

The Lesser Violence Reading Group

Session 1: Text clips & links, part 1

TRIGGER WARNING: CONTENT CONTAINS DISCUSSION OF RAPE AND TRAUMA

Veena Das / from: *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*

Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and Descent into the Ordinary* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007)

“What is it to inhabit a world? How does one make the world one’s own? How does one account for the appearance of the subject? What is it to lose one’s world? What is the relation between possibility and actuality or between actuality and eventuality, as one tried to find a medium to portray the relation between the critical events that shaped large historical questions and everyday life.” 2

“If I cannot claim to know the pain of the other...what is it to relate to such pain? The absence of any standing languages of pain is perhaps symptomatic of the fact that I cannot separate my pain from my expression for it – another way of saying this is that my expression of pain compels you in unique ways – you are not free to believe or disbelieve me – our future is at stake.” 39

“Pain...is not that inexpressible something that destroys communication or marks an exit from one’s existence in language. Instead it makes a claim on the other asking for acknowledgment that may be given or denied.” 40

Sara Ahmed / from: *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*

Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014)

The contingency of pain:

“The impossibility of feeling the pain of others does not mean that the pain is simply theirs, or that their pain has nothing to do with me. I want to suggest here, cautiously, and tentatively, that an ethics of responding to pain involves being affected by that which one cannot know or feel. Such an ethics is, in this sense, bound up with the sociality or the ‘contingent attachment’ of pain itself.” 30

“The sociality of pain – the ‘contingent attachment’ of being with others – requires an ethics, an ethics that begins with your pain, and moves towards you, getting close enough to touch you, perhaps even close enough to feel the sweat that may be the trace of your pain on the surface of your body. Insofar as an ethics of pain begins here, with how you come to surface, then the ethical demand is that I must act about that *which I cannot know*, rather than act insofar as I know. I am moved by what

does not belong to me. If I acted on her behalf only insofar as I knew how she felt, then I would act only insofar as I would appropriate her pain as my pain, that is, appropriate that which I cannot feel.” 31

“Pain is evoked as that which even our most intimate others cannot feel. The impossibility of ‘fellow feeling’ is itself the confirmation of injury. The call of such pain, as a pain that cannot be shared through empathy, is a call not just for an attentive hearing, but for a different kind of inhabitation. It is a call for action, and a demand for collective politics, as a politics based not on the possibility that we might be reconciled, but on learning to live with the impossibility of reconciliation, or learning that we live with and beside each other, and yet we are not as one.” 39

Gabrielle Goliath / from: *A Different Kind of Inhabitation: Invocation and the Politics of Mourning in Performance Work* by Tracey Rose and Donna Kukama

The full essay will appear in the ICA's forthcoming publication, *Acts of Transgression. Contemporary Live Art in South Africa* (ed. Jay Pather & Catherine Boule, Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 2018)

If language falters and inevitably fails in its attempts to articulate the irreducibility of trauma and pain, how do we begin to think about the possibilities of what art can and cannot do? For Griselda Pollock, confronting this representational limit demands of art a necessary shift from the mimetic promise of representation – as a foundational premise of art in a traditionally western sense – to its more affective operations¹. In this respect, the objective of art is not to make trauma comprehensible (through representation), but rather, by involving the viewer in a more performative mode of witness, to sustain as a necessary tension its incomprehensibility. Rather than faithful transmission, what art affords in such contexts are ‘occasions for encounter’ between viewers (or participants) and the unrepresentability of trauma. In facilitating these kinds of intersubjective and affective encounters, Peggy Phelan stresses the particular and specifically embodied opportunities presented in performance:

“Performance, which also ‘takes’ no object, is an important expressive system often overlooked by philosophers attempting to account for the capacities and incapacities of language . . . In returning to the agony of trauma, art might provide a means to approach its often radical unknowability, in part because art does not rely exclusively on rational language, narrative order or naïve beliefs in therapy.” ²

Following Phelan, I would like to suggest that to engage with performance is to shift and make apparent the conditions and politics of affective aesthetic encounters with trauma. What does the body in space – live, gestural, active, sweating, breathing, black, brown, white, queer, able, disabled, absent, present, accessible, inaccessible – afford us? Is it a tool artists use to get a point across, to demonstrate, to address our desire to make sense of? Or, as socially embedded, does it facilitate something more difficult and complex; forms of intersubjective encounter that unsettle an

¹ Griselda Pollock, *After-affects/After-images: Trauma and Aesthetic Transformation in the Virtual Feminist Museum* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 19.

² Peggy Phelan, ‘Survey,’ in *Art and Feminism*, ed. Helena Rickett (London: Phaidon, 2001), 45.

otherwise presumed passive witness; situations in which to work through, to sound and make felt the inexplicable, the irreducible? Here, viewers become implicated subjects – their bodily presence involving them in ethical, political and often uncomfortable situations³. These are the terms: established by interrelation, by the sociality of essentially human encounters. And it is in this sense, I propose, that performance makes possible alternative (or rather decolonial and intersectional) meetings whereby, in affective encounters with the experience of others, we must concede to that which we can never make sense of, but must nonetheless engage with. The unknowing inherent in such facilitated encounters does not, however, do away with what we have been shown and subjected to, confronted, shocked, surprised or even bored by. Rather, it is to appreciate and process the different registers of affect generated by our relation to performing bodies and the political space that is the shared bearing we have upon each other.

Sandra Young / from: *Personal Accounts and the limits of representation*

Catalogue contribution, published on the occasion of *AFRICA. Raccontare un mondo* (PAC Pavilion of Contemporary Art), Milan, 2017

([view](#) extracts from Gabrielle Goliath's 5-channel video installation *Personal Accounts*)

To attempt to represent the devastation of sexual violence is to risk further violation, however faithful an account might seem, however strong the imperative to bear witness. To abandon the endeavour altogether may seem more reasonable when the tools at our disposal are so ineffective as to constitute failure or, worse, betrayal. What kind of response, then, is available to the attuned artist? Gabrielle Goliath's *Personal Accounts* presents an extraordinary testament to the struggle to bear witness to the aftermath of abuse. It offers a discomfiting experience of the paradox that lies at the heart of the matter, in recognising simultaneously the inevitable failure of language to represent violence and the imperative to attempt representation, even so. What emerges most powerfully is the humanity of the women who have chosen to share their stories.

This is not because *Personal Accounts* replicates the narratives fully but, on the contrary, because it disavows any sense of completion, confronting us with the limits of our capacity to grasp anything of the survivor's experience; the power of the work inheres precisely in this painful disavowal and in the sheer, undeniable presence of the speakers, whose voices we cannot hear. For, as Judith Butler proposes, it is precisely a work's insistence of the damning inadequacy of representation that allows for an affirmation of what is human. Explaining the work of Emmanuel Levinas, Butler writes that for "representation to convey the human, then,

³ Seeking to trouble the victim/perpetrator dichotomy, Michael Rothberg proposes the term 'implicit subject' as a way of speaking to forms of trauma that are incremental and non-spectacular, but nonetheless global in reach, having a bearing upon us all. Michael Rothberg, 'Preface: Beyond Tancred and Clorinda – Trauma Studies for Implicated Subjects,' in *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literary and Cultural Criticism*, eds. Gert Buelens, Sam Durrant and Robert Eaglestone (New York: Routledge, 2014), xv.

representation must not only fail, but it must show its failure.” For Butler, the “human” is identified with “that which limits the success of any representational practice” rather than with its apparent fulfilment.⁴

Goliath’s work takes the form of a 5-channel video installation in which the personal testimonies of five women, all survivors of domestic violence (including rape, in some instances), have been stripped of speech, leaving just the spaces in between. As a result, we witness, above all, the pauses, the breathwork, the gathering of self. In removing the verbal elements of the narratives – the words themselves – Goliath’s work offers no assurance that we’ve achieved any understanding at all. Instead, it invites us to tolerate, if we can, the discomfort of being denied access to the sequential logic of events by which we might seek to define the women and imagine that we “know” their stories. As witnesses we are confronted by the failure of testimony and of our own capacity to grasp the pain of another. And yet, if we can stay the distance, our confrontation with this failure may open us to the survivors’ vulnerability, and perhaps even our own.

In its insistence on the intelligibility of trauma, the work is both a disavowal of testimony, and an affirmation, even so, of the possibility of bearing witness, however incomplete. Without being able to lay claim cognitively to the spoken details of the event, the witness attends to the women themselves – their bodily presence and what it suggests about the struggle of survival in the aftermath of abuse. Defamiliarised and dislodged from their usual, liminal position in the spaces between spoken words, the sounds we hear are accorded an uncanny prominence. We are confronted by the sheer bodily effort involved in narrating abuse, through Mercia’s sharp intake of breath, the high pitch of her lips loosening their clasp against each other, and the audible crack as Brenda’s palette and tongue part. We get a hint of the tenor of Charmaine’s voice when she begins to laugh, in the voiced intake of breath: a hint but no more. This disorientation of *not* hearing is most acute during periods of animated speech, when many short clips of sound are spliced together and we are left with the disorienting busyness of compounded interstices and the unyielding limits of our own knowing. Paradoxically, it is the longer periods of silence, when there is no spoken voice to be denied us, that we encounter the most expressive moments of connection. It is in the gaps – that which would otherwise register as “silence” – that we find unanticipated eloquence.

Confronted by our utter failure to comprehend cognitively and verbally, as witnesses we have an opportunity, nonetheless, to be open to the presence of each survivor, in turn, and to offer her our attention: to notice eyes made large, then turned away to a distant point out of the frame; to discern the unanswered question in a shrug and the incomprehension it signals; to wait out the full length of a pause when she can find no pathway back to speech; to meet the unnerving intensity of a direct look; to be caught in glad surprise at a sudden open-mouthed smile. *Personal Accounts* invites us to be open to the disarming gift of connection, extended to us

⁴ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), p. 144.

across the chasm of painful memory, and to experience the shame of our own utter lack of comprehension.

Judith Butler / from: *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*

Violence and the politics of mourning:

“Loss has made a tenuous “we” of us all. And if we have lost, then it follows that we have struggled to find the conditions for our desire. We have all lost in recent decades from AIDS, but there are other losses that afflicts us, from illness and from global conflict; and there is the fact as well that women and minorities, including sexual minorities, are, as a community, subjected to violence, exposed to its possibility, if not its realisation.” p.20

“One speaks, and one speaks for another, to another, and yet there is no way to collapse the distinction between the Other and oneself. When we say “we” we do nothing more than designate this very problematic. We do not solve it. And perhaps it is, and ought to be, insoluble”. 25

Precarious Life:

“The structure of address is important for understanding how moral authority is introduced and sustained if we accept not just that we address others when we speak, but that in some way we come to exist, as it were, in the moment of being addressed, and something about our existence proves precarious when that address fails. More emphatically, however, what binds us morally has to do with how we are addressed by others in ways that we cannot avert or avoid; this impingement by the other’s address constitutes us first and foremost against our will or, perhaps more appropriately, prior to the formation of our will”. 130

“We cannot, under contemporary conditions of representation, hear the agonised cry or be compelled or commanded by the face. We have been turned away from the face, sometimes through the very image of the face, one that is meant to convey the inhuman, the already dead, that which is not precariousness and cannot, therefore, be killed; this is the face that we are nevertheless asked to kill, as if ridding the world of this face would return us to the human rather than consummate our own inhumanity. One would need to hear the face as it speaks in something other than language to know the precariousness of life that is at stake. But what media will let us know and feel that frailty, know and feel at the limits of representation as it is currently cultivated and maintained? If the humanities has a future as cultural criticism, and cultural criticism has a task at the present moment, it is no doubt to return us to the human where we do not expect to find it, in its frailty and at the limits of its capacity to make sense. We would have to interrogate the emergence and vanishing of the human at its limits of what we can know, what we can hear, what we can see, what we can sense. This might prompt us, affectively, to reinvigorate the

intellectual projects of critique, of questioning, of coming to understand the difficulties and demands of cultural translation and dissent, and to create a sense of the public in which oppositional voices are not feared, degraded or dismissed, but valued for the instigation to a sensate democracy they occasionally perform.” 151