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NATIONAL DOCUMENTATION CENTRE

Synthesis: an Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies

No 17 (2025)

Derrida à l'œuvre: Deconstruction at Large

Testifying for the Pylos Disaster: Who/What "bears witness for the witness?"

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doi: 10.12681/syn.44015

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Testifying for the Pylos Disaster: Who/What "bears witness for the witness?"

Elpida Ziavra

Abstract

In his two seminars on *Le Témoignage* (1992-1994) and in *Sovereignties in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan* (2005), Jacques Derrida provides a rich archive on the politics and poetics of testimony and the question of who or what can testify for the disasters of the human in the past and the present, and what language can be adequate to the task. Derrida deconstructs the idea of a transparent and pure testimony, which, he suggests, is by default contaminated by silences, breaks, cuts, incoherences, lacunae as well as the hesitation and traumatism of the witnesses that cannot fully translate their experience, bound on their senses and visceral responses, into rational *logos*. Derrida dramatizes the potential of poetic discourse to inherit, inscribe and disseminate a testimony that does not correspond to the common understanding of legal testimony or of a coherent, chronologically linear narrative. Reading Derrida's archive on testimony in apposition with selected poems by Paul Celan, this article aims to testify for a contemporary disaster, namely the shipwreck of the *Adriana* trawler carrying refugees from Africa to Europe, a few miles from the Greek city of Pylos, on June 14th, 2023, in order to probe the possible and impossible witnesses of the disaster and what their testimonies can flesh out about a historical and political reading of the catastrophic event. The paper constellates a series of fragments, that is, media coverage of the shipwreck, photographs before and after the disaster and survivors' testimonies, in order to suggest that not only humans, but also poems and (audio)visual materials should be taken as witnesses for this unique event that tends to occur again and again in the Mediterranean and other sea and land crossings around the globe.

> I'm thinking of the poet as documentarian, documenting the Silence of the archive, because that Silence is where we, from whom so much has been taken, to whom so much harm has been done, reside.
>
> —Philip in Metres et al. 124

> And of his 350 fellow Pakistanis who were also in the hold with him, only 12 were rescued. "Beautiful people were lost," says Abdul.
>
> —Malichudis et al., *Under the Unwatchful*

This article looks into Jacques Derrida's politics and poetics of testimony, both in *Le Témoignage* seminars (1992-1994) and in *Sovereignties in Question* (2005), in order to testify for a contemporary disaster at sea, namely the sinking of the *Adriana* fishing trawler—overfilled with refugees, trying to cross the Mediterranean and reach Italy from Libya—off the coast of Pylos on the 14th of June 2023. I probe the *Adriana* shipwreck, more commonly referred to as Pylos in the Greek and international press, as a case study that can examine the question of who/what can testify for the witnesses of the event and who/what should or has the right to do so. The proper name Pylos geographically situates the disaster and provides the mourners with a tomb or a *stele* of a sort that monumentalizes and commemorates, even if it is a cenotaph of a city name metonymically standing for the loss at sea; it names the unnameable catastrophe that cannot be fully illuminated and known, whose opacity cannot be translated into language and whose witnesses can only testify for the impossibility of testifying before such a traumatic event. The reason the trawler undertook such a long voyage instead of passing directly to Greece through Turkey is the hostile conditions migrants are facing in the Aegean Sea by the coast guard that push back and abuse them.[1] The spot where the shipwreck occurred is close to the deepest point of the Mediterranean, and a few nautical miles to the west of cape Tainaron, the southernmost part of the Balkan peninsula and a place that ancient Greeks thought was a gate to the underworld;[2] an uncanny resonance. I approach this specific locality and temporality of the Pylos catastrophe in the Aegean Sea via WWII Hiroshima and Auschwitz, two haunting city-names that also metonymically stand for unspeakable disasters against humanity, for which both artistic representations and historiographical archives still strive to provide their testimonies.

Hiroshima-Auschwitz

The film *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* (1959), directed by Alain Resnais and written by Marguerite Duras, is a cinematographic tour de force that incorporates all the symbols, motifs and concepts, namely, witnessing and testifying, the hand, "teletechnologies" (Habermas and Derrida 121), survival, the name and the date that are going to haunt my analysis on testimony. At the first scene of the film, the unnamed French woman narrates her experience of Hiroshima, as a spectator of the catastrophic events of the 6th of August 1945; she talks about the hospital with the suffering people right after the atomic bomb dropped—that she has followed through the media—and the museum commemorating the disaster—that she visited at a later date. The various reproductions and representations of the event through the museum exhibits, photographs, videos, macabre traces of the incinerated humans and of other materials affected by the extremely high temperatures tend to elicit the affective responses of the spectators/voyeurs, of the ones that only witness a mediated and montaged version of the disaster: "Four times at the museum at Hiroshima…The people walk around, pensive, through the photographs, the reconstructions, for lack of anything else, through the photographs, the photographs, the reconstructions, for lack of anything else, the explanations, for lack of anything else" (my translation).[3] The photographic reconstructions supplement the lack of testimonies for the disaster from the ones who died from it; they pass as the real thing for the visitors of the city, but the locals know their superficiality and their inadequacy to testify for the atomic holocaust (a Greek word signifying the all-burning: from '*holos'* all and burning '*kaustos'* from the verb to burn, *'kaiein'*). The unnamed Japanese man of the scene insistently responds to the woman who claims to have truly seen the catastrophe of Hiroshima: "You have seen *nothing* at Hiroshima. Nothing" (my translation).[4] The man seems to say: whatever you think you have seen, it is not the disaster itself; no one can bear witness for this disaster, apart from the ones whose bodies were there, then, at Hiroshima, on the 6th of August 1945, at 8:15 am, and were turned into ashes. For the Japanese man who lost his family, friends and his hometown at the atomic holocaust, the experience of the disaster is completely different from that of the French woman, who witnesses Hiroshima and the annihilation of its people through the news as a catastrophic event that happened far away from home, and even though she sympathizes with the suffering of the people, they are not her people and the city not her city. Her access to the event occurs only through photographs and reproductions created for the museum and not from the war zone itself. She is

inevitably, as Susan Sontag famously put it, "regarding the pain of others" as a spectator, a protected subject that has the choice to close her eyes and avert her gaze. In this first scene of the film, the dialogue of the two anonymous protagonists about the memory of the disaster and the impossibility of seeing, let alone testifying for Hiroshima, a name that does not only refer to the Japanese city where the nuclear bomb dropped at the end of WWII, but becomes a metonymy for the nuclear disaster in general, is accompanied by the viewing of two torsos in a tight embrace. The focus is on their entwined arms and their hands that touch and caress, hold and grasp one another in a lovers' fragmented and knotted bodily discourse. The two bodies are covered in ash that keeps falling and which, at some point, starts glowing. Incandescent, glorious ash, invoking Paul Celan's poem "Ashglory," on their "shaken-knotted/ hands" (Celan and Joris 62) and arms.

Derrida conjures another well-known proper name that speaks through ash and has become metonymic of the holocaust, namely Auschwitz, in order to argue that the proper name can obscure what it claims to illuminate, since it renders the disaster exceptional by erasing and obfuscating its different manifestations (Auschwitz was not the only concentration camp) as well as its seriality and reproducibility throughout the years, at different dates: "there is certainly today the date of that holocaust we know, the hell of our memory; but there is a holocaust for every date, and somewhere in the world at every hour. Every hour counts its holocaust" (Derrida, *Sovereignties* 46). Derrida thinks with Lanzmann, the director of the *Shoah* (1985) film, and dramatizes the danger of exceptionalism and of monumentalizing certain events, rendering them exemplary and iconic, while disregarding and forgetting others. Auschwitz is a revenant that haunts a series of tragedies that occurred at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century. Lanzmann claims that

> ...Auschwitz did not end at Auschwitz, that it continues, that it is not an event that took place and that it has been demarcated, that it ends as a thing of the past, towards which we return. In a certain way it is an infinite event that continues (All translations from *Le Témoignage* seminars are mine).[5]

This article emphasizes the need to read historically a series of catastrophic events whose politics are intertwined—despite their potential temporal or geographical distance—as instances of a long history of race thinking in modernity, as well as of an utter contempt for the lives of people deemed the radical others and thus "ungrievable" (Butler 22). Like Auschwitz, Hiroshima did not end at Hiroshima; it is an exceptional event but by default one of a pair—

another bomb hit Nagasaki on August 9th, at 11:02 am.[6] The *Adriana*/Pylos shipwreck is also not the first and it will unfortunately not be the last disaster at sea involving refugees whose overcrowded and unseaworthy boat should not have undertaken the perilous journey of crossing the Mediterranean; neither the first nor the last catastrophe for which the drowned will not be recovered and their names will not be known; neither the first nor the last world-ending event in the Aegean Sea.[7] And yet, each disaster and each individual death are experienced by the survivors/mourners as the end of *the* world, for which they bear the heavy task to testify. It is not, Derrida argues, the end of *a* world amongst others but the obliteration of everything that was:

> Death marks each time, each time in defiance of arithmetic, the absolute end of the one and only world, of that which each opens as a one and only world, the end of the unique world, the end of the totality of what is or can be presented as the origin of the world for any unique living being, be it human or not. (Derrida, *Sovereignties* 140)

Despite their distinct histories and politics, Hiroshima, Auschwitz and Pylos become the metonymies of the each-time world-annihilating disasters. Who/what can bear witness to and testify for the continuous reiteration of the Hiroshimas, Auschwitzes and *Adrianae*/Pyloses of this world that never end and who is able to bear, to carry, to wear this mourning (*porter le deuil*)[8] (Derrida and Bonhomme 2) about the cities and about these unspeakable disasters, which are "incommensurable to speech?"[9] How to inherit and remember such unique yet serialized world-ending events, which continue happening, typical[10] of an ontological and political categorization of human beings as more or less worthy of being protected and of being alive, and which testimonies and evidence can write their spectral traces that remain? What language can attempt to represent the disasters and what grammar can transfer the *différance* of testimony, including its moments of silence, its fissures, aporias, and extralinguistic traces?

Derrida deconstructs the "epistemo-doxical" (*épistémo-doxique*) (*Témoignage I,* session 5, p. 13) idea of a pure, absolute and transparent testimony (and a transparent I) that can fully represent an event and underscores the religious character of testimony as an act of faith. An absolutely certain testimony, a pure testimony would be no testimony; it would count as an incontestable piece of evidence. Derrida suggests that the testimonial[11] is not entirely of the order of language and that it requires silence and the body to pass on its aporias:

> ...it takes the body and the intonation and the gesture, whether it be a breath, a look, not necessarily a caress but, in any case, something singular and singularly sensed that makes the verbal enunciation insufficient to testify by itself; that signifies that the act or the gesture of testifying in the declaration of love is not reduced to speech, or to what of the speech belongs to lexico-grammatical verbality.[12]

It takes the body to say *I love you*, *I care about you*, but it also takes the body to testify for anything, since there are parts of a testimonial that can never be fully translated into words. Testimony is never purely translatable and transparent since it requires the transmutation of an experience of the whole body into discourse and a well-ordered narrative; it is a precarious step undertaken by the witness, a gesture to grasp something furtive, that is, memory of a visceral and synesthetic event that defies the ocularcentrism of the western *cogito* and reason. In the western tradition, the eyewitness is the privileged witness, who can supposedly offer the most credible information on an event, first as an oral testimony that can then easily and unproblematically pass into written language. However, despite the demand for a chronologically ordered and linear narrative that can render in language the multisensorial memories of the witnesses, they usually offer a fragmented testimonial, full of fissures and gaps that requires an otherwise translation and writing of the disaster.

Maurice Blanchot, in his seminal work *L'Ecriture du Désastre* (1980) speaks to the impossibility of narrating the disaster because of the limitations of human languages and the inherently unrepresentable and unnarratable character of the event, and gestures towards the writing performed by the disaster itself. A disaster writes through the traces and fragments it leaves behind, the ashes, smoke, and bones that become corals on the ocean bed; it writes through "the fleeing silence of the countless cry" (Blanchot and Smock 47).[13] The disaster writes and is written through the fragmentary, the poetic: "*When all is said, what remains to be said is the disaster. Ruin of words, demise writing, faintness faintly murmuring: what remains without remains* (the fragmentary)" (33).[14] For Derrida, "all responsible witnessing engages a poetic experience of language" (*Sovereignties* 66); the poetic bears a testimony that can render the unheard cries of the victims and the ruins of the disaster as well as the guilt and trauma of the haunted survivants; the poetic testimony starts from the historical incident and deconstructs, reconstructs and "critically fabulates" (Hartman 11) the parts that have not been archived, that have been elliptically recorded and represented, or have been omitted by the official grand narratives. The poet becomes, thus, as Marlene Nourbese Philip suggests in my epigraph, a documentarian that safeguards and

represents the Silences[15] of the colonial archives: Silences with a capital S signify for Philip the "*genres of being human*" (Wynter 31) that have been misrepresented as silenced but have always already spoken in otherwise modalities that were not registered and legible by the colonial grammars. In poetry, the testimonies have the room to extend their gaps, silences and ellipses, the words have the space and the time to breathe (unlike the refugees on the boat or the people in the crematories or the ones in Hiroshima and Nagasaki); there is no necessity for the work to make absolute sense and follow a line of causality to a *telos* or obey rigid syntactical rules. Paul Celan's poetry exemplifies this postmodern poetics of the fragmentary and the Silent; a poetics that is haunted by the traumatic past and writes its "spectropoetic" (Derrida, *Specters* 56) testimonials in order to counter the impossibility of testifying for the disaster, for the sake of the only witnesses worthy of the name, the ones annihilated in the fire, salty water, or atomic blast.

Pylos

Pylos is the third metonymic proper name of a city/village I discuss in this paper, which speaks to an exceptional yet repeated event in the Mediterranean, the shipwreck of an overcrowded boat filled with refugees desperately trying to reach Europe. The question that haunts this article is: Who/what can bear witness for the witnesses of the Pylos shipwreck? Thinking with Derrida, I assemble various fragmentary testimonials to underscore how a single testimony can never represent the disaster, but it is in the interstices and overlappings of various accounts that the event could start to be accounted for. The first mortal beings that attempt to testify for the Pylos disaster and its victims are the survivors that were on the boat at the moment of the sinking. Derrida explores the concept of the witness and follows its etymological thread in Latin (*testis*, the one who testifies, a term that evokes the *terstis,* the third in a triangular relation of love and witnessing). The Latin word *superstes* also designates the witness, and more specifically the one that has survived and assumes the painful task to tell the story, as "the surviving third, even the testamentary heir, guardian, guarantee, and legatee, in principle, of what was and is now gone" (Derrida, *Sovereignties* 74). The ancient Greek word for the witness points towards the religious interconnection of testimony and martyrdom: the *martus* "who becomes the martyr, the witness of faith, does not literally entail any of these values (third, surviving, presence, generation)" (75). Testifying is a performative act accompanied by an act of faith and an invocation to a third

as a witness for the veracity of the testimonial; it entails a promise and an oath of the testifying witnesses before the ones they take as witnesses.

A witness is someone who has been present at the event in question but at an appropriate distance: close enough to the event to be able to see, hear or even touch and be touched, assist and be involved in what happened, and so provide a credible testimony, but far enough to survive it and be able to pass on the experience of the event at a later time. Derrida distinguishes at least two temporalities and performances of testimony; one is contemporaneous with the disaster: the witnesses who bear witness to the disaster, who become affected by, traumatized and destabilized, hurt and endangered by the event are the *témoins-témoins*, the witnessing-witnesses. When they attempt to testify for the disaster (before a court, in a newspaper or even to their loved ones), at a later date, they become *temoins-temoignants*, testifying-witnesses in the process of transforming their experience that might have included multiple modalities and senses into a *récit*, a narrative, a linear and chronological, step by step historicization of the traumatic experience.[16] As Frédérik Detue and Charlotte Lacoste suggest concerning the testifying witness: "Even if he or she relives the events while narrating them (sometimes very shortly afterwards), the witness 'interposes [between his experience and us] the entire grid of a discovery and a memory and a consciousness which carry things through to the end'" (30). Each witness witnesses and frames their testimony differently, depending on the unique "autopoietic" (Wynter 28)[17] modalities they have for processing reality, their memories of the past, their ideological biases and their personal aims; attestations are nothing more than fictional stories told by human beings, struggling to transform their fugitive memory into a coherent whole, even when the witnesses swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

The Pylos *superstites* are the *témoins-témoins*, the survivors-as-witnesses. They may suffer from survivors' guilt, or PTSD;[18] they feel that they have seen what they should not have seen and have survived that which they should not have survived. Derrida argues that the witnesses survive after they have seen the worse and that is "…the condition of testimony, but to survive that which one does not survive, one should not have survived."[19] The shipwreck survivors were traumatized, suffered from nightmares for a long period after they witnessed the dying of their loved ones, the "beautiful people" (Malichudis et al. *Under the Unwatchful* n. pag.) Abdul speaks about in my second epigraph, and they knew that they could have been counted amongst the dead as well. The survivors/*superstites* bear the weight not only of their own testimony and shock before the traumatic events they witnessed and participated

in, but also of the deceased, the drowned and disappeared, the unnamed and unmourned. They are responsible of performing an impossible task, namely, of providing their (by default) imperfect and unnarratable testimonies *for* the witness par excellence, the spectral dead, even though "[the survivor] cannot testify for the only and true witnesses, the ones that are dead."[20] Derrida returns multiple times to the three lines by Paul Celan's "Ashglory" (*Aschenglorie*):" "No one/ bears witness for the /witness" (Celan and Joris 63)[21] to argue that no one bears witness *for*, that is, in the place of the witness, because no one can, but also no one has the right to, no one should undertake such an impossible and unethical task that replaces the beloved dead with a testimony by a witness that has a limited access to the world-ending disaster. And yet, after the death of the other that constitutes each time the end of *the* world, the surviving witnesses have to bear their mourning by incorporating the dead and speaking for them, a necessary betrayal in order not to silence them entirely. The *superstites* have to testify for the apocalyptic and eschatological event that is unique every time it happens; "…what I speak of, says or implies any witness, happened only once, on a single date, and therefore a last and final time. I always testify for a final judgment."[22] Testifying is a debt owed to the dead who have departed and cannot fight for justice, performed by the haunted survivors, who, left alone, bear the heavy burden to carry the beloved others and their worlds that are now faraway, a responsibility and a weight echoing in the last line of Celan's "Great, Glowing Vault:" "The world is gone, I have to carry you" (Celan and Joris 97). Celan's "Ashglory" also dramatizes the violence entailed in the incorporation of the dead, haunting the survivors, through the line: "I dug myself into you and into you" (63). In *Sovereignties in Question*, Derrida provides alternative interpretations for this digging, to denote the repetitive and violent hollowing out of the survivors who are transformed into tombs, crypts, and burial grounds for the dead; he speaks of the dead that bury, inter, encrypt or inhume themselves in their survivors.[23] The dead entomb themselves into the survivant witnesses and ask them to narrate, using language, the hauntological experience of being inhabited by the specters of the drowned and the incinerated that refuse to disappear and return as revenants to demand justice and commemoration.

The Pylos *superstites* provided their testimonies to the coastguard after they had been rescued, turning into *témoins-témoignants* of the disaster. But they faced certain difficulties in their attempt to testify; they were deprived of their phones, which they had previously protected in plastic cases, containing evidence of the moments before, during, and right after the disaster. They were also afraid that if they spoke too freely about the role the Greek coast

guard had played in the sinking of the *Adriana,* they would be mistreated[24] and, since they could not speak Greek and sometimes maybe not even English, their testimonies were not properly registered due to the language barrier, the lack of interpreters and of eagerness from the part of the police to record their attestations. In a joint research by *Solomon*, *Forensis*, *The Guardian*, and *ARD*, some survivors provided a second series of testimonies to a group of researchers and journalists who employed 3D models and data from satellites, aerial photographs that were blown up to reveal more minute details, nautical coordinates, and the situated testimonies of the survivors to reconstruct the conditions aboard the ship and its trajectory till the moment of its sinking. Only by combining multiple attestations as pieces of a puzzle from the survivors could this experiment work; each person has only witnessed a small angle of the disaster, and the survivors of the tragedy might have seen the cause of the sinking or not, depending on their location on the boat. The teletechnological tools available supplemented the witnesses' accounts and allowed for a reconstruction of the position of bodies on the boat, in its holds (for the latter not many testimonies remain, since the people inside had a very hard time escaping death) and a small room where the women and children were situated for better protection that became their liquid tomb. No women and children survived. The uncanny digital reproductions of the overcrowded ship (seen in the *Forensis* video) echo the famous 1789 broadsides by British abolitionists, which "provided the most recognisable, shocking, and unforgettable of all images associated with the Atlantic slave trade" (White n. pag.),[25] since they displayed a sketched overview of the slave ship and the maximum of human bodies it could fit, when they would be lying down; a bleak resonance speaking to the continuity of (neo)imperialist and (neo)colonial politics that feed off the deracination and expropriation of human beings, deemed as fungible, "ungrievable" (Butler 22) bodies.

The second witnesses of the Pylos disaster are the coastguard officers, whose testimonies suggest that the trawler repeatedly refused to be assisted. They claim that they stood close to the refugee boat but did not interfere with it in any way. When it finally capsized, it was because the people on board suddenly moved towards one side. For Derrida, everyone can be a false witness unintentionally because human memory can trick a person and make them testify to something they swear is true, while in fact they have been mistaken.[26] There are, however, cases in which the witnesses intentionally distort their testimonies in order to serve their own interests. The coast guard's official testimony has a number of gaps and inaccuracies, as proven by the evidence from multiple other sources, like the satellites, the scarce but important

photographic evidence, and the survivors' accounts. Many eyewitnesses from the refugee ship speak of a blue rope that towed the boat for quite some time, turning it towards Italy, before it snapped. Other witnesses inside the trawler liken the sudden towing to a rocket starting abruptly (*Forensis* video). Some survivors claim that it was this towing that made their boat violently lurch so much that it finally capsized. They also claim something else, namely, that the coast guard ship stood by and watched until their boat had completely sunk before they attempted rescue, when it was too late to save all the people, demonstrating their uncaring, systematic *necropolitics* (Mbembe),[27] dictating which lives should survive and which should be killed or left to die, in the context of a so-called crisis at the borders. The coast guard let the boat sink, since rescuing and processing the migrants' asylum demands would be more economically harmful than simply letting people die.[28]

The coast guard had the responsibility to record the rescue attempt according to Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency. The reason they were required to do so was that they have been accused and condemned by the European Court of Human Rights on multiple occasions about pushbacks and violence against the people in need they are supposed to rescue and bring to safety. The *Solomon* article: "Under the Unwatchful Eye of The Authorities' Deactivated Cameras" claims that "the Coast Guard vessel ΠΠΛΣ-920, the only vessel present at the time the *Adriana* capsized, was obligated to 'document its operation by video-recording' in accordance with a 2021 Frontex document which recommends that the Greek authorities record their operations continually" (Malichudis et al., n. pag.). The coast guard boat at the scene had a state-of-the-art thermal camera system, exactly to register such incidents, but the cameras were off during the 13th and 14th of June 2023. The mechanical, glass eye, with the superhuman ability of night vision, charged with the task to oversee and record the events of the rescuing attempt, was shut, since the coast guard, who could have had a panopticon-like view of the boat and a recording for the future, preferred not to activate the cameras and to perform their operation under the guise of darkness. The officials suggested to the press this happened in order to have all the officers available for rescue instead of having them manage the cameras and that it was a matter of care: "When we have an incident, we try to have the ability to operate seamlessly. Making some crew members 'inactive' so that they can record a video, you understand, is unethical" (Malichudis et al., *Under the Unwatchful* n. pag.), the spokesman of the coast guard suggested, providing what seems to be a false testimony, refuted by one of his former colleagues, who argued "that these cameras do not require constant manual operation and they exist exactly for

this reason—to record such incidents" (Malichudis et al.). The technical eye needs, at first, a certain mediation by the human finger that presses the buttons to activate the camera, and the human eye that directs the lens and sets its testimonial frame but is then able to fully witness and safeguard a visual archive of the event in its memory on its own.

Other cameras, however, documented the moments before the Pylos shipwreck. The photograph that still remains as the most iconic of the catastrophe is one taken in the days before the sinking and it serves as a foreshadowing of the imminent tragedy. It is an aerial photograph showing the clearly overloaded trawler sailing at low speed in the middle of the sea. Paraphrasing Elizabeth Alexander's question of a politics and an ethics of gazing at the visual reproductions of black suffering in the USA, I ask:[29] Can you be human and look at this overcrowded boat, knowing that it is going to sink? Can you close your eyes or avert your gaze to avoid looking, or conveniently forget to turn the glass eye of the camera on to avoid recording? It was this photograph—along with the ignored SOS signal emitted by the *Adriana*[30]—that made it impossible to trust the coast guard when they said they did not think the boat was in danger and that is why they did not immediately proceed to a rescuing expedition. In the meanwhile, testimonies by survivors describe that the passengers who had run out of water used their shoelaces to lower buckets into the sea and fill them with sea water to drink. The *Adriana*'s helplessness and the people's unheard cry for help conjures another bleak incident, namely the 1781 *Zong* case of a slave ship that lost its direction while going to Jamaica and ended up running out of potable water. The captain and crew devised a way to ensure their profit; they threw the sick and dying enslaved humans overboard, to protect their investment and avoid the destruction of the rest of their *cargo*. Philip echoes the thirsty pleas becoming inarticulate cries striving to pronounce the word *water*, in the first poem of her seminal collection *Zong!* (2008), by scattering the fragmented cries and syllables, gurgles and shouts on the page, allowing them the space to breathe the *Zong* and *Adriana* passengers were not afforded. What sounds were heard aboard the unmoving *Adriana* waiting for assistance, while the people's throats were parched from thirst and from drinking the sea "wa/ter/ of/ w/ant" (Philip, *Zong!* 4)?

No One

Derrida repeatedly poses a question to his students during his seminars on *Testimony*: "What are we doing, here now, we?" and he attempts to speculate on an answer: "We are testifying, some would say. We take ourselves as

witnesses, others would say. We are testifying and we are being asked to witness the impossibility of testimony, some others would say…"[31] I would like to invite *us* to think of what *we*[32] are doing in the face of the Pylos disaster and its unique date, the 14th of June 2023, which remains as a memorial and a tomb of the world-ending event. The spectators, *we*, the people that did not take part in the disaster, become the witnesses of the witnesses' attestations; we are the ones who read or listen to the different testimonies and gaze at the visual archives of the disaster to draw our conclusions and believe or disbelieve them, like the unnamed woman of *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*. Photographic and video recordings have the potential to represent the pain of others and become testimonies of the catastrophe but run the danger of being manipulated and framed in ways that render them false testimonies and us false witnesses, since video and photography are necessarily mediated by the human eye and hand, both before being recorded and afterwards. Thus we, as spectators, should, as Eduardo Cadava urges, "learn to see" (343) and to read images "creatively and historically at the same time" (347) and not in isolation, but in a critical, political *and* poetic context, so that we may not be manipulated by their potentially false captions, dates, angles and framings. We need to excavate with care and attentiveness the multimedia traces and testimonials which frame, filter, and make up the images even though they are invisible, as well as the histories and stories that are passed on through the photographic archives.

The documentary video by *Forensis,* concerning the research conducted after the Pylos disaster, remains as a teletechnological archive of the so-far unheard testimonies of the *témoins-témoignants*. What I find intriguing about this recording is that for reasons of protection of their anonymity, the witnesses' faces are not revealed; all the spectators get is their voices and their hands. And these hands speak. One of the survivors who testifies before the camera and the researchers says in a heartbreaking voice: "I lost my friends, my cousins, my brother-in-law" (*Forensis* video). I will attempt to read the still from the video directly following the survivor's enumeration of his losses, a still which vibrates with the forceful caption "I need to find them some justice" that remains and resonates with the debt owed to the dead by the haunted *superstes* (Figure 1). I will offer a rather poetic analysis of the still image, affective in tone, stemming from my own reactions to the specific photographic archive and the potential of a poetically oriented discourse to better start to speak, through its fragmentariness and polysemy, to the unnarratable disaster.

Figure 1: From the article "Under the Unwatchful Eye of the Authorities' Deactivated Cameras: Dying in the Darkest Depths of the Mediterranean." Courtesy of Solomon.

The survivor's testimonial, supplemented by his hands, articulates his plea to justice for the bodies lost at sea that will never be found to be properly buried and mourned. Looking with care at the frozen frame from this specific moment of the documentary as a "still-moving image" (Campt)[33] I feel that its *punctum* (Barthes) is the knotting of the hands, the suffering hands with (burn?)marks on them, palms facing skywards. These hands are empty; they can no longer caress, hold, or grasp their beloved, like the lovers' hands in Resnais' film; they testify to their mourning and to their effort to do the impossible and bear witness *for* the witnesses, despite their guilt for having survived. They form "painknots" (Celan and Joris 62) of entwined hands that hold on to each other lest they fall apart: one hand is nestling within the other, sheltering the other. Celan's "Ashglory" and "Psalm" frame my analysis and my witnessing of the witnessing captured on camera; I keep thinking about the "shaken-knotted/hands" (62) and how they bloom in this picture; how their wreathed fingers embrace one another and seem like a plant emerging from the soil; like a no-one's rose; a rose of the anonymous witness for the unnamed, beautiful dead:

> We were
> a Nothing, we are, we
> will remain, blooming:
> the Nothing-, the
> No one's-rose. (Celan and Young 47)

The hands perform the impossibility of testifying; they move to say that language cannot represent the disaster; they show the futility of trying to testify for the witnesses in any language, let alone a foreign one. They still hold on to the visceral memories of the disaster and dramatize a testimonial of the gesture, the tactile, and the flesh that cannot be attributed through *logos*. As Napier argues in his detailed study of hands, gesture "allows things to be expressed that can never be spoken of" (157), like the mourning and helplessness of testifying for the drowned and the disappeared. Cadava writes about hands in Fazal Sheikh's photographic works:

> In each instance, whether the hands are holding something, whether they are holding each other or someone else, or simply resting on this or that part of a body, they imply an effort to keep and to hold, to carry and hand over, to hand down, like a kind of legacy or inheritance, a fragment of the past. (296)

The hands bear the task to inherit and pass on their extralinguistic testimonies through a choreography of gestures and silence; they try to grasp and hold on to the fugitive traces of the histories and stories of the disasters that "cannot be told, must be told, and will never be told" (Philip, *Zong!* 207).

The question remains: who/what can testify for the Pylos disaster? Can the survivors, bearing the guilt and the trauma of having survived; the coast guard officers, following the lines of a narrative that exonerates them of any wrongdoing; the researchers and journalists that ask for witnessing and truth; the cameras photographing the before and after but not the moment of disaster; the empty, entwined hands; the poems written for different dates but which resonate with this particular one: the 14th of June 2023; the poems yet-to-be written that can speak to the event through silence and fragmentation? Derrida, through the poetics of Paul Celan responds: no one. No one can bear witness for the witness. Despite the seeming impossibility of witnessing this phrase gestures at, I would like to attempt a different reading of this *no one* that appears in Celan's "Psalm" and the title of the poetic collection *The No One's Rose* (*Die Niemandsrose*). "Psalm" starts thus:

> No one kneads us again out of earth and clay,
> No one conjures our dust.
> No one. (Celan and Young 47)

The no one could signify the desperation and existentialist solitude of a person or a people abandoned by God and humans; a poetic testimony of

hopelessness and sorrow. But what if this no one is a proper name metonymically standing for the witness-to-come, like in Odysseus' ruse before the cyclops Polyphemus? Polyphemus asked Odysseus his name and the epic hero responded that he was called *οὔτις*, no one. When, later on, Odysseus viciously attacked the cyclops and blinded his one and only eye, the monster started screaming that *οὔτις/no one* had hurt him, causing the confusion of his fellow cyclopes. Can Celan's no one be read as a ruse that allows the possibility of a witness for the witness called *Niemand/No One* to exist? Then the line *No one bears witness for the witness* can be interpreted entirely differently; no one is actually someone[34] that, in "Psalm," performs the ritual act of reshaping the human beings reduced to dust, sand or ashes and ritually invoking the spectral traces to return and be glorified.

And what if no one signifies that it is no human being, but a thing or a specter that can bear witness for the witness? A poem is a *no one*, since it is considered unliving; a specter is a nobody, a no-longer-body, a *niemand* (no man) that asks for justice. Derrida suggests that the specter is "*le témoin du témoin*" (*Témoignage II*, Session 8, p. 1) opening up a fissure denoting that there can be a witness of the witness, but maybe not of the order of the living humans; maybe an alliance of the specters with the poems has the potential to testify for the only witnesses worthy of the name. And what if *no one* signified not one but multiple? A singular testimony is dangerous; it is impossible for a single witness to know the entire story and be able to account for it. By reading a number of different sources and by combining religion, legal discourse, media, artistic creations that pretend to depict reality or that only claim to create fiction, as well as real events recorded by the camera, Derrida, in his two seminars on *Le Témoignage*, underscores the danger of a single, dominant, epistemo-doxical testimony—to echo and paraphrase here Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Ted talk on the single story that obscures and effaces otherwise modalities of understanding the world; he warns that testimony is not evidence, but an act of faith performed before the ones the witnesses take as witnesses. Documenting and archiving an event require multiple types of testimonies brought together from many different viewpoints and lenses. It also asks for teletechnological media, which constitute framings of reality that, intentionally or not, record and capture the event. Finally, the testimonial also requires the poetic discourse, a form that welcomes and incorporates the ellipses and the aporias of the event and can get closer to the testimonies of the witnesses *par excellence*, the ones who did not survive the disaster, but who return and haunt the *superstites*, asking for some kind of justice. The poem speaks through its unique "spectrographic or spectropoetic" (spectrographique ou

spectropoétique) (*Témoignage II*, Session, 9, p. 8) discourse that does not exclude the silences and ruins of the colonial archive and its fragmentariness. Derrida argues that Celan's poem "Ashglory" speaks

> of testimony in general, but first of all about the poem that it is, of itself in its singularity, of itself as an operation, or rather as a *work* (*opus*) and as an event, as a dated event that leaves a trace (effaceable, certainly, like every trace), a trace, that is, a testament, a finite survival left as a heritage for the legatees whose identity and determination, whose destination even remain essentially uncertain, certitude being heterogeneous to the order of testimony, speaking itself, signing itself thus, this poem speaks, speaks to us of the testimony that is every poem, of the poematic nature of all testimony worthy of this name.[35]

The poem speaks to the *différance* of the historiographical narratives and gestures towards the impossibility to fully write the history of the past, especially the parts of it for which little or no material traces remain; the bodies turned into ash in Hiroshima or Auschwitz or transmuted into tiny particles recycled during their "residence time" (Sharpe 41)[36] in the Mediterranean Sea. The poem can attribute the Silences, the uncertainties and the traces of the catastrophe that defy a chronologically ordered, ocularcentric and *epistemo-doxical* narration. It is an archive that survives and remains as a legacy, a testament and a testimony for the readers-to-come, who can read and deconstruct it, translate and efface it, or employ it as a witness account and an attestation of a disaster that has unfortunately not ended but keeps being perpetuated in the long durée of modernity as a different event that is, however, a slightly modified manifestation of the same, at a different date.

Notes

[1] See Henley's article in *The Guardian*, the latest in a series of accounts by the international media that document the illegal actions of the Greek coast guard, pushing back and letting refugees drown, as well as the two recent rulings of the European Court of Human Rights, concerning pushbacks from Greece to Turkey.

[2] The trip to the other world was carried out by Hermes the psychopomp, the guide of souls towards the afterlife; the dead had to carry coins with them to pay Charon, the boat-rower for the transportation of their souls, on a paid voyage to Hades.

[3] « Quatre fois au musée à Hiroshima…Les gens se promènent, pensifs, à travers les photographies, les reconstitutions, faute d'autre chose, à travers les photographies, les photographies, les reconstitutions, faute d'autre chose, les explications, faute d'autre chose » (Duras 24).

[4] « Tu n'as *rien* vu à Hiroshima. Rien » (Duras 22, 23,25,27, emphasis in the original).

[5] « Auschwitz ne s'est pas arrêté à Auschwitz, que ça continue, que ce n'est pas un événement qui a eu lieu et qui s'est délimité, qui s'arrête comme une chose passée, vers laquelle on se retourne. D'une certaine manière c'est un événement infini qui continue » (*Témoignage I*, session 7, p. 8).

[6] And it did not end there, either: As Veronica Tello argues, concerning the counter-memorial politics of Silvia Kolbowsky's video *After Hiroshima Mon Amour* (2008), linking the atomic holocaust with the war in Iraq and the catastrophic consequences of hurricane Katrina:"[t]he (perpetual) aftermath of biopolitical violence that make possible the horrors of Hiroshima don't cease; they transmute into the disaster zones of Iraq and New Orleans, and do not end there" (175).

[7] There is the *Pharmakonisi* case Mina Karavanta has written about, another boat at Cythera, so many in Lesvos, Lampedusa, and the list goes on and on and on… Pharmakonisi was an attempt at a pushback by the Greek coast guard that backfired, leading to the drowning of a great number of migrants. Karavanta sees the potentiality of the testimonies of the survivors and the communities they create to speak to an otherwise way of being-with and redefining what it means to be human as it is performed by the subalterns, rogues and beasts deemed "ungrievable" (Butler 22) and less-than-human. She suggests: "Where laws and politics have failed, we can rely on the revolutionary imaginary potential of narratives that pass on what it means to be human together, refusing to sink" (Karavanta 311).

[8] "*Porter le deuil*—what a strange idiom: how is one to translate such a bearing or such a range of meaning [*portée*]" (Derrida and Bonhomme 2).

[9] « incommensurable à la parole » (*Témoignage I*, Session 2, p. 3).

[10] See Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic*. Speaking of the 1781 *Zong* massacre, Baucom deconstructs the exceptionality of the event, which was, unfortunately typical of the era of the triangular trade, when enslaved human beings were ontologically, politically and legally deprived of their humanity and thus prone to being killed with impunity for the sake of economical profit of their murderers. He argues in a haunting passage:

> The *Zong*, then, was not an aberration, not some wildly exceptional event which could nevertheless, somehow, just barely, be encompassed or made sense of by the dominant cultural logic of its age, not some anomaly…It was, instead, the very type of the type of case which that moment's value theory had identified as its test case, the type of the type of event in which that moment found the full range of its cultural, capital, and imaginary protocols concentrated, the typical sort of loss event from which this typicalizing age deduced its speculative procedures, average theories, theoretical realism, and money forms of value. (Baucom 109)

[11] Concerning this unusual term, see *Le Témoignage II*, session 1, p. 25: «…le témoignage, le testimonial [mot que je préfère…parce que testimonial recouvre à la fois l'expérience du témoin-témoin et du témoignage déposé, du témoin-témoignant, *witnessing* et *bearing witness*]» "…the testimony, the testimonial [a word I prefer …because the testimonial covers both the experience of the witnessing-witness and of the deposed testimony, of the testifying-witness, *witnessing* and *bearing witness*]."

[12] «…il y faut le corps et l'intonation et le geste, fût-il un souffle, un regard, pas forcément une caresse mais en tout cas quelque chose de singulier et de singulièrement sensible qui fasse que l'énoncé verbal seul ne suffise pas à témoigner, ce qui signifie que l'acte ou le geste de témoigner, dans la déclaration d'amour ne se réduit pas à la parole, ou à ce qui de la parole appartient à la verbalité lexico-grammaticale» (*Témoignage I*, Session 3, p. 7).

[13] *«le silence fuyant du cri innombrable»* (Blanchot 80).

[14] *«Quand tout est dit, ce qui reste à dire est le désastre, ruine de parole, défaillance par l'écriture, rumeur qui murmure : ce qui reste sans reste* (le fragmentaire)» (Blanchot 58).

[15] For a literary analysis of Silence and its difference from silence, see Philip, *Looking for Livingstone: An Odyssey of Silence*.

[16] For the discrepancy between the traumatized subject's inability or unwillingness to speak and the demand of legal procedures to record the testimony, analysed from a psychoanalytic perspective, as well as the challenge of poetry to testify for the traumatic event by employing legal testimonies, see Haselden.

[17] Wynter takes this term from the biologists Maturano and Varela who looked into animal groups to unravel their *autopoietic*, that is, their "autonomously functioning, living systems" (28). Human societies are also *autopoietic* in the sense that they create themselves through stories: "Our human eusocial systems are instead *hybrid languaging cum storytelling (if biologically implemented) living systems*" (28).

[18] The limitation of these psychiatric diagnoses lies in their specific relationship with socio-historical cases. The survivors' guilt was first articulated as a response of the Nazi concentration camps survivors to the horror they had escaped, and PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) refers to the experiences of (usually) American soldiers returning home after fighting a war abroad. They are both based on the fact that the traumatic experience has ended and the subject has to be reintroduced to society and a normal life. But what about the refugee experience that adds trauma upon trauma, or the predicament of the Palestinian people, for whom there is no after, no *post* in their traumatic disorder to navigate? I would like to thank Dr Samah Jabr and her Edward Said '57 Memorial Lecture, "Radiance in Pain and Resilience: The Global Reverberation of Palestinian Historical Trauma" for the insight into the inadequacy of the PTSD diagnosis for the Palestinian people, now more than ever.

[19] « *la condition du témoignage, mais de survivre à ce à quoi on ne survit pas, on ne devrait pas survivre* » (*Témoignage II*, Session 9, p. 20).

[20] « [le survivant] *ne peut pas témoigner pour les seuls et vrais témoins, ceux qui sont morts* » (*Témoignage I*, Session 1, p. 21).

[21] "Niemand/ zeugt für den/Zeugen" (Celan and Joris 62).

[22] « ce dont je parle, dit ou sous-entend tout témoin, s'est produit une seule fois, a une seule date, et donc une dernière et ultime foi (*sic*). Je témoigne toujours pour un jugement dernier » (*Témoignage II*, Session 8, p. 2).

[23] Derrida suggests: «je m'enfouissais [je m'enterrais, je m'encryptais, je m'inhumais] en toi et en toi)» (Derrida, *Sovereignties* 93), translated by Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen as: "I buried myself [I interred myself, I encrypted myself, I inhumed myself] into you and into you)" (93).

[24] Nine Egyptians that survived the sinking were arrested for trafficking, but were subsequently acquitted in May 2024, since the shipwreck had occurred at international waters and Greek courts did not have the jurisdiction to conduct a trial.

[25] See the reproduction and analysis of the broadsides' content from the Princeton University collections in White.

[26] In the course of the seminars, Derrida himself becomes an unintentional false witness (*faux témoin*), when he narrates the plot of Michelangelo Antonioni's 1966 film *Blow up*. He identifies the photographer as an amateur, when he is a professional fashion photographer, and he suggests that the couple has committed a murder, whereas the man of the couple is the one who drops dead and the woman tries to retrieve the photographic film from the photographer whose camera has unintentionally witnessed an event his human eyes are (initially) unaware of. This anecdote demonstrates the relativity of testifying when it becomes clear that the witnesses' memories of the event are inevitably mediated by their memory and their unconscious filters that interpret and archive information in a very idiosyncratic way.

[27] For Mbembe, "the notion of biopower is insufficient to account for contemporary forms of the subjugation of life to the power of death" (92), what he calls *necropolitics,* which is "deeply reconfiguring the relations between resistance, sacrifice, and terror" (92). He looks into

> the trajectories by which the state of exception and the relation of enmity have become the normative basis of the right to kill. In such instances, power (which is not necessarily state power) continuously refers and appeals to the exception, emergency, [or a migration crisis, as in the Pylos case] and a fictionalized notion of the enemy ...Thus the question becomes: What is the relationship between politics and death in those systems that operate only through a state of emergency? (70)

[28] There is also the socioeconomic aspect of the grievability of the others, apart from their racial profile. A few days after the Pylos shipwreck, there was an accident at sea, during which three extremely wealthy businessmen, the son of one of them, and an explorer lost their lives while touring the Titanic shipwreck on an entertainment expedition. The international efforts to rescue them were astonishing, especially when compared with the lack of care towards the *Adriana* migrants. On the different reactions towards the two catastrophes, see Pérez-Peña.

[29] See Elizabeth Alexander: "'Can you be BLACK and Look at this?': Reading the Rodney King Video(s)." Derrida also refers to the Rodney King video, which I read as a very important text in his analysis on witnessing, especially of the witnessing and testifying rendered possible by teletechnological means. The video of the brutal

beating provides visual evidence that demonstrate the disproportionate and unjustified use of violence against King. If it were not for the video recording, the police would have imposed their version of events, suggesting that they were merely defending themselves.

[30] See the *Solomon* article: "They Are Urgently Asking for Help": the SOS that was Ignored."

[31] «Que faisons-nous, ici maintenant, nous?» (*Témoignage II*, Session 8, p. 4) «…Nous témoignons, diraient certains. Nous nous prenons à témoin, diraient d'autres. Nous témoignons et nous prenons à témoin de l'impossibilité du témoignage, diraient encore d'autres…» (p. 4).

[32] As Susan Sontag cautions: "No 'we' should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people's pain" (7). And Derrida claims, right after the questions I have previously quoted: « Mais la production d'un 'nous' dans ce séminaire est aussi problématique » (*Témoignage II*, Session 8, p. 4), meaning: "But the production of a 'we' in this seminar is also problematic."

[33] Tina Campt defines *still-moving* images as: "*images that hover between still and moving images; animated still images, slowed or stilled images in motion or visual renderings that blur the distinctions between these multiple genres; images that require the labor of feeling with or through them*" (n.pag.).

[34] Derrida suggests: "We say 'nothing' [*rien*] and 'no one' [*personne*] according to French grammar, in which these words are neither positive nor negative. Despite the artifice or the randomness of this situation, the grammatical suspension is not unrelated to that in which Celan's *Nichts* and *Niemand* may resonate" (*Sovereignties* 41).

[35] «du témoignage en général, mais d'abord du poème qu'il est, de lui-même dans sa singularité, de lui-même comme opération, ou plutôt comme *œuvre* (*opus*) et comme évènement, comme évènement daté qui laisse une trace (effaçable, certes, comme toute trace), une trace, c'est-à-dire un testament, une survie finie laissée en héritage a des légataires dont l' identité et la détermination, dont la destination même restent essentiellement incertaines, la certitude étant hétérogène à l'ordre du témoignage, parlant lui-même, se signant ainsi, ce poème parle, nous parle du témoignage qu'est tout poème, de la nature poématique de tout témoignage digne de ce nom… » (*Témoignage I*, session, 1, p. 29).

[36] Christina Sharpe wonders about the fate of the black bodies thrown or jumping overboard during the Middle Passage, in the salty oceanic waters—as I wonder about the bodies in the Mediterranean: "What happened to the bodies? By which I mean, what happened to the components of their bodies in salt water? Anne Gardulski tells me that because nutrients cycle through the ocean (the process of organisms eating organisms is the cycling of nutrients through the ocean), the atoms of those people who were thrown overboard are out there in the ocean even today…The amount of time it takes for a substance to enter the ocean and then leave the ocean is called residence time» (40-1).

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