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The intersubjective witness: trauma testimony in Towfiq Al-Qady's *Nothing But Nothing: One Refugee's Story*

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Testimony typically privileges singular subjectivity; as a means of representing psychological trauma, it is thought to bear witness to an individual's unique experience. This essay interrogates the question of singular subjectivity, arguing that a community can be the nexus around which witnesses 'gather' the human and historiographical significance of their experiences, focusing their constitutive relationship with those of and for whom the testimony is spoken. I examine this idea with reference to Towfiq Al-Qady's autobiographical solo performance, *Nothing But Nothing: One Refugee's Story*, first presented in Brisbane in 2005. Al-Qady constructs a fluid, unstable (inter)subjectivity, performing as and speaking about his mother, lover, daughter and his child and adult selves, as well as speaking for other communities with which his experience connects. While the decentralisation of the individual witness highlights possibilities for encounter and communication, it can be problematic in terms of witness agency and risks de-specifying individual experience. This problem focuses the tensions and slippages between self and other(s), 'truth' and 'fiction', that inhere in testimonial acts. I investigate the extent to which *Nothing But Nothing* enables *effectual generalisation*, whereby lines of community engagement are drawn up across the divide between asylum seekers/refugees and Australian audiences.

Keywords: asylum seekers; refugees; testimony; witness; theatre; Australia

Testimony typically privileges singular subjectivity; as a means of representing psychological trauma, it is thought to bear witness to an individual's unique experience. A belief in this singularity underlies Primo Levi's key assertion that the only true witnesses to the Holocaust are the 'drowned' – those who died in the concentration camps (1988). Ostensibly, this argument leads (as it did for Levi) to the conclusion that 'true' subjectivity is impossible in relation to the camps. But in identifying the (lost) subjectivity of the drowned, Levi accounts for their experience, and for their crucial position within the community of which he, as survivor, is part. The very structure of his testimonial self-representation serves to witness for the drowned, even as it asserts (rightly) that much of the latter's experience can never be testified.¹ This essay interrogates the question of singular subjectivity, arguing that a community or collectivity can be the nexus around which a witness 'gathers' the human and historiographical significance of their experience, focusing its constitutive relationship with those of and for whom they speak. I examine this idea with reference to Towfiq Al-Qady's autobiographical solo performance, *Nothing But Nothing: One Refugee's Story*, first presented in Brisbane in 2005 with directorial

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assistance by Leah Mercer.² An artist and refugee from Iraq, Al-Qady constructs a fluid, unstable subjectivity, performing as and speaking about his mother, lover, daughter and his child and adult selves, as well as speaking for other communities with which his experience connects.

In these ways, *Nothing But Nothing* supports the case for theatre as a productive space for 'intersubjective witnessing'. In performance, testimony is generally edited or devised for the purposes of theatrical structure, and comes to bear some of the characteristics of fiction, such as symbolism and tension. In Al-Qady's play, intersubjectivity works in two key ways. Firstly, and inevitably, the enactment of testimony *transforms* the witness-subject into Other; he is 'generalised' within the framework of the performance and becomes representative of a like community. Secondly, and more specifically relevant here, Al-Qady's text 'gathers' or speaks of and for the subjectivities and experiences of other witnesses – parents, lovers, children, fellow asylum seekers – to the traumatic event(s). The decentralisation of the individual witness highlights possibilities for communication and encounter with others. Of course, notions of speaking for and generalising are problematic in terms of witness agency and risk de-specifying individual experience, constituting asylum seekers and refugees as a homogenous category. In many ways, such problems focus the tensions and slippages between self and other(s), 'truth' and 'fiction', that inhere in testimonial acts. I investigate the extent to which *Nothing But Nothing* enables *effectual* generalisation, whereby the witness's testimony is situated and its significance expanded, and audience identification with the witness figure allows for lines of community engagement to be drawn up across the divide between asylum seekers/refugees and Australians.

Al-Qady's lyrical and impressionistic monologue (markedly different from the precise, sober language adopted purposefully by Levi) testifies to a lifetime's cumulative trauma: an insecure childhood in Iraq, persecution and imprisonment under Saddam Hussein's regime, the deaths of loved ones and the journey, with a boatload of others, to Australia. Belying its title's claim to tell 'one refugee's story', the play makes sustained recourse to the trauma of a community – a family, a nation, a group of asylum seekers and, especially, child civilians of war. At the beginning of the performance Al-Qady enacts himself as a child: 'I like to play with everything. I like to play soccer./I like to play with the ball but we don't have enough money to buy a ball'.³ The child Al-Qady's burgeoning awareness of his own poverty prompts broader consideration of the condition of children: 'How many children are in the same situation?/How many children are worse than my situation in this world?' Al-Qady's subjectivity is mediated by the collective subjectivity of the child; he asks the audience, 'Do you know the feelings of the child when you say to him, no?' Personal trauma is translated into a violation of the generalised child-subject when Al-Qady concludes, 'The war destroys the hearts of small children'. This slippage between the specific and the collective enables him to convey effectual generalisations of the voices of child civilians.

Al-Qady's first-person narration activates the singular specificity of testimonial speech; however, the use of present tense creates a poetic immediacy that differentiates the text from conventional testimony. Wavering between re-enactment and reportage, Al-Qady alternates from present to past tense as he describes events in Iraq: 'What is this?/This is love./Her name was Leila./With Leila, I saw my dreams./I like her, I love her, Leila'. First-person disclosure gives an impression of

direct transmission of a subject's emotional state, but in Al-Qady's case, it is an explicitly mediated form of self-expression, being in English rather than his native Arabic, a translation he found emotionally and intellectually difficult (personal communication, 1 August 2007). Al-Qady's style of representation masks the painstaking construction of a legible enacted self.

While in one sense Al-Qady is conspicuously alone onstage and as a persecuted figure, the importance of interlocutors, whether friendly, hostile or indifferent, is reinforced throughout the performance; every point of his physical and emotional journey is contingent upon the outcomes of his human relationships and encounters. He engages in various 'conversations', between his child-self and his mother, with his first love Leila, with his young daughter, with an Iraqi official and with an Australian immigration officer. In such interactions, Al-Qady invokes an imagined, external Other. However, in the most traumatic instances, he seems to retreat within himself; for instance, his pleas to his dead father are performed in a defeated, crouching position with his back to the audience. Nonetheless, the impulse to connect and commune manifests in the most futile of contexts: during the journey to Australia, Al-Qady attempts to engage the sea, the sky and the boat as benevolent interlocutors: 'Good morning, sea/I like you and I am scared of you at the same time./Please be quiet and soft with us because we are weak people'. Nature's non-response to these pleas challenges the Australian audience-community to acknowledge a point of congruence in terms of the nation's more general disavowal of asylum seekers.⁴

Appropriately, the importance of an interlocutor is invoked through Al-Qady's relationship with his audience. Dominating the stage, 'opposing' the audience in physical and ideological terms, is a large wooden cut-out of the word 'NO', which Al-Qady utilises as a grim symbol: his father's grave, a prison cell, the boat to Australia. At the beginning of the performance, he implores his audience-interlocutors to respond to a series of candid questions; gesturing to individuals, he asks, 'Would you like to be my friend? ... If you are my friend, then maybe you wouldn't mind if I asked you to help me – could you help me?' When he has elicited 'yes' from the audience, he explains, 'Between YES and NO I have spent all my life', thereby situating the audience at the affirmative end of the binary. Upon initiating this dialogue, he begins to tell his story.

In this way, Al-Qady places the audience in an enabling position, emphasising what is often merely implied in testimonial representation: the significance of the human agent(s) to whom the witness speaks – and ultimately, the possibility that a listener will *bear witness* to the testimony. In *Nothing But Nothing*, the audience confirms the subjectivity of the witness by vocally consenting to the enactment of the testimony. Al-Qady's gesture establishes a situational relationality, whereupon the connection between his subjectivity and the audience is contingent not just upon his act of testimonial representation, but also upon the audience's willingness to hear it. This request for friendship and assistance parallels that made by asylum seekers to the Australian nation and its elected representatives. Of course, given that Al-Qady's audience has, in attending the performance, implicitly consented to hear his testimony, it is difficult to argue that the contingency implied by his request is literal; what his gesture invokes, rather, is the context of alterity within which asylum seekers and refugees must speak. More specifically, it recognises the position of power held by Australians relative to asylum seekers and refugees. Al-Qady's call for

recognition and response challenges the passivity of conventional spectatorship; this is sustained beyond the bounds of the play with the addition of post-show question and answer sessions.

Al-Qady articulates his experiences in Iraq in socio-cultural terms, using first-person singular and first-person plural pronouns interchangeably in a Brisbane interview: 'I like the art. I like museum. We like to paint. We like to write. Iraqi people are very nice' (quoted in Dalton 2005, 1). Correspondingly, much of *Nothing But Nothing* is focused on broad civilian communities. Al-Qady imagines how he would represent the global community of refugees: 'I'd like to make a huge sculpture of the refugees of the world, from this water, to say to the world, look, look what the war has made for the people'. Instead of a strategy of making known through individualisation, he envisages the amalgamation of the world's refugees as an effectual way in which to communicate their plight. Enacting an interview with an Australian immigration officer, Al-Qady resists individualisation: 'my name./ I forget, I can't remember. Please write my name down as Sinbad./Sorry, my number ... 5 million. 5 million refugees, they escaped from my country'. He designates himself as belonging to a community, or what Debbie Rodan terms a 'lifeworld' (2000, 60), of Iraqi refugees while his choice of the name Sinbad concurs satirically with Western stereotypes of the foreign, exotic seafarer. Al-Qady's transformation from individual witness to symbolic witness figure involves the grafting of experiences that are not his own: on the journey to Australia, his self-character sees a butterfly and is drawn out of listless exhaustion by the prospect of land and freedom. In a Brisbane newspaper article, Al-Qady reveals that a fellow asylum seeker actually saw the butterfly (Dalton 2005, 1). This strategy of incorporation subjugates strict autobiographical veracity, gathering the identities and experiences of a trauma community. Thus, the audience engages not just with Al-Qady, but with the refugee figure that he embodies.

This figure is one of lamentation: 'my dream, my struggle, my escape, my tears and my suffering'. While, as Julie Salverson has argued in relation to testimony (2001), the trope of the victim is problematic, Al-Qady's preoccupation with experiences of oppression, disempowerment, loss and grief does not preclude the possibility of resistance and transformation, or of efficacious communication with an audience. Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray employ the term 'subversive speaking' to describe testimony that does not underline and redouble positions of disempowerment, but in which witnesses recognise themselves as interpreters of their own experiences, and not simply as reporters of events (Alcoff and Gray 1993, 282). Al-Qady's narrative is not overtly activist, but in assuming the position of interpreter of his experience, by presenting an unstable subjectivity and tracing its interrelations with the communities to which he belongs, he arguably instigates an act of 'subversive speaking'. When he tells of the misery of the Iraqi prison, Al-Qady also describes 'the best thing [he] did', which was to paint a dove of peace on the prison wall; although he obeyed the order to wipe it away, he realised 'that art was stronger than the prison ... stronger than Saddam Hussein'. Al-Qady's politicised interpretation of his experience enabled him to perceive a purpose and sense of agency in the midst of persecution. His contextualised self-representation opens the space for transformation from disempowered victim to instigator of social and

cultural dialogue. His scrawled inscription, immediately following the closing night's performance, of the words 'thank you' and 'freedom' across the large 'NO' appropriates the subservient pleas that punctuate the performance and transforms them into a subversive inscription akin to the one he employed in prison – albeit met with an entirely different response.

As far as subversive speaking is concerned, Al-Qady's comprehensive role in the production is significant. *Nothing But Nothing* was almost entirely his creation, both in terms of writing and theatrical realisation; Mercer explains that although she assisted him in English pronunciation and phrasing, her role was largely to facilitate his vision, which was 'very clear and very specific . . . as if he already had it all clearly performed in his head' (personal communication, 20 June 2007). This distinguishes *Nothing But Nothing* from the higher-profile Australian production *Through the Wire*, in which the only refugee to play himself (Shahin Shafaei) encountered difficulties with directorial re-fashioning of his self-representation. Both works involved the transformation of witnessing selves and the creation of despecified and collective subjectivities, but their dramaturgical processes differed along the crucial lines of refugee agency and creative authority. Due in part to the agency of its author-witness-performer, *Nothing But Nothing* offers an effectual generalisation of 'one refugee's story'; Al-Qady thus constructs an ethically steadfast identity that is intertwined with different witnesses to trauma, and his narrative is underpinned by an imperative to speak of and for them, *to* an engaged community.

Notes

1. Other Holocaust survivors, such as Charlotte Delbo and 'Ka-Tzetnik 135633', explicitly situate their own trauma within a historiographical context, drawing attention to the communities of others that experienced it. See Trezise (2002) and Popkin (2002).
2. The work premiered at Brisbane's Metro Arts Theatre on 10 April 2005. Towfiq Al-Qady continues to present it to schools and colleges in Brisbane.
3. All quotations from *Nothing But Nothing: One Refugee's Story* are drawn from Towfiq Al-Qady's unpublished unpaginated playscript with the author's permission.
4. Al-Qady's Metro Arts audience consisted of Australians as well as members of Brisbane's refugee (particularly Iraqi) community. My reference to the Australian audience-community is not an attempt to homogenise the audience, but identifies the dominant 'others' to whom Al-Qady's text speaks, as distinct from those *on whose behalf* he performs.

Notes on contributor

Emma Cox is a PhD candidate at the Australian National University. She is researching recent works of performance and writing by and about asylum seekers and refugees in Australia. Emma has published articles on drama and contemporary fiction in Australia and the USA.

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