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Beyond the Archive: Cultural Memory in Dance and Theater

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Abstract

This essay uses the concept of the constellation to characterize the relations among interdisciplinarity, cultural memory, and comparative literature. To do so entails: (a) reviewing the paradoxical interdisciplinarity of comparative literature, (b) tracing its establishment at a liberal arts college (Bryn Mawr College, USA), and (c) describing a course on “The Cultural Politics of Memory” that tested the limits of scholarship and testimony. The discussion includes an account of an unusual conference on cultural memory: that is, the ways in which different cultural groups identify and describe their shared pasts. The informality and collegial dialogue of the conference were associated with a liberal arts context. It then turns to the question of theorizing aspects of cultural memory that are conveyed at the margins of conventional discourse: by what is largely unsaid, or represented in dance or pantomime. Because each of the performances discussed here is related in a distinct way to a preceding historical trauma (the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia, African American slavery in the USA, the terrorism of the Shining Path in Peru), it was important to determine what source of memory, what archival materials, could persist through traumas that often suppress memory. Traditional archives consist of written documents. Moreover, they often support or represent official histories. New ways of thinking about archives--their composition, their place in cultural history, and their theoretical dimensions--have suggested new approaches to cultural memory. The essay ends with accounts of three forms of dance or pantomime that convey cultural histories informed by trauma in significantly different ways. A narrative thread foregrounds the close relations between scholarship and pedagogy.

Keywords: cultural memory; archive; dance; interdisciplinarity; comparative literature; testimony

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I

One of the more powerful metaphors in modern philosophic thought has been that of the *constellation* as defined by both Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno. Here is Martin Jay's composite definition: "a juxtaposed rather than integrated cluster of changing elements that resist reduction to a common denominator, essential core, or generative first principle" (Jay, 1984, pp. 14-15). This metaphor propels the discussion that follows, inasmuch as it links interdisciplinarity to both cultural memory and comparative literature. Although cultural memory and comparative literature are structurally distinct in that the first is a cultural phenomenon and the second a discipline of study, each acts on and is, in turn, acted upon by the other. I begin with a sketch of comparative literature as a discipline that has had a special relation with interpretive projects, move on to interdisciplinary dialogue as a distinctive feature of a faculty seminar and some courses at Bryn Mawr College, USA (hereafter, Bryn Mawr), and to an interdisciplinary conference on cultural memory, that served as a prelude to a course on that topic. By cultural memory, I mean the ways in which different cultural groups--which may be national, religious, or ethnic--identify and describe their shared pasts. It is a way of thinking that informs group discourses, documents, and arts. It may, however, be apparent in the speech or work of one person who is perceived, in turn, as speaking for the group. Although the cultural memory of a group constitutes a history, that history may not coincide with what are regarded as objective facts. Once construed as an art or a practice, *memory* (both individual and collective) and its transmission have become the objects of historical and psychoanalytic study. But this has not happened without tensions, in which history and its guardian, the *archive*, have been viewed as antagonists to memory. The archive's defining properties have changed, however, due in part to historical and technological developments, in part to contemporary theoretical approaches. Such changes have enabled a new form of interdisciplinary dialogue in which dance and mime, nonverbal arts, play a role. The discussion here traces a line of inquiry about the sites of cultural memory and its place in interdisciplinary dialogue.

One of the paradoxes inherent to comparative literature is that it is constructed along interdisciplinary lines. A product of nineteenth-century universities, like other humanistic disciplines, comparative literature in its early stages brought together literary works from different languages, related by genre, style, literary traditions, themes, and ideas. It was oriented largely toward Western languages. (Asian languages were, however, included in west-coast American universities well before they were included in east-coast comparative programs.) In the latter part of the twentieth century, comparative literature periodically rethought itself, moving from the traditional model through a political, postcolonial phase, to an eclectic mode where, as Haun Saussy writes in a recent report (2006), the interdisciplinary battle has been won--at least for the time being. It is open to a worldwide spectrum of languages. Today it brings together literary, philosophical, psychoanalytical, anthropological, and art-historical texts (among others) and reaches out toward the arts. Comparisons, ideas, and interpretations circulate within this broadly constructed domain. To be sure, most programs are based in literature departments, where

scholars in the field owe a dual allegiance to a traditional discipline and to comparative literature. Instead of an exterior dialogue among separate equals, comparative literature practices a form of *interior dialogue*. To say that it maintains disciplinary self-consciousness is to say that it must be continually aware of both its boundaries and their porousness. The model here resembles not sleight-of-hand but shape-shifting, not Borges's Chinese catalogue (cited in Foucault's Preface to *The Order of Things*, 1973, p. 19) but the constellation, that "juxtaposed . . . cluster of changing elements" brought together by the power of thought. To the list of academic fields, we may add such arts as photography and film, dance and theater, often aided in this dialogue through the discipline of performance studies.

What holds in theory, however, is more problematic in practice--not unlike a constellation, whose life span may be brief. Comparative literature owes its existence to fields of force, historical and scholarly. And it frequently mirrors their tensions and indeterminacies: While the literary text may have been its original object, its actual and potential objects now seem potentially endless, as do its theoretical and cultural approaches to the texts. Here we may say that comparative literature itself follows the model of the constellation.

II

Comparative literature at Bryn Mawr grew in part out of an interdisciplinary "Seminar on Interpretation" that flourished during the 1980s, a seminar whose objects of study (for example, psychoanalytic thought, modes of visibility) had links to several disciplines. The decisive step in establishing the academic program resulted from a joint faculty initiative on the part of Bryn Mawr and Haverford colleges in the latter part of the decade. Imagine, then, an academic program growing out of an intellectual community, a coming-together of curricular and community interests. In both of these contexts--the classroom and the faculty seminar--dialogue was a prominent feature. One course, "The Play of Interpretation," was the offspring of the seminar. It covered a variety of later twentieth-century interpretive practices that developed in the wake of structuralism, psychoanalysis, and hermeneutics: all of them major theories that made it possible to relate the social sciences and philosophy to literary study. Another, covering English and German Romantic poetry and philosophy, changed titles as it moved from a quest model ("The Romance of the Self") to one of intellectual crisis ("Romanticism: Crisis and Critique").

It was, however, a course on "The Cultural Politics of Memory"--a growing and controversial field of study--that presented a critical test of the limits of academic discourse in several ways. The first involved the general issue of whether memory was an appropriate object of study, as opposed to clearly documented historical events. Second, even if memory were to be allowed as an object of study, certain kinds of memory, such as posttraumatic memory--repressed, delayed in coming to light, often elliptical or metaphorical, sometimes expressed in nonverbal arts and at times without the corroboration of witnesses--challenged traditional scholarly methodologies and modes of interpretation. Third, primary texts of cultural memory often challenge distinctions of genre (the line between novel and memoir, for example) or call for a new theoretical

approach. Add to these issues the emotional challenges of such a course, for many students had personal investments, including family histories, which came to light in classroom discussions.

Both the rationale and the shaping of this course depended upon one more event: a conference on cultural memory that took place in the summer of 1996 in a remote corner of the Adirondack Mountains in New York State. The two dozen participants came from academic institutions in the northeastern United States, as well as France and Germany. Their fields included literature, philosophy, history, anthropology, sociology, folklore, and journalism. The conference center, designed and built by a member of the Haverford philosophy department, afforded ample time and space for dialogue. In that respect, it resembled meeting places of liberal arts colleges. The conversation began at breakfast and continued until midnight for each of the 4 days. So intense was the dialogue that it continued even during the afternoon break: even while swimming across an icy pond on an extremely hot day. Topics ranged from the Holocaust to Israeli collective memory during two millennia, from museological representations of memory to such American practices of remembrance as memorial ceremonies on the dates of major events (e.g., the end of a war) or the dates when memorial structures were completed (e.g. the Vietnam Wall in Washington, DC). One of the two French historians, a pathbreaker in the study of cultural memory, explained his recent reservations about the psychoanalytic aspects of the field, while his colleague traced the rapid changes in French collective memory from World War I to the period after World War II, each change projecting a newly formed myth of heroism and resistance. A journalist, just returned from Rwanda, had intended to speak about *Schindler's List* and the Holocaust Museum in Washington, both prone to sensationalism in his eyes. Instead, he recounted some of his experiences in Rwanda and showed photographs of skulls collected and displayed as both evidence and memorials of the recent genocide. Like some of the photographs from the genocide in Cambodia, they were treated as archival evidence of the past trauma. Still another scholar analyzed the ways in which photographs--with and without accurate identifications--could shape collective memory; most of the photographs had been taken of concentration camps at the end of World War II. The director of the *Gedenkstätte* (memorial) at Buchenwald, Germany, with an archival memory of the photographs of 1945, was also at the conference.

If that remote conference center seemed like the last place on earth, especially to the Europeans, I was to visit many more last places in Europe and elsewhere, including concentration camps and memorials. Cultural memory was often a challenge to official memory, as Robert Frank had demonstrated (in *La mémoire empoisonnée*) and Marcel Ophuls revealed in his film, *Le chagrin et la pitié*. In the film, the people of Clermont-Ferrand, France, narrate their experiences in World War II from various political positions. Their accounts raised serious questions about the accuracy of official French history. The problem was not one of defining cultural memory, but rather one of defining cultural memory and situating it as a phenomenon with its own shape and history.

How does one frame a course on cultural memory? Because the major focus of the course was to be on historical traumas and their consequences for cultural memory, it began with

a very early traumatic event: the flight of Moses from Egypt. Selections from the Old Testament were paired with a chapter from the Egyptologist Jan Assmann's book, *Moses the Egyptian* (1997). Assmann contrasts the cultures of continuity, in which, say, the gods of one polytheistic culture are comparable to those of another, with what he calls "deconstructive cultures": the narrative of Moses breaks with the past inasmuch as it represents the major shift from a polytheistic to a monotheistic culture. The latent tension between history and memory appeared in a few texts designed to frame the course: one contrasting archival history with living memory, another suggesting that collective memory is a linguistic and a social construction (Halbwachs, 1992; Nora, 1989). Many students had personal connections to the historical traumas under scrutiny: family members who had survived the Holocaust, or fought in Vietnam, an older student who was the mother of bi-racial children, a Vietnamese student whose family had fled Vietnam. Still others challenged the propriety of certain texts, especially those focusing upon the Holocaust. How, for example, could one consider the account of a political prisoner, Jorge Semprun, as an authoritative work on a Jewish disaster? How could a contemporary German writer, Bernard Schlink, make illiteracy the allegorical "condition" of a former concentration camp guard? Others tried to rank the horrors of the catastrophes whose representations we studied: At least, one person argued, the concentration camp prisoners shared a common language--which slaves, deprived of their native languages, did not. The reply had to be repeated in later versions of the course: this was not a course in comparative victimology. On September 11, 2001, the vision of catastrophe came close: at 1 p.m., I entered the classroom to find a stunned group watching on TV the repeated screening of the attack on the World Trade Center. Later, photographs from daily newspapers, *This is New York* (an exhibit of photos in a nearby storefront, many taken by amateurs), film clips and media representations (the subject of a long essay by one student): such pictorial reminders of the experience of trauma, part of the collective consciousness of the class, often found its way into the classroom.

Despite the continuing excitement of the course, its orientation to memory--by way of texts, films, slides of memorials--had to face hard questions. The familiar questions about the unstable subjective nature of memory as compared to the objectivity of history recurred frequently. This does not, however, speak fully to such crucial memory practices as personal testimony. The reliability of memory as well as its ethical significance were challenged. And these were in turn related to traumatic historical events and to psychoanalytic theory and practice. Traditionally, scholars in the humanities turn to libraries, archives, collections: all of them visible, readable, and at least potentially available. Historical traumas threaten memory by eliminating witnesses, by causing crucial blanks in individuals, or by leading to collective memories that may erase differences. Psychoanalytic thought reveals the resistances of memory, its turn to symbolic representations, its temporal substitutions and distortions. Yet although these black holes of history are, for many historians, off limits, as Saul Friedländer notes (1994), psychoanalysis and contemporary philosophy offer a release from this quandary. Different as they are, both disciplines rethink an institution that is crucial to understanding the forms of cultural memory: one that has been exterior and agonistic, interior and compatible: that of the *archive*.

In an earlier course on “Psychoanalysis and Literary Criticism,” the members of the class and I had pondered a remark of Jacques Lacan:

The unconscious is the chapter of my history that is marked by a blank or occupied by a lie: it is the censured chapter. But the truth can be recovered: most often it is already written elsewhere. It is to be known . . . in archival documents also: and they are the memories of my childhood, impenetrable if I do not know their provenance. (Lacan, 1986, pp. 136-137, my translation)

Lacan’s dictum (in the literary form of a blazon) became a harbinger of the inquiries I was pursuing. It was also contemporaneous with a widespread theoretical concern about the nature of archives in relation to historical study, to psychoanalysis (Derrida, 1996), to the discourse available to an era (Foucault, 1976), to witnessing and testimony (Agamben, 1999), and to postcolonial politics (Taylor, 2003).

Generically indeterminate texts in which traumatic events are conveyed by indirection and historical distancing--*Literature or Life* (Semprun, 1997), *The Things They Carried* (O’Brien, 1998), *Auschwitz and After* (Delbo, 1997)--along with dance and pantomime, are difficult to situate theoretically. They seem to occupy a space where the indirections of art conspire with what appear to be evasions of consciousness. Blanchot’s “little by little suddenly” in *The Writing of the Disaster* (Blanchot, 1996) or Ida Fink’s “our slow crawl into the new zone” in *Traces* (Fink, 1997, “A Second Scrap of Time,” p. 153) refer to moments inaccessible to a formal archive. Dance, in which bodies are primary vehicles for conveying memory, emerges as a limit of sorts to such verbally elusive texts. Fortunately, the concept of the archive has undergone a significant transformation, one that will allow us to accommodate studies of historical trauma to a theoretical context.

III

Let us turn to three historical traumas in which the concept of the archive has been rethought. First, the Holocaust. One should remember that the Nazis intended to destroy the records of what had happened, as we know from both Himmler’s Posen speech (delivered on October 4, 1943 to SS officers), and from the death marches on which concentration camp prisoners were sent in the last days of World War II. Diaries and records from the Warsaw ghetto were saved in hidden milk containers, notes from prisoners buried in the ground in Auschwitz. Many survivors were faced with “the impossibility of communicating and . . . the unbearable imperative to testify” (Ricoeur, 2004, p. 176). This “short circuit between the moment of testimony . . . and the moment of representation in its written expression, beyond the steps of archiving, of explanation, and even of comprehension” (p. 176), Ricoeur writes, does not mean the end of historiography, although one may have to wait for truth and reconciliation commissions or journalists to record such traumatic events. But there are as well cases in which those most victimized have lost the capacity to testify about their condition. How to theorize their plight? Agamben (1999) does it by way of Foucault’s theory of the archive.

One of the crucial points in seeking to identify and confirm cultural memory can be located at the moment of testimony, in which two perspectives emerge. The first is both historical and general, in Paul Ricoeur's sense: documentary evidence has its source in oral testimony. It is also concrete and specific, insofar as the report of individual experience supplies the testimony that verifies particular events. What happens, however, when those who are at the center of traumatic events cannot testify because they are either dead or traumatized? One such situation was that of the *Musselmänner* in concentration camps: they were people reduced to the lowest levels of biological life, unable to speak, on the verge of what looked like literal dissolution. We know about them largely through the writings of others, for example, Hannah Arendt (1973) and Primo Levi (1989). Giorgio Agamben (1999) helps to resolve this question by turning to Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1976). Foucault characterizes the archive not as the repository of shared knowledge, but as a "general system of the formation and transformation of statements" of a culture (p. 130). The rules of speech that it supplies become knowable only when and as we stop using them. Although individual forms of speech, or books, could *represent* parts of the archive, they could never speak for it in its entirety. The archive's existence is predicated upon the unsaid or the unwritten as well as upon what is explicitly given in language. Conceptually, such a dematerialized archive permits the construction of a social space in which individuals, by speaking to one another, make real, or realize, the archive.

According to Foucault's formal rules of language, speech is constituted by "positions of enunciation," here those of a speaker and the other to whom she or he speaks. Appropriating Foucault's theory, Agamben analyzes Levi's claim in *The Drowned and the Saved* (1989, pp. 83-84) that the *Musselmänner* are the ultimate witnesses of the concentration camp. Levi and other survivors are "incomplete" witnesses because of their very survival: they have not had the ultimate camp experience of being sent to the gas chamber. For Agamben, subjectivity entails the possibility of speech; in *Remnants of Auschwitz* (Agamben, 1999) Levi appears as witness, speaking for those who cannot speak. The subjectivity of one man thus bears witness to an impossibility of speech; the "intimacy" between the one who can speak and the one who cannot, is "testimony." Such a resolution speaks to Levi's writing as bearing witness, as well as to all other survivors who testify to what they have seen and experienced.

This restructuring of testimony as a relationship between the mute witness and the person who speaks refutes, Agamben writes, the "isolation of survival from life" (Agamben, 1999). What the Nazis thought--that no one would believe anyone trying to bear witness to the camps--is refuted here. Although this limit situation involves biological human life at its nadir, it may be transposed to other situations in which the mute body is involved. Where testimony appears in the arts, the theory developed in Foucault and Agamben may take a different turn. In certain forms of dance, movements of the body convey both tradition and trauma, constituting testimony to an otherwise mute past.

While Agamben's appropriation of Foucault's theory helps to supply a validating framework for testimony of the past, it is Derrida's theoretical treatment of the archive that transforms testimony into a question about the future of memory. The early pages of

Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression (Derrida, 1996) represent the archive as an institution that not only contains historical documents but emerges from and is contained by historical practice: not only do archons guard the place where historical documents are kept, but they interpret them, thus exercising both privilege and power. In its decisions about classification--what is public or private, to what genre the documents belong (say, biography or autobiography), what belongs in the category of theory--such decisions will, Derrida writes, raise questions about borders, limits, distinctions. In light of these questions, "archival order is no longer assured" (p. 5). Derrida brings us to the critical question of the future: "The archive, if we want to know what that will have meant, we will only know in the future" (p. 36). The concept thus turns toward self-contradiction: the knowledge of what it will have meant will come to us only in the future. In effect, the concept of the archive cannot be archived, for it has no currently determinate form. Psychoanalysis itself faces questions of how it is to be archived: the models for theoretical exposition and "the archivization of its institutional and clinical practice" (p. 16) on the one hand, and on the other the growing and changing array of technological instruments available for archiving. In effect, "the technical structure of the *archiving* archive also determines the structure of the *archivable* content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future" (p. 17). E-mail, for example, is "already transforming . . . the limit between the private, the secret (private or public), and the public or the phenomenal" (p. 17).

IV

Such questions relate to a web of allusions to such cultural traumas as the Holocaust and other genocides, wars, and the experience of slavery. Earlier in this discussion of the relations between cultural memory and archives, it emerged that some of the most telling and exemplary instances of cultural memory are posttraumatic. Those instances rely upon structural or linguistic models to recuperate what would otherwise have been lost in the past. Derrida's reasoning provides us with what is at once the most serious threat to memory and the most persuasive argument for the reconstruction of memory after repression and trauma. Derrida's psychodynamic model underlines the ambiguity of the archive: it is shaped by archons or other cultural groups, but it also preserves memory with a series of increasingly sophisticated technological devices. And as a supplementary prosthesis--as an archive of memory must be--it also works to distance memory from its origins in the mind. Jan Assmann remarks that Derrida's conception of the archive is what others call cultural memory, and that the latter in turn opens up "the memory spaces of many thousands of years," at the same time that it "develops a sense of simultaneity that makes it possible to identify with the forms of expression of a past going back thousands of years" (Assmann, 2006, p. 28). It is a place where agent and witness are reconciled by testimony, and nevertheless one where the archival process and technology threaten to exile memory from its origin in what Diana Taylor (2003) calls "embodied" practice. It is this practice, from circumcision (Derrida, 1996) and tattoo (Greenaway, *The Pillow Book*, a film of 1998), to performance in dance, music and theater that restores the rapport, the near identification between the archive and cultural memory. What is written on or in the body, and then perceived in "embodied" practices, helps to strengthen and extend the ties of the archive to sites of memory.

The challenge, then, is to find a theoretical language to explore and interpret dance as it has appeared in different contexts and countries. It is necessary to keep in mind the position of dance in various national cultures, as well as the relation of choreography to traditions and history on one hand, and to trauma on the other. Changing ideas of the archive could effect a transference of sorts from the traditional collection of documents to the new archives located in the body itself--as dancer and as vehicle for dance. For anthropologists and some dance critics, the body is the mediator between self and world (Comaroff, 1985). For psychoanalysis, the elusive site of memory lies in the body. When a culture is destroyed, as it was in Cambodia, dancers and dancing bodies remain as the sole archives of dance tradition (Phim, 1989).

It may seem that extending the meaning and domain of archives is no more than making metaphors--a genial but superfluous activity. But beyond the fact that the material meaning of archives now includes such items as the rocks in New York City's Central Park, machines used in psychological experiments, and photos of the dead displayed in Cambodia, the extended abstract meaning of the archive now makes it possible to treat an essentially nonverbal art such as dance in the language of discursive criticism and theory. A linguistic model that is abstractly temporal, and that includes the appalling forms of the *Musselmänner* who were unable to speak, helps to frame the archive oriented to the past, while psychoanalytic theory situates a form of bodily memory that faces both the past and the future (in survivors as well as dancers). I turn now to a discussion of dance in Cambodia and the USA and pantomime in Peru, in which the two arts represent the recuperation and establishment of cultural memory.

Amitav Ghosh's remarkable essay, "Dancing in Cambodia" (1993), entwines three narratives: (a) an account of the royal Cambodian dance troupe's visit to France as part of the king's entourage, in 1907, (b) Ghosh's search, after the defeat of the Khmer Rouge regime, for the brother of Pol Pot, who happened to be the husband of a former dancer, Chea Samy, (c) and the recovery of the dance group after the decimation of artists and intellectuals during the Khmer Rouge regime. The fates of the royal family, of Pol Pot's family, and of the dancers are, in one way or another, linked as they move between France and Cambodia. The royal visit to France, in 1907, sets the symbolic stage for both the essay and the meaning of dance in Cambodia. The sculptor Rodin, fascinated with the young dancers, made several sketches that were exhibited in Paris. Rodin saw in them, Ghosh writes, "the power of Cambodia's involvement in the culture and politics of modernism, in all its promise and horror" (Ghosh, 1993, p. 159). Ghosh reads the royal visit as a virtually uncanny anticipation of the entwined lives and practices that will branch out over 6 decades. Pol Pot will study in Paris and eventually lead the murderous Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. His brother will marry Chea Samy. Family ties will not help them during the Khmer Rouge period, and their lives will be obscure. Chea Samy, however, will help the remaining dancers to reconstruct their works. The recovery of the dance group in turn represents "the indestructibility of the middle class" and its "resilience" after "all the institutions and the forms of knowledge that had sustained them were destroyed" (p. 135). Here Yeats's question, "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" (in the poem, "Among School Children") assumes a strangely literal historical resonance.

V

A quarter of a century after the genocide in Cambodia, I am in the Joyce Theater in New York, watching a Cambodian dance troupe perform their classical dances, based largely upon myths central to its culture. It has taken nearly 5 hours to sew them into their resplendent golden costumes. Musicians play at the side of the stage. The elegance and splendor of the performance are all the more striking because the audience knows both the broader political narrative of Cambodia and the story of a regenerated corpus of dances. A few days earlier, I have learned, at an informal dance space of the Joyce theater, the basic hand movements of Cambodian dance. Like most of the audience, my hands lack the flexibility of a child: Cambodian dancers begin their training in childhood. But it is not only the children who are dedicated to the art. Toni Shapiro Phim, the anthropologist/dancer who speaks, describes a moment of exile during the Khmer-Rouge period when Cambodians in a refugee camp, guarded by soldiers and with an insufficient water supply, spent their time teaching dance to their children. In another camp near the Vietnamese border, a Cambodian group danced under fire, stopping only to let shells pass over their heads.

Resilience under fire, the drive to reconstruct: After the defeat of the Khmer Rouge, the surviving dancers found one another; working in pairs, they revived their dances. The dancers themselves, as Toni Shapiro Phim notes, were the sole archives. Musicians put together instruments, others sewed costumes from rags. They first performed them, Ghosh writes, at a small festival in Pnomh Penh, Cambodia, wearing “improvised costumes and performing in a theater filled beyond its capacity. The crowd wept. “It was a kind of rebirth:” Ghosh writes, “a moment when the grief of survival became indistinguishable from the joy of living” (Ghosh, 1993, p. 168).

I am in a classroom, showing *Dancing to the Promised Land* (Jones, 1994), a documentary about Bill T. Jones and the choreographing of *Last Supper at Uncle Tom’s Cabin/The Promised Land*, a dance whose narrative joins *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (Stowe, 1852/1981) with the biblical story of the Last Supper. Jones remarks that while he was choreographing the episode where Simon Legree, the cruel overseer, whips the gentle Uncle Tom, the memory came to him of a story his mother had told him. His grandmother was working on a farm and, learning that her pregnant daughter was ill, asked leave to visit her at the nearby farm where she worked. The grandmother’s boss refused to give permission; he beat her cruelly when she tried to sneak away. When her brother tried to intervene, his finger was broken. Jones remembers this narrative in the act of creation where, we might say, the grief of memory is indistinguishable from the art of dance. In a dance Jones choreographed later, a filmed image of his mother appears on a screen at the back of the stage, a scrim (a thin textile) dividing the screened image from Jones as he dances. The palimpsest on the stage, formed by Jones, the scrim and the screened image of his mother, translates into visual terms the form implicit in “Last Supper at Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” where the biblical text, the novel by Harriet Beecher Stowe and Jones’s choreography are also related to one another by a palimpsestic form. Maguy Marin, a French choreographer whose parents had to flee from Spain during the Spanish Civil War, and who choreographed a dance conveying the suffering of Latin

Americans under repressive regimes, remarks after a performance that the history of suffering “is, after all, written in the body”. Her composition, “One Can’t Eat Applause,” was based upon the writings of the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano. While Jones’s composition includes spoken parts of both Stowe’s text and others, including a passage from Sojourner Truth, “Ain’t I a Woman” (a former slave, she preached abolition), and while Marin’s does not depend on the spoken word, the words themselves are visibly informed by the choreography. Two genealogies, two intergenerational family traumas are imbricated in national or international narratives.

Some time later I am in Lima, in the *casa* of the Yuyachkani, a theater group with the ambitious goal of trying to form a unified cultural memory for Peru, one that would include the country’s indigenous peoples. I am watching a theater piece called *Hecho en el Perú: Vitrinas para un museo de la memoria* (Made in Peru: Windows for a Museum of Memory). Six members of the troupe perform pantomimes that represent “typical” Peruvians: all perform at the same time, each repeating his or her piece once. The actor-mimes are lined up in two rows of three on each side of the theater space (a former stable), while the audience circulates from one to another in the wide central aisle, stopping to watch each one for as long as they wish. One mimes the “typical” Peruvian man evolving historically from Inca to the modern urban figure in a trenchcoat. The self-sufficient, nearly naked Inca will eventually market suntan oil, inviting the audience to sample it. Next to him, Teresa Ralli mimes the relation of Peruvian women to the Catholic Church, while her sister Rebeca, completing the row, mimes, using several changes of costume, the possible lives, good or bad, open to women. Her narrative is the most open and ambiguous of the six; she wanted, she said, to convey possibilities, as well as the irony of the Peruvian “brand.” On the other side of the aisle, a woman mimes the transformation from indigenous Peruvian woman to smartly dressed terrorist. (The second and third in command of *Sendero Luminoso* or Shining Path, the major terrorist organization of the 1980s and 1990s in Peru, were women.) Next to her, a man mimes a seller of Peruvian exports, offering the audience “typical” Peruvian products, while his neighbor acts out the scandal of Montesinos, Fujimori’s finance minister, caught in acts of bribery, while a TV monitor plays a video of the actual episode. Here reality is caught on a screen, while the “real” mime is only a persona, a performer. Some performers try to draw members of the audience into dialogue, while others seem enmeshed in their own fantasies. There is a carnival atmosphere in the *casa*: elegant as they are in their mimicry, the portraits’ “typical” figures share something with sideshows. Performance, Taylor remarks, provides “‘memory paths,’ the space of reiteration” (Taylor, 2003, p. 210). Such repetition, however, is not itself symptomatic: “the performances enter into dialogue with a history of trauma without themselves being traumatic” (p. 210). The performances, Taylor continues, create witnesses to a history they may or may not have experienced, but which they may then appropriate for themselves. The shared space of actors and audience, a literal “space of reiteration,” makes possible a form of secondary witnessing open to those who become cognizant of traumatic history only belatedly.

The following day I speak with Rebeca Ralli about the Yuyachkani and their history in furthering human rights in Peru. In the performance I have seen, as well as other theater pieces, the troupe has represented Peruvian history, including the recent period of terror

when the Shining Path ruptured life in Peru and the re-membling that followed. As we discuss the performance, it seems natural to say (echoing Marin), “So memory is written in the body?” “Claro,” she replies: Of course.

VI

The dances I have sketched fan out into a variegated politics of dance. They refer to traumatic pasts, although their modes of signifying vary. They refer ambiguously to loss and survival. Jones’s choreography for *Last Supper at Uncle Tom’s Cabin* suggests a redemptive narrative, inasmuch the second half turns to the Last Supper and then a joyous episode set in the Promised Land. *Hecho en el Perú* (Made in Peru) intimates that a memory which all Peruvians share will supply the base for a unified future. One composition projects a visionary future, while the other makes any future contingent upon acknowledging a common history, often painful. Whether expressive or reconstructive, these wordless performances invite us to participate in a shared enterprise. As dance or mime, these performances convey not only responses but also forms of writing by the body. Beyond the histories and traumatic memories which they represent, a form of disciplined interdisciplinarity emerges. What is a dance or a pantomime, after all, but a set of changing constellations? Or cultural memory, housed in differing archives as it traverses generations?

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