

Working Paper Series n°5: Narratives of Peace and Conflict

Trauma and Testimony A Mix of Genres

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An exhibition presented at July 2015 Conference "Narratives of Peace and Conflict" at the Archbishop Desmond Tutu Centre for War and Peace Studies

Liverpool Hope University, UK

July 2015

The witness has forced himself to testify. For the youth of today, for the children who will be born tomorrow. He does not want his past to become their future....
(Wiesel, 2012 p.3)

I would like to tell you about my art work. It starts with a story:

Look ... the worst experience that I had, and I am speaking personally now happened in 1948. The Etzion settlements were surrounded and did not have enough weapons, so a decision was made, to send soldiers to supply them with weapons. My commander, Jehoshaphat Harkaby, wanted me to participate in this operation. I told him I will not be able to do it because I am too weak. He said to me, don't go. I think they were 35. They were on their way to Etzion Settlements when the Palestinians found them and killed them all. There was a need to identify their bodies. Because I knew the people, they sent me to identify the bodies. Look it was a very difficult experience for me ... and that is it.

*This is a painful testimony told to me by my grandfather. I could feel some of this pain and some I could barely imagine. He never told me in details about that moment or what he felt when he saw the dead bodies of his 35 friends in front of him. Maybe he was trying to protect me? Or maybe he felt that there aren't any words that can describe what he felt. But beyond the personal narrative it is the story of the Israeli Palestinian conflict, the story of war, the story of the past, and the story of the present- maybe it embodies stories of all wars. **The Etzion settlements were surrounded.** I am inside the story, his words taking me back to 1948, the past is no longer the past. I open my eyes, the past becomes present again, and another war between Israel and Palestine begins in the*

summer of 2014. This time my friends are soldiers fighting the war. I would like to testify not only to how this untold story haunts my grandfather, but also as to how similar or different untold stories about wars are haunting all of us today. Only if we speak of, make sense of the stories can we use them as evidence against wars. So I start gathering new testimonies, some are told to me directly, some are second hand testimonies, and some I write myself. They all include pain and trauma as well as truth and manipulation. I write a sentence in Hebrew then translate it to English and back to Hebrew again. One language may not be enough for me to tell what I am trying to tell. The word War as well as its Hebrew equivalent are both limited names for the unnamed experiences that I would like to document through my art. Yet, why do I feel compelled to tell this story despite the inevitable failure of doing so? I am trying to use it as evidence for an unofficial trial against wars. Do I swear to tell the truth and nothing but the truth? How could I when I cannot know all the facts of these events without even being there- when there are so many truths in the same moment?

My brother told me that he killed someone in the war in Gaza this summer. He wants to tell Dad about the horror that haunts him, the guilt that is pounding from him like the beats of his heart. The feeling of disgust, the horrible smell that follows him around. But Dad sits in front of the television screen watching the news, muttering over and over again that we have to kill all the fucking Arabs.

My baby boy says: Drive me back to the war, if not I will get there by myself. Yesterday he got back home from hospital. A splinter entered his foot, injuring him. When I heard he was wounded, finally, after so many days of worrying, I felt calm, at least he is alive. Now, he wants to return. So I drove him there.

After that, my mother stopped speaking to me because I allowed him to return to fight the war.

2014: New York: 4:30 am. I cannot sleep. At first, when I was just a little girl, it was World War II and my parents were worried. Then I grew up and I was a soldier. Again, my parents were worried, but so was I. Many of my friends were killed, among them my fiancé. Then again and again ... and again ... wars. I was worried about my husband. And again, war - and I was worried about my cousin. He died. In the next war, I was worried about my sons. We do not have a leader today who seeks peace, so I am worried again... this time about my grandchild. Yesterday, he died.

I am not trying to display an objective body of evidence concerning these realities. Rather, I am using the fragments of these stories or testimonies, as prototypes of the trauma they inhibit to paint my picture of war. I gather these testimonies and give them a bodily form by blowing them up to a large scale and printing them on chiffon fabric. The white fabrics can be envisioned as a flag or burial garments. I place them one next to another forming a physical shape of a circle and creating a document, a story made out of stories. Pain, death, danger, war flicker from the testimonies as the words flicker on the fabrics that move and spin with the wind. You, who see my artwork cannot fully feel the pain presented in the testimonies and yet it can move you. I want you to see this pain and feel anger towards all that makes it possible. Then you will disagree to take part in this



war.

Fearless Speech, Huss Michal 2014

The above described art work deals with testimony and the act of testifying to the collective political trauma of war. According to Yaakov Vertzberger (1997) collective political trauma is an event of violence from human behavior that is politically motivated and that affects a community of people. Some of the symptoms of collective trauma include rage, depression, denial, survivor guilt and internalized oppression. International relations are affected by collective and historical trauma. Nations and peoples carry the weight of their own historical trauma with them. In the following I will contextualize the above description of my artwork as an alternative mode of documentation. I will suggest that in the act of writing about trauma there is a personal element of therapy that can be expanded to a political element of resistance to the power mechanisms that enable war. I will compare the processes of writing to the process of memory using Freud and Derrida. I will attempt to show how subjectivity and reproduction as a way of experiencing and

documenting trauma call for genre mixing. I will, through my art, attempt to represent a history that is made out of several 'self's' and points of views that gives a voice to untold stories from underrepresented and marginalized positions. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, [Sara](#) Ahmed claims that pain itself is a lonely experience, we cannot know what someone else's pain feels like, and the attempt to tell about this pain is restricted by the limitations of our language to describe it, 'I may repeat the word pain or hurts precisely given the difficulty of translating the feeling into descriptive language.'(Ahmed, 2004 p. 22). Thus, telling and representing pain also marks an impossibility to fully access it. For example, while reading about the pain of a grandmother that lost her grandchild in war, I am also aware of my inability to know what her pain feels like. Such a traumatic experience resists or shatters language and communication. On the other hand, documentation of pain also has a collective element to it. According to Ahmed, there is a risk that a collective story of trauma or pain will be told in a way that confirms or recreates it. One way of doing so, is by telling the story of pain without marking its historical cause. She gives the example of a quote from a letter written by a Christian aid charity that describes the pain caused by landmines without referring to its origin, humans have placed them there at a time of war. According to Ahmed, 'The transformation of the wound into an identity cuts the wound off from a history of getting hurt or injured.'(Ahmed, 2004 p.32). Returning to the context of my artwork, I will show how the above described encapsulation or de-contextualization of pain often operates within the Israeli Palestinian conflict. For example, in the recent escalation in 2014 the word "tragedy" was widely used in Israeli press to describe the death of soldiers in the war, similarly, Barack Obama, USA president, described the

death and injury of Palestinian civilians as a "tragedy" in a public speech. The term "tragedy" works as a way to avoid apportioning blame towards the army, nation state ideology the government and so on and poetries violence as something that could not have been avoided. Hence, there is a need to bear witness to unrepresented elements of pain such as their cause, and different kinds of pains. In *Witnessing and Testimony*, Kelly Oliver, similarly to Ahmed, draws on the political importance of giving a voice to untold stories from unrepresented positons of subjectivity, as she states, 'the need to demand recognition from the dominant culture or group is a symptom of the pathology of oppression' (Oliver, 2004 p.81). In the case of the above-described artwork, I am trying to demand recognition and I am giving a voice to the oppressed story of my grandfather's unheroic act and his pain, which is an unrepresented element of war. I view this as a political task that undermines the way dominant nationalistic cultures represent war. In addition, Oliver argues that it is impossible to separate trauma from its phenomenological subject. In other words, testifying to a trauma and giving an account of something seen or experienced within the context of past or present history refers to the structure of subjectivity itself. Oliver suggests that rather than understanding subjectivity as lacking historical accuracy and truth, then subjectivity can 'allow us to get closer to experiencing a truth beyond recognition, the truth of witnessing what cannot be seen.' (Oliver, 2004 p. 81). In the following paragraph, I will use Freud and Derrida's analysis of the resemblance between writing and remembering to support the above argument of the relation between testimony and subjectivity as unavoidable and positive. In his essay

Notes on a Mystic Writing Pad Sigmund Freud uses the mystic writing pad as a metaphor to the way our psyche itself records experiences and memories.

if we imagine one hand writing upon the surface of the mystic writing pad while another periodically raises its covering sheet from the wax slab, we shall have a concrete representation of the way in which I tried to picture the functioning of the perceptual apparatus of our mind. (Freud, 1997 p. 212)

In the writing pad, texts can be written, erased and re written endlessly, never the less the material leaves a faint trace on the waxen surface below. This appearance and disappearance of the writing is similar, for Freud, to "the flickering-up and passing-away of consciousness in the process of perception". (Freud, 1997 p.2011) Thus our memories our always influenced by the traces of our past and present experiences, we can only ever experience the world through the traces of previous experiences. This explains why we can only experience a trauma or pain subjectively in relation to our previous experiences. In *Freud and the Scene of Writing* Derrida takes Freud's metaphor for theorizing memory according to a writing machine further. For Derrida, then writing supplements perception before perception even appears, 'If there is neither machine nor text without psychological origin, there is no psyche without text (Derrida 1972, p.76). Furthermore, Derrida claims that in order to understand Freud's analogy we need to understand the act of physical writing. What does it mean to take something and transcribe it to something else, to take an experience and transfer it to a concept, a representation, into words? Through writing I can perceive something and then recollect it, I can write on a piece of paper, journal, tablet, or web page: **Look ... the worst experience that I had, and I am speaking personally now happened in 1948.** I can forever go back

to this piece of writing, read it and recall this happening as if it just happened. Thus the technique of writing allows me to revisit endlessly a present that isn't actually present. For Derrida, our first impression, is already constituted by a duplication of 're petition and erasure- a readability and unreadability'. (Derrida 1972, p.112) In addition, Derrida understands writing as representation of death, 'Representation is death ... death is (only) representation. (Derrida 1972, p.114) for him, the act of writing marks an absent, our inevitable physical death as well of an act of witnessing, of surviving and creating a memory. Thus writing creates a body that has no physical existence and is not limited by time and space, creating a new way of being in the world, through thought and memories. On this level then writing can be understood as a type of prosthesis. A prosthesis is an artificial device that replaces a missing body part, which may be lost through trauma, disease, or congenital conditions. Writing as prosthesis makes writing an artificial device that records experiences and memories. This throws into question the very concept of being as a unified, coherent and stable present. In the essay, *The Trauma and the Benefits of Writing about It*, published in 2009, Art Markman explains that writing helps deal with the fragmented memories of trauma through linking them together into a coherent whole that can be cognitively and emotionally contained and laid to rest. Thus, on the personal level writing can become a prosthesis that helps our psyche deal with the pain of trauma by leaving some of the memories of trauma outside our physical body, additionally, through writing a memory that is fragmented turns into a coherent story. However, any reader each time he reads, it, "stains" it with the traces of his own subjective self and his own traumas. Derrida writes:

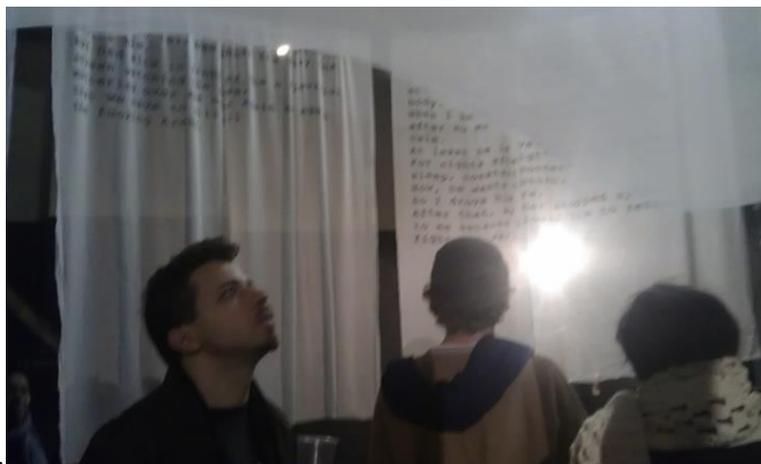
Everything begins with reproduction. Always already: repositories of a meaning which was never present, whose signified presence is always reconstituted by deferment, belatedly, supplementarily: the appeal if the supplements primal here and breaks open what will be reconstituted by deferment as the present. (Derrida 1972, p. 92)

Thus, the way our psyche perceives and remembers trauma is already a reproduction, always influenced by the traces of the self. Prosthesis as a written testimony allows multiple endless possibilities for the presence of other readings and other authors. To elaborate on this idea of the multiple authors I will turn to the book *Unclaimed Experience* by Cathy Caruth. This book demonstrates how a writing of self can happen also when writing about a historical event that was not experienced personally. She gives the example of Freud's book *Moses and Monotheism*. In this case, his writing about ancient Jewish history becomes a site of trauma itself. She demonstrates how his own trauma of being forced to flee Germany because of the persecution of Jews by Hitler echoes in his writing with the trauma of Jews fleeing slavery in Egypt. Thus, an autobiographical account, a personal testimony and a collective historical event, can all be read simultaneously into his text.

To conclude, staying within a single genre when writing about collective trauma can hide the cause of the wound or traces of present selves and manipulations, creating false objectivity. In order to overcome this danger, there is a need for modes of representation that are not straightforwardly referential. In *The Law of Genre*, Derrida discussed the limitation of the genre, 'as soon as genre announces itself, one must respect a norm, one must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not risk impurity, anomaly, or monstrosity.' (Derrida, 1980 p. 57). In the historical genre, there is a norm of representation through facts or accuracy, historical war books are filled with strategic experiences and tactical warfare. Yet, In the

case of a collective political trauma such as war, one bears witness to a truth about humanity and suffering that exceeds those facts. No words can describe it or no scientific measurement can be used to testify to the degree of horror or pain the ‘self’ or the ‘collective self’ had experienced. One way of breaking this genre is through using alternative modes of representation that offer a mix of truth, subjectivity, contradictions, fragmentations, and inconsistencies. My art is trying to become a disruption of a single historical or documentary genre: I mix textual and visual signifiers, memories, facts and fiction.

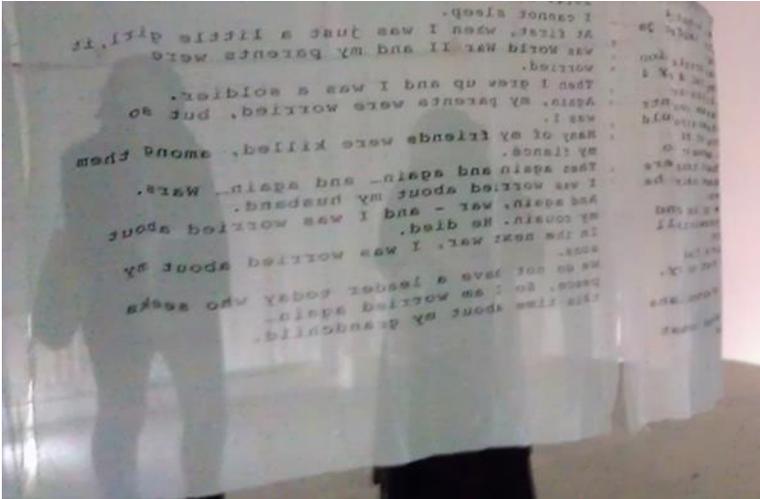
*When entering the space I created of the circle of fabrics, the viewer of the artwork is physically drawn into the space in order to read the stories as well as being outside of the space or reality they signify. Traces of myself cling to this art work, I had cut and stitched these fabrics, I had also written myself along these stories. I am the one gathering and reporting these stories for you, I read this line again: **Yesterday, he died.** I remember standing in the funeral of her grandchild, my friend. She attempts to read her eulogy but cannot speak, we all cry.*



Speech, Huss Michal 2014

Fearless

The viewer of the artwork is drawn into a political reality of a conflict that happened, happens and is constantly happening. In order to make sense of my history, present and future as an Israeli, I make art, I also write an academic essay about collective political trauma; this allows me to adopt different genres to document this experience. I invite you to re-read and re-tell it.



Speech, Huss Michal 2014

Fearless

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