in the contemporary United States. It is about a change in the normative structure of mass subjectivity, a shift in the public sphere standard of ordinary personhood from an Enlightenment model of the reasonable man who is organized by a hierarchy of mind over body in favor of an image of the subject who becomes historical by proximity to trauma.[2]

Trauma is a famously indefinable thing – an overwhelming event, a scene of impact beyond the eloquence of history, the literal, unsymbolizable mark of pure violence, or its opposite, violence congealed in an intensified representation (Caruth, 1995, 1996; Felman, 1991; LaCapra, 1996; Farrell, 1998; Burns et. al, 1999). Whatever has been meant by trauma, though, my aim is to understand its formal qualities: as a universal category it must appear to need no enumeration, to appear transparent, or empty. This paradox explains why a subject who identifies as post-traumatic is deemed both to have the most and least expertise over its significance – least because trauma definitionally dissolves the rules of continuity that stabilize self-knowledge over time and most because ultimately no one else can witness one's own story. When adopted, as it now so often is, as a metaphor for the singular personal and collective experience of social negativity, trauma's tautological quality protects the subject by assuring his/her expertise over the ground of his/her claim. ('I no longer can make up self-continuity as a person/community in control of my history, but no-one can take my trauma away from me'). It's the gift (of loss) that keeps giving.

The imprecision of the 'concept-metaphor' trauma is, then, neither my doing nor evidence of its descriptive emptiness: like most categories called empty, it actually overflows with meaning (Spivak, 1987, p. 198). Any concept that is considered a universal must take on the form of this emptiness, this indeterminate and proliferative abstraction, while appearing to assume a formal continuity that surpasses any particular content. This is why theorists of trauma turn over and over to psychoanalysis and lyric theory, and their attention to rhythm and impact and repetition, to describe the traumatic. Regardless of content, there is a certain pleasure to the condensation of the symptom and the lyric mode, which hold a place still enough to enable the subject's continual return. On the other hand, the nightmare of a repetition governed by a rhythm that overwhelms the performance of will interferes with the capacity to imagine a beyond to the scene or the event that dominates the present. Adjudicating the relation between these processes is often described by the phrase 'working through'. Hard work if you can get it.

Yet the negated must speak *as though* his/her speech has already attained clarity: that is, has already become performative. In this sense the testimonial's phrases also speak to a version of the reader that does not yet exist, as though the existence of the historical person were only part of a collective agreement from which the letter writer can threaten effectively to withdraw. The testimonial 'I' here, then, to cite Hortense Spillers, is used on behalf of a collective function: the outsider letter form smudges the line between collective and individual subjectivity, speaking ideally to a world but mediated through nonparticularized

individualities (1987, p. 67). The bodily distress whose communication grounds the claim for the reader's political transformation means nothing without the reader's critical commitment to keeping the event open, which means experiencing the trauma of someone else's story and communicating it in a way that keeps it traumatic *for others*. This is why testimonials always partake of the epistolary. The one-at-a-timeness of such a collectivized imaginary makes publics out of privacies, and vice-versa.

In short, the rhetorical mood of this record is impersonal, objective, and intimate. Deemed otherwise unspeakable, the unrepresentable truths of traumatic subordination and negation must be translated into modes of rhetorical failure dramatic enough about ongoing violence to be effective in communicating trauma as a visceral and cognitive experience. Mobilizing the putative universality of pain and suffering, the testimonials challenge you to be transformed by the knowledge of what you cannot feel directly: to re-hardwire your viscera, enabling your bodily impulses to archive the encounters of which you read. They make it your job to seek a right relation to conscience, that place of higher law where you face the disparities between the letter and the spirit and then tally the results of your deduction. Such a dare is incredibly intimate, threatening to expose you to your newly mediated self as unfeeling while, at the same time, *in the know*. Conscience is where you do the math. To the degree that actual numbers are involved – so many dead, so many imprisoned, so many marked out for violence – the dialectic of testimony and witnessing has material consequences. One either commits to compelling new laws and practices, or not. One decides to count, or not. One makes further publics with one's knowledge, or not.

Desperately requesting that the audience pass the stories on, then, the 'I' under duress has a mixed aim. It needs to provide lines to speak masterfully. One must feel compelled to repeat them, which is the only condition under which they take on the form of authority. At the same time one must admit that the words are inadequate, just as individuals and conscience and knowledge as such are inadequate to the transformative task at hand. The inadequacy of the words that nonetheless capture the scene of duress produces internal anxieties that ideally force one to feel that changing the world that produces these stories is now a condition of one's own survival. These stories must work like a virus, so that people burdened with trauma-knowledge feel a continuous and displeasing bodily echo. Negativity circulated through the testimonial thereby produces *negativities*. Impersonality and anonymity point toward ineloquence to register the inhumanity of violence by hyper-personalizing 'you', but only in terms of what you must do. Who you were before you read the letter does not matter. The noise one makes from the negative must exemplify a social relation

effectively without turning it into a thing that already exists, since the point of circulating counter-juridical testimony about depersonalizing harms is to stake out a future that exists only beyond the letter.

I am suggesting how it works that the rhetoric of these stories articulates ineloquence with sensational narrative. This is a rhetorical, political, and ethical paradox that faces anyone who pays attention to the current proliferation of testimonies to violence of all sorts. Sue Golding calls the mode of testimonial authorship I have been describing the enactment of not-not negativity (1997, pp. 16-18; see also Derrida, 1987). Overcoming the negative through the agency of the letter does not mean that the author's negation has been negated like a filled hole or a fear quelled permanently, like the addition of two negatives, even if some 'success' is achieved by the letter according to some measure or other. Instead, de-negation is the best we can imagine for the social transformation of subordinated lives: the testimonial remains are also evidence for what has been. Symptoms that condense history are like dead metaphors, challenging their readers to make them live.

This returns us to the problem of the ethics of critical attention, 'the delicacy of listening' (Renov 1994, p. 94). It's one thing to be in trauma's sensually overwhelming and numbing spaces; quite another to read about such things in the absence of bodies and images of bodies that become mnemonics – failed symptoms, or testimonials – for the trauma gauzed and revealed by language. I have suggested that we are presumed to know what to do with the knowledge of the wounds that are beyond our own flesh. Gayatri Spivak speaks often of the responsibility of the privileged recipients of the letter to learn to translate ourselves into languages we will never master, so as to make ourselves vulnerable in the language of the dominated subject – presuming, of course, that we encounter her (1993). But there is never anything transparent or universal about the meaning of the word-wound, whether photographed in the flesh or in its testimonial genre. The witness is always belated, which means that knowledge is always bound by loss, and efforts at repair by futility. A studied humility of commentary at its ineloquence in the face of the contingent object of (interpretive) desire is not only the only ethical stance of the privileged but a demand to mark the place-holding function of all post-traumatic signification.

Where representing testimonial authenticity and historical optimism are concerned, the assertion of a bodily real behind the clarity of traumatic representation has become an equally demanding norm. Under these conditions, the new field of expertise that includes this special issue emerges, producing cases and explanations that, honoring the topic, do not explain it away. But what happens when the testimonial form becomes ordinary over time, across repetitions? Rather than producing spaces of clarity that mark in advance the value of

testimonial agency, I' d like to think about the genres and the norms that have become associated with them that organize the contemporary circulation of trauma in heterotopias of listener intimacy.

What does it mean to track a form? Form is not the same as genre, which refers to the conventionality of interpretive law. For genre to exist as a norm it has first to circulate as a form, which has no ontology, but which is generated by repetitions that subjects learn to read as organized inevitably. In its simplest sense, this paper asks, what does it mean that non-juridical testimony has become a popular form whose authority is performed by the *genre*? I want to parse these terms and their interrelation in the testimonial form – as law, genre, embodiment, knowledge.

Let me rephrase what I have been arguing thus far in terms of a counter-liberal theory of form. As I have suggested elsewhere, the abstraction law enables is simultaneously a scene of form and formlessness, of surplus embodiment and of exile and silence (1991, 1993).[3] Law represents the structure that enables the fantasized formlessness of universalized personhood, an a- or anti-morphousness in which the subject who can be represented is deemed free of abandonment to a negated body and bodily destiny. Here, representation is the universal whose opposite is usually the thing we call 'embodied particularity'. In certain circumstances, however, the negated subject is not predominantly marked by revelations of her all-too-intelligible corporeality, but by her anonymity. This anonymity mirrors and inverts the formlessness of the universal subject privileged by law and by the concept of abstract personhood. Not a neutral or even utopian anonymity, it is an agonistic one (Anderson, 1991; Berlant, 1997; Bersani, 1987; Young, 1990). It challenges our notion of the intelligibility and clarity of the particular, which usually signifies as though it is always shaped as a detail of lived experience that can be verified. As the non-universal subject is both negated and shaped by the law, her safety and survival often require her further anonymity to it. Additionally, the urgency of her position is repeated in our anonymity to her, for even when the letters are sometimes signed the name almost always signifies alterity, mere sound. An impersonal intimate letter to a stranger: this describes the law of genre in the testimonial form.

Yet we also know that some urgencies are more urgent than others. In the contemporary US, and for the last twenty-five years, this modality of performance has come to express all sorts of condition, threatening to flatten out trauma's bumpy terrain. Thus to approach this mode of self-translation and circulation is to see it sometimes become something other as well, regardless of content: an insistence on the self as a traumatic story that must be told endlessly, its repetition made soap opera, melodrama, an aria.[4] Its modality is rhythmical, but more like sprung verse wedged into a sonnet. As these conventions of personhood

have converted into signs full of a desire for presence they have taken on the form, say, of pop music. Sublimity is marked in its intelligible pulsations, the playing out of a generic sound, the plunking noise of banality. As the lyrics are unmemorable even while memorizable, the form becomes the message, threatening to neutralize the imperative claim of the content.

This is always the risk universalizing takes. My point here is not to repeat Adorno's argument that, for example, unvarying syncopation (of jazz) numbs the mind, but that the pervasiveness of testimonial genres now threatens to mime the numbing or banalizing aspects of repetition. The difference is in the unstable thematic of disrupted, hiccupping form that traumatic stories involve: a predictable thematic performing inevitable repetitions, but ones that pierce a will to no longer feel vital or alive, and therefore traumatized.

In this version of this essay, my heterogeneous archive is suppressed due to limitations of space. It would come, if it were here, mainly from the United States: what makes its objects comparable is the way autobiographical testimony serves as the prime formal evidence that the contemporary moment is an historical present in which someone or a community has suffered enough to be said to live on but not beyond a trauma that defines the *now*. Historically, I am particularly interested in the eruption of 'women's networks' in the United States: this includes formations within popular journalism of the nineteenth century through those of the contemporary the mass public sphere. Generically speaking, this archive links the testimonial or 'complaint' form that unsilences women's knowledge to other expressive modes such as the voice over and the soundtrack, those sites which always mark the elsewhere to realist narrative in modern literatures (aesthetic and otherwise): think the place of the *melos* (music) in the 'woman's film', in its figuration of the inexpressible. These kinds of linkage have come to suture women across diverse scenes of suffering, asserting and erasing the difference, for example, between the letter from the unknown woman in war and the letter from the unknown woman in love. But when any woman testifies publicly 'as woman' she is unknown: her knowledge is marked as that which public norms have never absorbed, even when there's nothing new about the particular news she brings (Berlant, 1998).

Recognizable by its recourse to the 'I', the testimonial form forces you to pay attention, even to the clichés. Yet a world of monologues bouncing off of each other like so many molecules can look not very emancipatory. More like 'empowering': the logic of contemporary conventional testimony evokes a desire for bigger, insurgent selves in a world whose parameters and value hierarchies are taken for granted. It can look normative and disciplinary, a scene of instruction in the proper formalism of the person. But if there is nothing wrong with autobiography itself, the 'so what' question its post-traumatic versions

inevitably generate has to be joined with what we might call the 'for what' question. Dissident knowledge by women (and subjects conventionally overidentified with the body) always bears the burden of its apparent failure to be impersonal *enough.* For what end is the story being told? But to ask this does not mean that the rhetoric of trauma is *bad* – just, minimally, that it is *rhetoric.*

On Genre and History: Or, The Law of Cliché

It may seem that I will attribute too much to the banalizing consequences of repetition. Let me explain what is behind that emphasis. As Judith Butler argues in *The Psychic Life of Power,* psychoanalytically speaking, we are taught to love the law, and to see its goodness in us (1997). The story of testimony as a transgressive genre must start with this first exchange, this mirroring of something formal about the world in modes of promised intelligibility where institutions meet persons and make them social. A Marxist and a psychoanalytic genealogy meet up in this domain: for Negt and Kluge, Laplanche, and Zizek fantasy is the approximate other of testimony; it too produces a sense of pseudocontinuity between the person and the social (Zizek, 1994, pp. 28-9; Zizek, 1997; Negt and Kluge, 1993; Laplanche and Pontalis, 1986). When fantasy works, one does not appreciate the non-continuity between oneself and the world. When mass fantasy works, as in national identifications, the sense of this continuity reverberates in the form of a political right. Conventionally speaking, the form of individuality in liberal culture censors the non-continuity between, say, individual self-understanding and the meaning of acts between representation and event, voice and agency, even blood and national destiny. Indeed the whole dream of a liberal public sphere demands this discontinuity: in order for a state to regulate speech the capacity to circulate it, to associate in political groups, and to generate counternormative practices, speech must be separable from citizenship, and therefore paradoxical within the law. In the public sphere speech is more legitimate as it becomes more separate from bodies. The capacity to speak is evidence of the person's formation as a legal subject and of the law's successful protection of him as a citizen. What's censored, by which I mean disavowed, in this context, is the non-continuity among these positions: of speaker/agent, juridical subject, citizen.

This leads us back to the law. In the law, testimony has an instrumental purpose: it is evidence in an argument constructed by someone else, the prosecutor of the case. In law, evidence is presented according to strict rules that cover ideological things like relevance and materiality to the case – anonymous evidence and hearsay, of the type we have already heard, are banned. Legal evidence thus becomes part of

an archive that can be mobilized only insofar as it fits syntactically. This schematic is at the center of the pleasure of law: its clarity machine protects us from experiencing our negation. Anyone who has experienced their personal irrelevance to systemic social negativity will understand when I describe human rights and liberal law as the lover on the white horse who actually does sometimes come, and in a way that makes a difference to the how the world works, cleaning up the spaces of contestation and contingency in order to represent continuity while neutralizing its unstable detritus. Rather than being against the law or love or attachment, then, I am trying to pace out something about form: the relation between the testimonial genre as a marker of juridical/confessional personhood on the one hand and the testimonial genre as a form of self expression that marks a temporal urgency, a claim on time, and a mode of authenticity on the other. This latter form borrows from the long history of autobiographical performance in proximity to law, religion, and therapy culture, the modalities of cleaning up subjects and the social that mark a certain modern faith in the intentional self and its visible effects. But the dissident knowledge managed by the modern genre of the testimonial focuses not on the intentional self but the self made bereft of intention; not the legitimate person but the negated subject, whose negation makes her collective and minor, as Deleuze and Guattari famously say (Ferguson, et. al., 1992). Autobiography is always a mode of autocaptioning: I want to de-laminate the urgency of such testimonial performance from the traditional form it takes, to understand the increasing formalism of the systemically negated subject, made isolated by that negation and made simultaneously part of a collective world.

That is, we track the contemporary story of 'our' intelligibility as Enlightenment subjects who feel that the self exists because it has internalized those genres of discipline and fantasy or faith that originate in the law and in religious confession since Augustine. Foucault has done some of the conceptual work here, leading to a view of these genres as repressive: but as Michael Renov argues, he also 'draws our attention to the dynamic and protean character of confessional utterance' (1996, p. 81). Two major factors distinguish the Foucauldian from the psychoanalytic model: Foucault's interest in the *impersonality* of the scene in which we demonstrate our personal subjectivities; and his interest in the formalism not of genre per se but of rationalizing taxonomies that mark the subject's place within a categorical typification. The psychoanalytic argument, in contrast, starts with the traumas of intersubjectivity. 'Attachment' is experienced only in the scene of the infant's recognition that attachment is contingent: meanwhile, the desire for, and love of, the law comes from others' pleasure in our capacity to be literate, from our pleasure in making them intelligible to us. We become available as a subject to the extent that we

enter into the bargain of intelligibility. As the subject negotiates becoming orderly, the world promises that the subject's compliance will be valued and reflected in the social, such that a guiding law that seems to come from the subject can remain the general index of clarity where there is otherwise none.

Liberal culture's affair with the law as that which brings out the best in people requires not a verifying image of the body performing or not performing an act, but rather an explanation of the image that becomes attached to you: that is, liberalism is a culture of the caption, of that which can be read off the body and circulated among the people or institutions who can verify its truth. Testimony, therefore, is the ur-form of liberal individuality as well, insofar as it is expressed as conventional being: a testimonial story can be read off the subject and circulated about her, it forms an archive of the subject's destiny as meaning, condenses her into a text as a subject who has been subject to the laws of intelligibility. Derrida's *Ear of the Other* points out that one gives oneself to oneself when one overhears one's autobiography and is seduced into identifying with it (1988). This is why the idea of making an 'appeal' appeals so erotically and desperately in the culture of abstraction that is liberal law's fantasy of the good person: if the individual loses a case despite her testimony she makes an appeal because her story failed previously to be appealing. Instead, it appalled. It was not winning. There are rules and norms about what constitutes the right to make an appeal, but the stakes of failure are starkly clear: your eloquence or your life.

Feminist and anti-racist rhetoricians have shown us, time and again, how hard it is for negated subjects to find the mode of self-captioning that will be deemed eloquence or personhood within the culture of intelligibility-as-law. This is why the negated are well-known, these days, for their complaints about melancholia, their trafficking in the loss that is never quite lost, the trauma form that keeps on ticking and talking. What is it about the compulsion to repeat that keeps the subject attached to negation? Again, the Foucauldian and psychoanalytic models differ: the former focusing on the cultural capital accrued by the subject's participation in genres of intelligibility. Ronald Fairbairn, a Freudian analyst of the early twentieth century, sought to understand the conundrum of pleasure this way: if Freud was right that the subject follows her pleasure, how to explain the seeming addiction of subjects to the scenes of failure that risk one's optimism for survival? Fairbairn worked in Scotland with foster children and orphans who were badly treated by their parents: again and again the worst treated children became the most intensely attached. He concluded that for Freud pleasure is not pleasure but something formal, like attachment, the fact of repetition rather than anything we might call *desire*: one is compelled to repeat the scene of overcoming because it fails, and fails in a tangle of

optimism that the seduction of the law to one's appeal will finally be achieved despite what is also clear, that one is defined as intelligible only by one's prior negation, which can be drowned out by other signs but never entirely erased as a condition of one's own intelligibility /possibility. (Fairbairn, 1994)

Is this conception of testimony as the captioning of the subject's destiny a theory of the masochism of the subordinated, a form of misguided optimism on behalf of love of the law? Here we turn to Freud's explanation of female masochism. Freud defines it simply, as the turning inward of rage that has no sanctioned place in the social. From his point of view, though he argues that women have a weaker sense of justice because less stable boundaries or control over their captions, this would suggest that the melancholia of the socially negated and the compulsion to generate scenes of testimony that would verify the destabilizing desire for the intelligibility of law is also an inverted aggression, both a liberal appeal to seduce the law and an impulse to slap its callous face. It would be possible, then, to deem the testimonial genre an aspiring class aesthetic that seeks to overcome the conspicuously captioned state of the subordinated body: an expression of trauma (the law's violation of itself through the negation of its subject), leads to testimony (an appeal for its reappearance), and to a reclaimed line of captioning or typification (expressing a desire for a world in which one's self-knowledge or aesthetic of the self were recognized as personhood).

In this model the culture of captioning speaks a rhetoric of the socially minor to the socially major: a beautiful tune that the law might include in the Musak of its promise of clarity. But it is, at the same time, a polytonal soundtrack of an Other world, an underworld, even an underground organized by the failed testimony of the dominated. Perhaps the testimony failed to convince jurists; perhaps a rapist, a community, or a government. Elsewhere I have called this the scene of the pedagogy of failed teaching: of knowledge derived from optimism and scarred by disappointment (Berlant, 1997). It takes these textualized sounds and makes from them a family you have never had in a world that has never been yours or for you (Renov, p. 94). In so testifying to this failure you express a desire to see yourself on a page, and as more coherent than you ever felt, not as the formless spread out self that you carry around ordinarily: Now you' re a story, even a story of failure, with an end that does not stop with the final period but has a another life in this community of texted witnesses looking for each other to become a world of memory where nothing will be forgotten, shame will be obliterated, there will be no aloneness, and the words will count (this time) as knowledge. This is connected to something like an 'I' after all, in which the capacity to write makes you the hero of a story that is both yours and more than that. This version of testimony inverts the

implication but not the form of the traumatic story, the genre of the too-late-and-never-completed event. You testify: the audience is judge and jury. You prosecute: the absent origins of the violence that have marked your social contingency are on trial. You judge: there is a world of neglect or violence out there, no one with the right rhythms of intimacy and detachment, presence and absence, the being-with that is not overwhelming but not aversive either. The terrible feeling of being and having nothing structural to sustain you, only your will and memory, becomes, then, added to the initial scene for the purposes of *teaching* as a condition of surviving. Only the teacher understands the scale of the failed event, and only the teacher has the opportunity and optimism to repeat it to a new audience. The heroic wish involved in this mode of testimonial cannot be underestimated: epic similes by the survivor of the wars whose tale professes to give pleasure and instruction toward the prevention of repetitions. In other words, a form produces an affect world around failure's repetition into mere knowledge, a knowledge so contingent it threatens to be – merely academic.

Merely Academic Testimony

I have suggested that the testimonial genre congeals within it a complex history of privilege and claim-making. Most of it is familiar – from the sacred texts that avow God's presence in someone's subjectivity to the political texts that avow a violence that separates someone from a normal world that may or may not exist. I have also suggested that testimony inevitably denotes sexuality, and not just because etymologically the testes hang out in the word. But because sexuality involves the institutions that make particular corporealities seem intelligible in the present tense of their agency and over generational – not degenerate – time spans, the narrativity of the testimonial, whether transgressive in content or not, threatens the taken-for-grantedness of where the intimate and public meet.[5] Additionally, as Derrida's 'The Law of Genre' suggests, the virtually incestuous relation between mad repetition and proper intelligibility unavoidably marks the knowledge with *desire*. In particular, this is visible in the burden the structurally subordinate bear, of *having to have too much knowledge*. The testimonial form releases into the world that pressure on the brain of knowing too much because one does not have power, whatever it means to have power. This negativity is the shadow of the bromide *knowledge is power*: the definition of knowledge there points toward a recognized expertise, a dependable referentiality, an intellectual property. It points across the bell jar to Eve Sedgwick's 'Privilege of Unknowing': the burden of knowing (1993). Insofar as the homeopathy of the testimonial text seeks to undo the wounded flesh of the negated person, testimonial

knowledge is about disburdening oneself of a knowledge that can only interfere with its own repetition by becoming out of control, translated through others.

An accidental convergence of theory with my desire leads me to tell you here of Gerard Genette's proposition that when the voice-over speaks from within a character's story we call it *homodiegetic* (1995, 1997). The voice-over is the cinematic mode of captioning that takes the character beyond the bodily immediacy we see to the temporality we don't, as though it is the image that's a ghost while the voice, materialized as knowledge and commentary, can return to life without the burden of the unhappy body to which it is nonetheless attached. Self-expertise and narrative, then, compete with and can overwhelm the painful pleasures of the cinematic flesh. Homodiegesis, the splitting of the voice into being and its extension, a letter sent through the public to oneself in a way that confounds easy temporalization, is quite different than the exciting and depressing emergent modality of the musical movie soundtrack.

Since the early twentieth century, the relation between Hollywood studios and the music industry has tended toward vertical integration: the soundtrack and proximate images have long been 'like this', lending to each other modes of subjectification through sensual shaping unheard of before mass culture (Mundy, 1999; Prendergast, 1992). Recently it has become apparent that many films are mere appendages of their soundtracks, with film music marketed both as an advertisement for the film to which it may or may not explicitly refer and as a truth of the film to be determined: what is the relation between a market segment and a social identity? Genette calls this form of exteriority 'heterodiegetic' activity. Heterodiegetic subjectivity is engendered when a previously recorded song not already associated with an actor or star expresses a character's interiority. On television this convention was established by the show *Miami Vice* (Prendergast, p. 286). Don Johnson would have had a hard day; walking across a dark, abandoned parking lot, a song, say by the Eagles, would play. It was clear that the sense of that song was meant to express Johnson's character's true self, his sexuality, his inexpressible interiority. As product placement it signifies a star system that can be read off the film as cultural capital and purchased by whomever can pay the price, much the way fashion has signified since the movie tie-ins of the 1930s (Gaines and Herzog). Such musical anthologies are rarely written as 'score', involve complex financial and publicity exchanges with particular artists and studios. This does not mean that the songs fail to express the affective relation they mark: to the contrary the very artificiality of the song *is* modern consumer subjectivity, of a certain sort.

In collectivizing subjectivity through the collaborative voices of disembodied others, the heterodiegetic soundtrack can be said to

challenge the fantasmatic continuities of auto-captioning that I described earlier as marking the structure of liberal individuality (Flynn, 1992). Yet, the canned quality of pop interiority evokes postmodern realism at its height – the sense that one's authenticity can be experienced only as inauthenticity. But there is also nothing cynical about this appearance of the song that expresses one's true feelings in a predictable language: cliché and other conventional modes mark a wish to simplify whatever feels overwhelming and nonnegotiable about the world 'out there'. So it becomes the world 'in here' at the same time that its repetition is only consoling, is competent memory, is transparent and thrilling and not retraumatizing.

How different is this adolescent mode of true feeling, in which marketized music becomes a soundtrack to our own personal/collective unclarities, from what might otherwise be deemed as the 'good' kind of soundtrack, that of the homodiegetic topos that shows one's life as most truly lived in domains of nuanced practice and intricate memory? Terence Davies' autobiographical trilogy, beginning with *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (1988), uses thickly divine soundtracks this way. In memory, people are fighting to survive; in memory, there is always a song to accompany, without expressing it, the mood of living. Music is what deprivatizes the subject of survival, even more than church or pub or football team: it takes people out of their bodies to register something wonderful that is inexpressible in the everyday. For Davies music is memorable because the people he remembers knowing sing particular songs in particular places, acting out the melancholy of wished-for plenitude and personal loss we have come to associate with the working classes and the nuclear household. These are authorless ballads, not subjective testimonials about anyone's individual feeling. Their very presence in those spaces makes them livable, and at the same time measures what's impossible about living on there. His soundtracks are not utopian, in the sense of marking out a horizon to which one might aspire, though. Davies locates living in memory and mentality; his films retain the homodiegetic linkage with the song, the sense that its translation through a person whose story is being told right there is now *something* like reoccupying the scene she/he has not survived yet, and may never still. It marks a melodramatic identification related to future repetitions as well as the ones from which s/he has only physically emerged. It is as though mental space is both the least free and the space for departure – at least as long as autobiography remains so tied to the inexpressible attachment to trauma.

But for many the soundtrack commodity itself is now such a memory – the walkman, the boombox have made shared music both impersonal and portable, and part of social activity that requires no particular experience with any actual persons but that nonetheless does indeed constitute belonging. Privatization is now more public at the same time

as it creates publics, and I have been telling here the story of how liberal subjectivity and subaltern claims on the 'right to narrate' have conventionalized the indescribable, turning it into news rather than, more sublimely, *communication*. It is not as though the field of soundtrack self-accompaniment is fully saturated by a belief in the presence of language, however.

The soundtrack's ongoing capacity to move through the conventions of traumatic narrative toward not what is shared as pleasure but as blockage is powerfully performed in Paul Thomas Anderson's film, *Magnolia* (1999). *Magnolia* is not a musical. It has a voice over that purports to teach us that there are no accidents, that nothing is coincidental. The film proceeds to show coincidence of the dramatic, spatial, and historical sort – coincidence as social dependency and ideological articulation. The family is the scene of this, of course – this film, like so many others these days, stages a scene of masculine protest at the ordinary costs of intimacy, which, not passing through politics, has no public or agentive capacity to do anything but destroy, negate, harm, and murder. The optimism of the film – in the end Tom Cruise, the tainted stepson, caretakes Julianne Moore, the suicidal stepmother – seems not very Anti-Oedipal nonetheless. But smack in the middle a production number halts the narrative drive: all of the characters become 'coincidental', in their different plots and times and spaces, singing, 'It's not going to stop, it's not going to stop, it's not going to stop, ' till you wise up... so just give up'. In the video for this song, the singer Aimee Mann is a ghost in this sequence, hovering around the singing characters who, in the film, are isolated in their pop song subjectivities. That the film repossesses the individual's distinguishing marks – turning the separate stories into truly ensemble acting – devastates, when it doesn't irritate the audience (the reviews are split). It seems inhuman to depict persons as essentially the same, once they have been thrown into the isolation chamber of traumatic experience. It is as though the details do not, after all, (have) matter, like ghosts – like pop song writers and their haunting lyrics or selves and their intentions, the details are at best asterisks or epitaphs to fantasies of will in the privatized world.

Powerfully desiring control over the meaning of their simplicity, the subjects of true feeling turn inward: but we see that they sing the same song; they are stuck in a social repetition; they produce beauty in contrast to understanding, or they produce beauty as a sign that their desires have defeated them, their intimacies betrayed them, their institutional faith mocked them, their optimism humiliated them. In the contemporary world of ordinary traumatic subjectivity, this relation to the conventionality of one's ambivalence about the traumatic passions is

rarely depicted with such a stunning refusal to disavow, and yet with such startling remoteness, formality. *Magnolia* reminds us that the very event in which something complex is made violently simple is traumatic experience and, with a terrible irony, so often its fantasized end.

Notes

1 This long citation is a composite, derived from letters received over many years – five, to be precise. Rather than choosing an exemplary letter to demonstrate my claim about trauma, testimony, and ineloquence, I took seriously the request of the final warning and mixed the sentences up. What I risk is a distortion of the archive as you experience it. But so much is lost in the multiple translations that none of us, I dare say, could tell the whole truth from the evidence.
2 A longer version of this argument can be found in Berlant, 2000.
3. See Berlant, 1991; and Berlant, 1993
4 On melodrama and the trauma of ineloquence, see Cavell, 1987
5 See Williams, 1990 for more performative testimony as to the necessary articulation of politics and intimacy among strangers.

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