

On receiving the witness: A keynote as a site of care

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Abstract

At this year's conference, I was privileged to participate as one of the keynote speakers. Drawing on my dissertation, I gave a lecture on the pedagogical work and archival practices of an event known as The Toronto Homeless Memorial. This brief reflection is inspired by the way in which my words were received by conference attendees—and, more broadly, the work of listening to those who bear witness to violence. I, along with many others, relate to the memorial on a personal level; my research is a practice of witnessing and of partnering with the testimony of the memorial organizers. Influenced by Ann Chinnery's (2013) thinking, I conceptualize the work of storylistening as facilitating cross-temporal relationality with the past—specifically, with past-others rendered silent and invisible. By receiving the testimony of the witness, we make possible moments of interruption and encounter for/with those abjected from public regard.

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I have been reflecting on the pedagogical work of *storylistening*. The act of listening, of receiving testimony, is indeed a work of care. Ann Chinnery (2013) argues that others' past-others are brought into the present—into relational proximity—in the care we exhibit for the other. All of us carry traces of the past-others we have lost; in bearing witness to past lives—and here I think particularly in terms of those disappeared through violent means—we turn our listeners toward an “inescapable relatedness” (Chinnery, 2013, p. 260) that we are called to accept. In turn, the listener reminds the witness not only of reciprocity between them, but of a “reciprocity-by-proxy” (Chinnery, 2013, p. 261) with the absent, the disappeared. Thus, the storylistener cultivates “a space of appearance” (Arendt, 1958, p. 200) insofar as the dead can be made to appear through testimony.

I am reminded of Cathy Crowe's (2007) account of (and co-produced with) Melvin Tipping, the only person with lived experience of dehousing who was asked to act as an expert witness on “homelessness” at the coroner's inquest of 1996. The so-called “Freezing Deaths Inquest” was conducted after three consecutive men died of exposure on Toronto's streets in the winter of 1996. One of those men, Eugene Upper, was a friend of Tipping's. Tipping later shared, “I wanted to testify more about...Eugene Upper, but when I was on the witness stand, they said I could only talk about my present life...The Coroner and the Crown Attorney thought homelessness had nothing to do with the deaths” (Crowe, 2007, p. 40). It should perhaps come as no surprise that the very state violence that abandoned Eugene Upper to freeze to death in a bus shelter also sought to censure his (re)appearance at the trial. Though the trial was haunted, in Avery Gordon's (2008) sense of the word, by Upper (and the other two men, Irwin Anderson and Mirsalah-Aldin Kompani), there was no *storylistening* for Tipping; there was no reciprocity-by-proxy, no care for the witness. Such silencing is not new. State violence always seeks to maintain the invisibility of the victims. Neoliberal rationality continues to separate past from present (Rothberg, 2012). The task, then, is to

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cultivate spaces for “interruption” (Biesta, 2012, p. 685), wherein the witness is cared for by the listener, and the invisibilized specters can produce a “something-to-be-done” (Gordon, 2008, p. xvi). There was indeed a haunting that occurred at the Freezing Deaths Inquest: despite the censorship over the course of the six-week inquest, the jury’s verdict attributed all three deaths to “homelessness.” They called on all three levels of government to identify models for affordable and supportive housing and take action to increase the accessibility and availability of such services (*Jury Verdict of Coroner’s Inquest into the Freezing Deaths of Irwin Anderson, Mirsalah-Aldin Kompani, and Eugene Upper*, 1996). Of course, such work remains incomplete.

In my lecture at this year’s Conference, “Other Worlds, Any Ways,” I testified to the work of the Toronto Homeless Memorial. I shared how the memorial itself animates the memories of those who have died, while honouring and extending hospitality to friends and family members, who are often rendered “ghost[s] in the landscape” (Zachary Grant, personal communication, March 9, 2022). I argued that the affective force of commemorative practice helps us encounter past others—indeed, there is an argument to be made that my lecture was intended as part-lecture, part-affective encounter. In contrast to the “Freezing Deaths Inquest,” I had an audience of listeners who engaged thoughtfully and in reciprocity with the past-others whose names have been etched into this simple memorial. For those who attended: thank you for participating in this pedagogical act of bearing witness—for the receiving of testimony, for the ways in which this process made possible a cross-temporal reciprocity with those who you have not met, and for caring for me amidst the strange and contingent process that we call grieving. Somehow, even across the dislocation of the virtual environment, I felt very cared for in this address. I felt as if, perhaps, those whose stories I shared were able to be embraced alongside me—those for whom dozens, even hundreds of names on the memorial are the names of close friends, siblings, and children.

I am writing this reflection in July of 2023. This month the Toronto Homeless Memorial added over 40 names to the memorial's archive. Perhaps I should end this reflection with this sobering reality, but I want to offer what I hope are generative questions. What kinds of listening can we now engage in that will resituate who has a claim on public memory, commemorative practice, or public space? How can we cultivate moments of pedagogical interruption—interrupting the grammar of neoliberalism by creating openings for freedom, for plurality, and for possible sites of publicness? And isn't it paradoxical that I am insisting on the work of *listening* in order to foster *interruption*? Perhaps we should be fostering interruption to insist on listening. In any case, I am grateful for the chance to share some of my work, grateful to the conference organizers, and grateful to everyone who took the time to listen.

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