

Antipode

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Book Review Symposium

Geraldine Pratt, *Families Apart: Migrant Mothers and the Conflicts of Labor and Love*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012. ISBN 978-0-8166-6999-8 (paper); ISBN 978-0-8166-6998-1 (cloth)

Oscillations

When Chris asked me to write these comments he asked if, when reading and thinking about *Families Apart*, I could focus on the theme of testimony. I would like to start by thanking Chris both for inviting me and for this instruction. For the instruction because otherwise I don't think I would have been able to compose these comments: Gerry's book is simply too rich in terms of its detail, too carefully constructed in its discussions and arguments, and too powerful in its emotional and ethical claims, to be broken down and analyzed in a few hundred words. Therefore, in my segment I will, with regret and to the book's detriment, forego commenting on so many important aspects of the work, so many telling details and subtle insights into emotional and political entanglements. Instead I want to offer a brief reading of the work which, with an eye to the pressures, paradoxes, and aporias of testimony, seeks to locate what, for me, is the conceptual-ethical-political-aesthetic centre of the work, and then, from this, make a few comments.

At the start of the fourth chapter, 'Creating New Spaces of Politics', the chapter which discusses and describes the staging and reception of the testimonial play *Nanay*, Gerry outlines what she calls 'Melancholic realism' (p. 108). Melancholic realism will describe the epistemology of the play, the nature of the claims that it makes upon its audience (if that audience has the ears to hear, a question we will come to soon). So, on page 108 we read:

“Within psychoanalytic theory melancholy is understood as a process of refusing to mourn and relinquish what has been lost or to substitute it with other attachments...A melancholic insistence on the nonexchangeable singularity of what has been lost has implications for how it can be expressed. In particular, because any representation is a form of substitution, representation is itself suspect”.

The comments here pick up on threads from the previous chapters, particularly the discussions of loss and trauma. So, for example, on page 61, and drawing on Freud and Caruth, Gerry outlines how trauma is defined by that which resists meaning, by that which returns but returns as disquietingly, perhaps devastatingly, meaningless. On page 47, and this time drawing on Butler, we find Gerry foreshadowing the comments on nonexchangeable singularity, writing that loss is “not something that you ‘get over’ or ‘work through’”, that loss “cannot be represented, but it *must* be marked”, and I underline this ‘must’ to underline the imperative tone. And on page 45, practically at the book’s outset, we find Gerry reflecting on the impossibility of giving the ‘full story’ of all the harms caused by the Live-in Caregiver Programme (LCP):

“Slowly, we have come to recognize [that] this quest for plenitude - and its failure, perhaps especially its failure - to be at the heart of, and not an impediment to, the research project”.

Here, in this context, I understand the ‘research project’ to refer to the act of making visible and audible the harm, the violence, and the psychological and social damage, caused by the LCP. Gerry’s, the Philippine Women Centre’s (PWC’s), and others’, attempts to assemble this missing archive from Canada’s history, to move it from private and familial spaces of silence into the public sphere.

And so, to return to the first passage quoted above; how to express, in general terms, in public, in the open in front of witnesses, and, perhaps, if they can be opened, the eyes and ears of the state, ‘nonexchangeable singularity’? How to submit for discussion and the weighing of costs and benefits a loss which cannot be represented and which will not be relinquished? For me, this aporia is the conceptual-ethical-political-aesthetic centre of the book. I run conceptual-ethical-political-aesthetic together because, stated in this way, in the imperative tone of the ‘must’, it is impossible to separate out these threads; impossible to tell if this is purely a conceptual, ethical,

political, or aesthetic issue, impossible to place one above the other in the search for words, stories, and strategies.

I have entitled these comments for Gerry ‘Oscillations’: on page 111 Gerry describes a ‘productive oscillation’ within the work, in this particular case between the singular and the general, between the subjective and the actuarial. However, beyond this, it seems to me that so much of the force of the work can be understood from the way it occupies and, indeed, creates and stages oscillations between a series of irreducible registers; as noted, the singular and the general, but also, the affectual and the political, the ontological and the ethical, the anecdotal and the actuarial, the discursive and the figural, the archive and the inexpressible, separation and relation, silence and sovereignty, loss and possibility. What, I think, is key to this work is precisely the failure, or, rather, the unwillingness, to resolve such oscillations.

How to lend consistency to such oscillations? Many times, up to the very opening line of the final paragraph (p. 171, see also 47; 82; 116; 118), Gerry claims the impossibility of creating one overarching narrative. The mode of address here must be other than that of a sovereign state, or its representatives, narrating itself through liberal ideals and the “efficacy of numbers” (p. 27-28), naturalizing and legitimizing its forms of structural violence in the process. Indeed, Gerry warns against the political and epistemological presuppositions built into our, that is social scientist’s, methods and modes of narration; the way that interviews, for example, all too often presume a coherent and responsible citizen-subject as their object. In such a situation the temptation on the part of the social scientist is to constantly repair the testimony given, to fill in its silences and gaps, to erase its tears and its contradictions. To make the testimony suitable to the norms of judgment in the public sphere. An alternative to this method, which is repeatedly attempted throughout this book, is to reformat the mode of address; to decline from the authoritative role of Critic and refuse to separate out politics from ethics from concepts from aesthetics. Where Gerry (p.125; 127-128) draws on Ranciere to discuss the staging of claims, as I read about the play *Nanay* I kept thinking of a line from Sloterdijk (2011: 462) when, discussing melancholia, he suggests that there is always a possibility of reformulating what he calls ‘mental problems’ as ‘media problems’. That is to say, rather than seeking to repair testimony, to reformat it and make it suitable to existent regimes of representation and address, it may be desirable, and certainly more just, to seek to change such regimes and invent new ones. To invent new public spheres with new grammars, where new forms of connection and separation

are possible. With *Nanay* I think there can be little doubt that Gerry has gone further down this experimental path than most.

However, this raises the question of the witness of the witness, or, more simply, the audience, of you and me. What forms of hearing and recognition, and so what forms of being-with are assembled through the screen of Melancholic realism? Throughout the book there are repeated references to moving witnesses, audiences, and, indeed, readers from passive spectators to engaged witnesses. However, and again, this movement is not straightforward; in this “geography of separation” (p. 44) engagement is not a balm, it is not the end of the story, but rather necessitates an opening up to complexity, complicity, contradiction, and irresolution. To engage is to begin to disavow the disavowal which dissimulates and sustains the violence of the LCP. To engage is, on this account, to be disquieted.

Disquiet arises precisely from the way in which testimony is constituted; from its being structured around an unbridgeable gap, around the imperative to mark what cannot be represented, to make circulate the non-exchangeable. There is, for reasons which are not contingent but structural, which are internal to the nature and definition of testimony and witness as such, an essential and absolute solitude of the witness. An essential solitude of the witness insofar as the addressee of testimony or witness does not experience, cannot experience, what the witness did. Each loss is singular and non-exchangeable, it circulates only insofar as it fails to circulate. While demanding it, such loss or harm is “forever beyond the reach of hermeneutic exhaustion” and will remain “heterogenous to all interpretative totalization” (Derrida 2005: 26). The force or claim of testimony - the imperative ‘must’ and the confusion of genres that ensues - gather around this gap, around this relation between witness and addressee which is not founded upon and does not resolve itself through manifestation, comprehension, or representation. Hence the move to being an engaged witness is a move not to a position of power, while it may be empowering this is no moment of reclaiming a figure or gesture of sovereignty or the reconstitution of the norms of debate. Instead melancholic realism assembles us around and in a certain dis-assembly, a separation, loss, or interval, but not, as Gerry is at pains to emphasise, to bring “a Filipino community together *in* grief” (p. 95), but rather to make space for an “identification beyond identity” (*ibid.*).

References

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Paul Harrison
Department of Geography
Durham University
paul.harrison@durham.ac.uk

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