Reviews


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During a conference at the Yad Vashem International School for Holocaust Studies in 1999, at a session on history led by Michael Marrus, a survivor stood up to take issue with something Marrus had said about transports to one of the camps. A large man, whose voice boomed a strongly accented English, said, “No, that was not how it was. From Warsaw to Treblinka my family was taken in trains with compartments, not boxcars,” and he cited the month and year during which his family was destroyed. At this, Marrus said, “Yes, they were green cars with seats facing each other down the aisle, and they ran for three weeks in May.” Marrus went on to name the towns at which the train stopped on the way to the camp, and as he did so, the survivor, who had by this time sat down, nodded his head in amazement, remembering (or was he really recalling a story?) the time and the place, and the train on which his family went to its end.

In twenty years, it is likely that this survivor, along with all of the other survivors who met in that room in a building on the outskirts of Jerusalem, will be gone. And along with them will go the memories, the palpable remainders of events whose imprint is indelibly written as history. But the event itself remains indelible, leaving a mark on the language of history, like that of Marrus and others, and on the language of testimony and of fiction written by those who, unlike the Russian survivor, were not there on the spot. And whether the disaster at issue is the Shoah, or the Argentine dirty war, or the genocide against Hutus in Rwanda, it exerts a pressure on those forms of cultural and collective

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memory that attempt to erase the genocide as an instance of national anomaly, as well as those individual memories that would work through the trauma. Historians, like Marrus, who were not there are nonetheless able to “remember” the details of events that seem lost even to the individual who experienced it. Memory is as much the imprint of the loss of the event as it is the representation of the event; narrative histories, built as a bulwark against memory’s loss, stand in for and replace the event, which nonetheless returns, like the abject, to haunt it. The end of memory does not mean the end of history, but instead marks history’s beginning. Written histories must be aware of—and indicate—their status as substitutes for, and supplements to, a deep loss, a loss that is as important to a pedagogy of witness—of zakhor, the Jewish injunction to remember—as the representations themselves.

*Between Hope and Despair,* an exceptionally smart collection of essays edited by Roger Simon, Sharon Rosenberg, and Claudia Eppert, outlines the theoretical and pedagogical stakes of a sense of memory founded on the event’s irrecuperability and its effect upon subsequent acts of witness by individuals who were not there. The starting point for the collection is that “remembrance is an inherently pedagogical practice in that it is implicated in the formation and regulation of meanings, feelings, perceptions, identifications, and the imaginative projection of human limits and possibilities.” Yosef Yerushalmi’s understanding of the term zakhor is that the injunction to remember is complicated by the tension it embodies: “The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the Land of Egypt” (Leviticus 19.34). Memory here connects the individual’s relation to another in the immediacy of the present with a collective history marked by continuity and permanence. Zakhor, in other words, is relational; it is played out in one’s engagement with others, both those with whom we reside and those who, like the Russian’s family, are no longer with us. But it is, as Cynthia Ozick reminded us years ago in *Metaphor and Memory,* a metaphorical relation, dependent entirely on the discursive connection between that which has been lost and the compulsion to propel oneself into the future. To obey the injunction to remember, one has to become a witness, to be “confronted with a boundary” that marks one’s “distance from that undergone and spoken by others,” and yet the witness is also compelled to speak memory, to testify—this, in spite of knowing full well that the loss of the event and so of history will exert a force upon testimony that will “reconstitute the very transcription of memory.” The relation between witness and testi-
mony worked out in this volume resembles Levinas' relation of saying and said, in which what compels us to speak is lost in the act of utterance and yet is evident in the utterance's failure to represent its own origins. Many of the contributors to *Between Hope and Despair* insist that a pedagogy of remembrance in the face of historical trauma ought to be founded on this idea of loss, one that is nonetheless hopeful that the "reconstitution" of testimony will prevent us from seeing the historians' narratives as the event itself: while Marrus may well have remembered the Russian's railway cars more accurately than the witness, it was the *loss* of the event that registered bodily upon the historian, the witness, and the secondhand witnesses in attendance.

This book complicates the idea that history is that which can be preserved as a memory and written. But the event that serves as the object of history is unavailable (for the survivor at Yad Vashem it is the journey by train that led to the destruction of his family; for mothers of the *desaparecidos* in Argentina, whose children were victims of the military government's program in the late 1970s to quash political dissent through abduction, murder, and silence, it is the fate and in some instances burial site of their sons and daughters). This is true as much for the historian as it is for the one who was there. For Maurice Blanchot (the theoretical point of departure for many of these essays), the event becomes "immemorial": once an experience occurs, it is forever lost, though it is at that point—"upon losing what we have to say," the point of forgetfulness—that writing, testimony, begins. The *loss* of the event is the source of memory, writing, and history, and it is that loss that returns, like the abject, to trouble the known, either in testimonial or historical terms.

This is especially true in the case of traumatic events: like those recollected by Marrus and the survivor in attendance at his lecture; like second- and third-generation children of survivors whose memories of the past and whose present circumstances are transformed by their parents' memories and their own (as examined in Rachel Baum's essay, which owes a great debt to Marianne Hirsch's work on "post-memory"); and like the writing of those who, like the descendants of survivors of the Middle Passage, find that return to the origins of writing (that is, Africa), are impossible (as Rinaldo Walcott's essay makes plain). The witness saw the deed or the circumstance that presented itself (as trauma); but the event, as witnessed, gets in the way of what can be known or said about it. Cathy Caruth, whose work is cited frequently in this book, argues that the event registers on the witness as a void; to survive—to "get away
apparently unharmed,” in Freud’s terms—the witness testifies, though the narrative of the event bears at best an oblique relation to what the witness saw. You could argue that there is no history—a knowledge of what happened—available to either the survivor or the historian. To return to Yad Vashem, between the horrible memory of loss whose image the survivor can’t seem to shake and the stunningly complete knowledge of the timetable on which this particular train ran that is available to the historian, is something unavailable to knowledge, lost, in Blanchot’s terms, “to what we were to say.”

Testimonial narratives don’t disclose history; instead, they disclose—where the narrative most clearly shows its seams—the effect of events upon witnesses. The survivor’s correction of the historian at Yad Vashem functions as an interjection more than an argument, and it likely interrupted the survivor’s knowledge of history and the memory of his place in it as much as it intervened in the narrative of the historian. The effect of what the witness saw—in the presence of an audience of scholars and survivors—isn’t knowledge, nor is the inconsistency between Marrus’ narrative and the survivor’s memory evidence of an error or bad faith. In terms used in Between Hope and Despair, derived from Caruth’s and Shoshana Felman’s work on trauma and testimony, the interjection—the testimony—preserves the event in its disruptive effect; but the gap between the historical record and the irretrievable event cannot be filled by memory or testimony. This doesn’t mean that witnesses won’t try, though: some of the smartest essays in the collection—those by Mario Di Paolantonio on Argentina’s desaparecidos, Jody Ranck on the genocide in Rwanda, and Rinaldo Walcott on the Middle Passage—describe what happens when national or cultural narratives of memory and history work actively to “forget” atrocities that seem to work against notions of “humanism,” of origins, and the seamlessness of reason. Traditional notions of memory, and of community, seem to reify Yerushalmi’s narratives of “the one” (we were once slaves in Egypt) at the expense of the radically particular and relational narrative of loss and of risk (you shall love the stranger as yourself), and these authors are interested in a sense of memory “demanding vigilance and recognition of the impossibility of mastering what took place.” Such a vigilance demands, in Levinas’ terms, “an ethical form of hearing,” one that remains open to forms of memory, and of mourning, that cannot be easily integrated into the collective and the national, forms that are hybrid, syncretic, “in which we see the Levinasian embrace of alterity through the recognition of the human in the other.”
Memory's role in history is, therefore, a vexed one. The events that comprise the disaster exert a pressure upon it that registers in discursive form but that can't be read as a representation of the event. The disaster is related both to the moment of witnessing and to the inadequacy of the name that makes of that moment a knowledge. It is a knowledge whose "communicability of experience," like the hope of the book's title, or like Walter Benjamin's idea of redemption, appears as a combination of the "remembrance of the novelist" with the "reminiscence of the storyteller," as Roger Simon puts it. The historical event as trauma is both a moment of time and a moment that cannot be recovered in time. But because it troubles the witness' and the historian's ability to speak or write, the event (the disaster) becomes visible in the irregularities—in the repetitions, the odd displacements, and the inappropriate contextualizations—of their accounts. In the case of the survivor, memory is the image of a green train whose carriages contain the residents of the Warsaw ghetto, including the members of his family; but the event itself registers in the incomplete and faltering testimony of the survivor as well as in the startlingly clear enumeration of the details of the historian. In the case of Anne Frank's diary (discussed in Deborah Britzman's excellent essay), memory is our understanding of the writer whose life was snuffed out early, and the layers of contested ownership in the dynamic between Meyer Levin and Otto Frank; the event itself, the loss of the writer and of the diary in the morass of legalities and in what Susan Bernstein has called "promiscuous identification," makes itself plain in an anxiety, like the one expressed by Ozick when she wrote in the New Yorker that one can imagine Anne Frank's diary "burned, vanished, lost—saved from a world that made of it all things, some of them true, while floating lightly over the heavier truth of named and inhabited evil." Better to find a mode of writing, a way for secondhand witnesses to testify, that brings to the surface of the historical or fictional narrative the aporias that exist between subject and object, agent and patient, literal and figurative language, and takes the obligation to speak—and the risk of inevitable failure that it implies—as the object of inquiry. The most effective accounts of historical trauma, according to the contributors to this book, draw the reader's attention to the risks and the trauma involved in putting oneself in the place of the historical actor, of saying, "I am here. I understand."

What lies at the foundation of most of these essays is the idea of witnessing and writing found in the work of Levinas, Blanchot, Jean-François Lyotard, and—as I mentioned earlier—in its psychoanalytic analog, through Freud and Lacan, in Felman and Caruth. The occurrence
of the event in which a person is implicated and sees him or herself as such precedes experience. In order for the occurrence to register as experience (knowledge), the individual becomes a subject, gives the event attributes, and both the individual and it are thereby named. At that moment, the event itself falls outside being, in Levinas’ terms, and any attempt to recuperate it is haunted by its status as an event. The survivor’s insistence at Yad Vashem that his family had seats in a compartment and didn’t stand in boxcars was an insistence upon the facts of history. But the urgency in the interjection—and Marrus’ equally insistent focus on the timetable of the Reichsbahn—registers an element of history that is unavailable to knowledge. We may understand, on the testimonies of these two very different men, the nature of the transport during some weeks in May 1943 in Poland, and we may enumerate at least a few of its victims from this memory. But what is important about this exchange, as much as the content of the story itself—of the experience—is what cannot be placed into the narrative: the witness’ sense of horror or resignation or loss at the sight of the green passenger cars and his anger over the historian’s error. They find no place in the language of narrative, though they register in the interjection.

This is why conventional notions of pedagogy seem particularly insufficient when it comes to historical traumas such as the Shoah and other acts of violence and genocide. As Simon writes, often “educative projects . . . call on people to attend to [testimonies of atrocity] in ways that prefigure their importance and meaning. On such terms, the traumatic memories of others become object lessons meant to illustrate some significant historical moment, social process, or change and to provoke a compassionate and helpful response.” In some cases these prefigured responses are especially pernicious, particularly in the aftermath of self-inflicted national wounds like civil war, when truth and reconciliation committees are meant to sweep the memory of the murdered and the missing under the rug. Identification of the kind Britzman describes, like such a view of pedagogy, becomes “a defense against thought.” The paradox, she writes, is that “because learning from another’s pain requires noticing what one has not experienced and the capacity to be touched by what one has not noticed, identifying with pain”—which is the experience of the secondhand witness par excellence—“requires a self capable of wounding her or his own ego boundaries, the very boundaries that serve as a defense against pain.” The effect of the seen—particularly in the case of traumatic events—stands in the way of the fabric of testimony, leaving the witness to find some other language to stand in the
breach. Witnessing demands that the memory be inscribed, though its historical circumstances and discursive control are simply not available to subsequent witnesses. So it becomes excruciatingly difficult to witness that which one has not experienced, and to imagine that we can teach historical traumas in such a way that they redeem those experiences—let alone to imagine that we can find a way to represent them so that those representations become redemptive—seems counterintuitive.

But we represent them all the time, notwithstanding Theodor Adorno's dictum; the question the contributors to Between Hope and Despair wrestle with is how such representations might work against notions of history and testimony as "repetition, or as overfamiliar, but as means to work through" the incommensurability of history and memory. Remembrance, in the words of the editors, "must find a way to initiate a continuing unsettling and an interminable asking of pedagogical questions regarding what it means to be taught by the experience of others," in which "the responsibilities to history are displaced and rethought."

Baum's essay on second-generation post-Holocaust witnessing is cast in terms reminiscent of those Walter Benjamin used when speaking of redemption and history. Describing the photographs taken by Yaffa Eliach and placed in a two-story exhibit at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Baum says that those representations "move the viewer only to the extent that the viewer knows what happened after the shutter closed. They are moments out of time, drawn from a narrative that infuses them with meaning not found explicitly in the frame." There is something excessive in the images, something neither of the moment captured in the image, nor of the moments before and after, but somewhere between them, something that makes itself available—as a trauma or a moment of witnessing—in the present of the museum visitor. Here you have a constellation, in Benjamin's terms, of history and of memory, and their incommensurability provides a sense of the otherwise inaccessible object: a moment of profound loss, the loss of life, of culture, and of reason.

Redemption here doesn't mean trying to recuperate the events that "precede discourse," if by that we mean getting the historical moment, the minutiae of the disaster's horror, right. Events of history are heterogeneous: their interpretive significance and their effect upon the participant's and the observer's lived lives are by definition incommensurable. Di Paolantonio puts it in terms of Lyotard's differend, "the unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be," which can be seen as the "sentiment of an
affliction (a vulnerability) that prescriptively obligates me to respond" or to testify. This testimony-as-writing “comes upon the re-cognition that ‘our’ terms are at a loss, that they are therefore vulnerable (lacking), yet open (hopeful) to something other than what they already know/claim.” Any point of history is a disorderly intersection of moments that resist narrative closure; this is all the more true in cases of atrocity and violence, cases that appear utterly unreasonable to the witness and whose representations appear just as unreasonable to the secondhand witness or reader. Representations of such historical moments will show the pressure of this incommensurability, despite their attempts to do otherwise, in their effects upon readers or their figural displacements. But they don’t provide access to—stand in for—the events. What can be written is the impasse between what we can imagine and the conventions available to us to express them. Our job as teachers, writes Britzman (citing the work of Ernst Van Alphen) is “to explore and develop manners and means of representation that preserve contact with this extreme history; means that continue to transmit knowledge of it, that simultaneously prevent forgetting and making familiar.” In teaching this impasse, we might gather a sense of something simultaneously human and beyond the human, of something both distressingly recognizable (providing us comfort or pleasure) and impossibly painful as well.

To return to where we began, how do we remember the Holocaust at the end of living memory, when the survivors are finally gone and all that are left are second- and thirdhand witnesses who were not there? The assumption that the contributors of *Between Hope and Despair* argue against is that we can’t and that we’re left only with history. But the survivors themselves could at best merely approximate history. Our job, according to the contributors to this book, is to encourage a writing that redeems history—that redeems the events that flash up before the witnesses and haunt their testimonies and the testimonies of those who encounter them—and that is as potentially traumatizing for the secondary witness as it is for the one who was there. I can’t shake the memory of Marrus’ argument with the survivor at Yad Vashem over two years ago. But that doesn’t mean I can see what they saw. What haunts my memory is the sense that I can’t see what they did, and that those trains and those who were carried to their deaths in them are forever lost. What’s redeemed, in this memory, isn’t the Holocaust. It is instead the structure of memory, its relation to history, and a sense that at the origins of both is a void, what Adorno called “the extremity that eludes the concept.” This isn’t the end of memory, or of history. As the contributors to this
outstanding book tell us, at its most redemptive writing presents what exceeds representation, forces the witness to see what he or she would rather not see, and troubles the lives of those who would prefer to think of history as something irrevocably past.

"Naming begins the chaos," Ann Berthoff once said in describing her model for composing as a double helix. "Because they have the power of naming, [students] can generate chaos" (Making of Meaning, Boynton, 1981, 70). Chaos is desirable in Berthoff’s formulation, a necessary condition for thinking, for making meaning. Naming is powerful, a way to shape experience and to claim it. Much of our work in the academy centers on a process of naming—of defining our terms, opposing them to others, renaming them to fit new contexts as they arise. Our fascination with naming generates a lot of chaos, a potentially productive tension that fuels our conference discussions about the role of the “personal” in the writing class, our teaching “theory” to undergraduates, and our departmental meetings about “interdisciplinary approaches” or about hiring for a “postcolonial” position.

Terry Caesar’s Traveling through the Boondocks is all about naming. And his aim might be to do as Berthoff suggests, to “begin the chaos,” to set in motion a process that would have academic institutions, and English departments in particular, bring to the surface those unnamed factors that circumscribe and limit our scholarly and teaching lives. “Boondocks” itself is a powerful bit of naming, for it refers not only to the mythical and parodied university in Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert’s 1991 article in Critical Inquiry, “Masterpiece Theatre: An Academic Melodrama,” but to Caesar’s own very real university in central Pennsylvania, Clarion State. Caesar writes from the boondocks, and down in the boondocks nothing much happens that might interest the larger world, the not-boondocks world of elite academic institutions. Caesar calls his univer-