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Scenes of Mourning: Theater Between Life and Death

Guillaume Sibertin-Blanc
Université Paris 8 Vincennes/Saint-Denis
&
Armelle Talbot
Université Paris-Cité

Abstract

This paper aims to articulate Judith Butler's thought on the "powers of grief" to some debates on the functions of theater in the political field. This articulation involves revisiting a whole section of the contemporary scene that has confronted the political institution of loss and analyzing from a Butlerian perspective the politics of theatrical representation called by the mechanisms of exclusion of certain lives outside the field of the human. But this articulation implies above all to question the theater that Butler's reflections on the vulnerability and the springs of the ascent to extreme violence presuppose. From this point of view, the question of the powers of mourning is very closely linked to that of tragedy and the complex relationship it has with the norms by which the political community codifies narratives that deliver the dead to memory and oblivion. The first tragedy to have come down to us, *The Persians* is an exemplary manifestation of this complexity by the unstable division it provides between the victors and the vanquished and the impossible identifications it implements. It is therefore to Aeschylus' play that we propose to return, opening the historical context of its creation to that of contemporary staging – those of Jean Prat in 1961 and Peter Sellars in 1993 – which accentuate its paradoxes.

Keywords: theater, political field, mourning, vulnerability, violence, tragedy, representation, Judith Butler

> "Many people think that grief is privatizing, that it returns us to a solitary situation and is, in that sense, depoliticizing. But I think it furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order, and it does this first of all by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility." Judith Butler (2004, 22)

We would like to examine the potential contribution of Judith Butler's thought on the "powers of mourning" to some contemporary debates on how the theater functions in the political sphere. We are thinking in particular of the work she has done since the early 2000s with *Precarious Life* and in a series of interventions collected in 2008 in *Ce qui fait une vie*. It is true that the most direct focus of these texts does not relate to the question of theater. Yet this discretion is no less an invitation to imagine the motives for creating this dialogue.

The first motive stems from the observation that the contemporary stage itself has faced the question of the *political institution of loss*. By this we mean the normative arrangements—the institutional and discursive arrangements—that choose and hierarchize the dead and which, therefore, include them unequally in a public space of recognition and in a possible sphere of experience: what deaths are counted as deaths, in other words as lives that have been destroyed? What deaths are experienced as deaths, in other words as lost lives that cause us grief? We would wager that theatrical representation has redefined some of its tasks here, at the intersection of two nodal dimensions of contemporary political spaces. One relates to changes in the politics of memory, or to the ways in which hegemonic narratives of identity have been contested by counter-memories, the counter-histories of workers, colonized peoples, women, immigrants… The other relates to the biopolitical consciousness of our time, or rather to its "necropolitical" opposite: the one that is concerned with political technologies that cannot include the life of the species without also including death, to the point of placing the differentiation of life and death *under political conditions*. Presenting wandering ghosts to our eyes and ears, bringing the departed on stage, accounting for the uncounted dead, giving a place to the non-place of the lost who are denied: you may recognize here some of the rich motifs of contemporary theatrical creation, even without the same dramaturgical and political objectives: theater of memory or theater-*momentum*; theater of reparations; theater of struggle against the denials of official

historiographers and the montages of media representations; documentary theater against falsifications and archival repression…

The second motive of the dialogue we are trying to establish takes the form of a hypothesis. Starting from Butler's analyses of the powers of mourning, we will consider how to rethink not only the politics of theatrical representation called on by the mechanisms that exclude some lives outside the sphere of humanity. We will also examine the theater *presupposed* by Butler's questions on the entanglement of denial of loss with the motivations to escalation to extreme violence. This questioning may in fact be based on a historical a priori that was first developed with the "birth of tragedy," or to say it alongside Nicole Loraux, with the theatrical birth of tragic thought. Because that is where we would see for the first time an anthropology of vulnerability be combined with a conception of theater as a place of ethical experience irreducible to the frameworks of collective identity.[1] If we were to summarize the patient analyses of Loraux into the hastier form of a thesis, we could say that tragic theater literally invented anthropological discourse as such, under the figure of a common condition, a common exposure to twists of fate, loss, and death. From this point of view, the question of the powers of mourning comes to occupy the space of tragic anthropology, and the disparity that it introduces with the norms through which the political community appropriates, so to speak, "its" dead, and codifies the narrations that deliver them to memory and forgetting.

Yet we must also say on the contrary that Butler's thought cannot occupy this space without producing a paradoxical effect of deconstruction, or at least without blocking the humanist interpretation that makes the human condition a horizon of experience simply transcending borders and antagonisms. The problem remains how to think about the way politics is *always already* at play in the anthropological difference of life and death, and in the work of mourning that repeats this differentiation. Should we always distinguish tragedies, one "antique" and the other "modern"? One, inventing a figure of humanity overflowing the normative

contours of political existence, the other inventing modes of exclusion of the political space that lead to foreclosures of the field of humanity as such? One, disconnecting anthropology and politics and the other, fusing them to the extreme? Finally, one, finding in mythology the material of expression of "antipolitical" excess, and the other giving the *fatum* through which death comes into its secular faces, those of nations and peoples? It would be tempting. However, it would then be necessary to admit that the first Greek tragedy, at least the oldest that has reached us, is the first "modern" tragedy. Letting Antigone rest from the many philosophical solicitations which she has already endured,[2] we will turn to *The Persians* by Aeschylus.

1. Patriotic Distribution of Signs and Affects

Here we are in—472: staged eight years after the battle of Salamis, Aeschylus' *The Persians* presents all of traits of a self-celebration of Athens, through the intermediary of a hyperbolic representation of the defeat of the great Persian power. "Painful to us but to our enemies joy" (Aeschylus 1981, 56, v. 1034): placed in the mouth of Xerxes at the heart of the *kommos* that concludes the tragedy, this formula expresses the inversion of signs and affects as distributed by the play, which operates their very violent separation between Greek glory and barbarian failure, between the song of triumph and the song of mourning, between audience and stage.

This play, which is edifying in every way, has been conjectured to have drawn on the misadventures of Phrynikos when he had staged *The Fall of Miletus* soon after it was pillaged by the Persians in—494. As Herodotus reported, "the whole theater fell to weeping" before the spectacle of their Ionian brothers being routed, such that the Athenians "fined [the playwright] a thousand drachmas for bringing to mind a calamity that affected them so personally" and "forbade the performance of that play forever." (Herodotus 2018, VI, 21) This account expresses both the interdiction of this play that was in fact lost and the interdiction of the memory of the suffering it evoked. As such, it constitutes an indication of the politics of memory and forgetting that began to be

institutionalized at the beginning of the Fifth century, and which converges with the different evolutions of Athenian burials at the time. Lamentations were from that point reserved for the women of the family and strictly limited, while the eulogy, which became the heart of the ceremony, banished them to focus entirely on the praise of citizen-soldiers and of the city-state by ratifying their unity and immortal glory. As Loraux indicates in *L'Invention d'Athènes*, "As much as the Athenian city-state made history, the only complaints that one had the right to mention [in a eulogy] were those of defeated enemies crying over their misfortunes, complaints that were mentioned self-servingly since they blended into a hymn to Athenian greatness." (Loraux 1981, 50; Hodges transl.)

There is no arguing that *The Persians* uses this device abundantly: where Phrynikos erred by excess proximity between stage and audience, to the point of negating theatrical mediation by reliving an all-too-recent past, Aeschylus plays on a shift in focus that relegates the politically prohibited effects into an outside place that removes any risk of confusion. Does this mean that geographical distance compensates for the lack of temporal distance, and that Persia, for the Athenian public, constitutes a figure of otherness similar those that later tragedies create by drawing on the repertory of myths—in short, the Persia of Xerxes instead of the Thebes of the Labdacids? That would mean overlooking the referential dimension carried by this play, which could almost be called "contemporaneous," at a time when Xerxes was still alive and the Persian Empire was less weak than Aeschylus would lead us to believe;[3] at a time especially when the Battle of Salamis represents not only an already legendary episode in Athenian History but a crucial moment in a long-term conflict that the audience and even the playwright himself experienced concretely, on the battlefront and at home. We should add the bitter memory of the sack of Athens that took place on the eve of the Battle of Salamis and that allows us to measure the symbolic violence carried out by these veritable *theatrical reprisals* which, through the stage, have the Persians reenter the city, at the foot of the Acropolis

that they had burned eight years earlier, but only to leave a king in rags, with no followers, armed only with a tattered quiver that is "the remnants of [his] power." (Aeschylus 1981, 55, v. 1016) The near contemporaneity of the sack of Athens and the Battle of Salamis and, we can conjecture, the combination of their memory in the minds of the Athenian spectators, implies a remarkably complex topography of the theatrical space. This space has four places coexist: Salamis, made omnipresent by the accounts throughout the play, and representing the off-stage area shared by the Persians (in the dramatic space of the tale) and the Athenians (in the contemporary space of the play's performance); Susa, where the chorus and Queen Atossa await in fear the confirmation of disaster; Athens, the physical place of the performance; but also the Athens pillaged eight years earlier, which the play alludes to when Darius laments the sacrilegious abuses of his son's armies,[4] and of which the traces are still visible on the Acropolis looming behind the audience, and on the ruins deliberately left unrepaired…[5]

In this context, Aeschylus' play engages a double enunciation where Athens addresses Athens over the shoulder of the Persians and inscribes each of their characteristics in a xenophobic construction in which they find themselves "captured"[6]: the exotic sound of the names of places and people, the allusions to the proverbial riches of Sardis and Babylon, the insistent references to the despotic character of an Empire that opposes Athenian democracy on all points… and even in the manifestations of pain, this divisive, and, to be frank, racist logic is present, a dire lament where the litany of interjections, with accompanying ostentatious gestures, like striking the chest, pulling out hair, or tearing clothes, refers to the uncontrolled emotiveness of the Barbarians and contributes to feminizing them, to the point where some have asked whether these effects of foreignness were not added touches of comedy for the public of the time.

Placed under the sign of theatrical revenge, *The Persians* presents the singularity of having a finally, absolutely self-centered narration that is based on a decentering. In short, we seem to be far from the requirement

described by Judith Butler at the beginning of *Precarious Life*, the requirement of stories abandoning the first person in favor of the second or third person, of a "we" capable of seeing itself from the point of view of the other, even an enemy. We can also add the atypical character of a tragedy that excludes any dimension of *drama*, relegating the action off-stage in favor of an inactive stage that only leaves room for the expression of *pathos*. In fact, there is *drama* but only in the content of the Persian accounts, in reference to the off-stage defeat of Salamis or to a recent past, already struck with the irreversibility of what has been done. On the present of the stage, the erasure of *drama* theatrically inscribes the military defeat of the Persians, who can only make themselves the *object* of their own discourse, while the Athenians are placed in a triple position of mastery: mastery of the battle as reported by the Messenger, mastery of knowledge that the Persian rearguard can only learn painfully, mastery of the affect caused by the performance itself, which gives a meta-theatrical scope to the "joy of the enemy" mentioned above, doubling the pleasure of victory with that of *catharsis*.

2. Anthropology of Vulnerability and Reversibility of Signs

It is possible, however, that none of these elements is unequivocal and that what we have described until now as a false decentering produces effects that are less decidable than they appear.

First, we cannot overlook the omnipresence, in this "historical" play, of *até* and the intervention of the gods that punish Persian *hubris* with dire consequences.[7] We said that the Athenians, within the Persian words, were the only ones in the position of *subject*; but the routing of the armies of Xerxes is never portrayed as being solely due to the skills of their foe, and is only described against the background of a shared fate, that of the "race of mortals" exposed to pain and loss.[8] Second, where Athenian funerals were about to be reorganized in a clear distinction of public space between the political scene of celebration and the domestic scene of lamentation, *The Persians* restages their entanglement. In

representing the antagonism of the Greeks and the Barbarians from the echo chamber behind the battlefront, Aeschylus' tragedy produces a real decentering. In the empty time of this scene "*à la cantonade*," (Althusser 2005) the expected effect of an immediate recognition of rival political identities is diverted, displaced towards the periphery where only the agony of not knowing and waiting can be heard: the king's advisors who form the chorus have no expression other than that of crying old men; the few individual characters, a queen, a late king, a defeated king become a mother, a father, and a son once again. For all of the Persians, however, the *political* scene of the defeat is combined with a private mourning, "parents and wives counting the days tremble at the lengthening time."[9] What emerges here, in the cracks of this patriotic play, is the vulnerability of mortals exposed to the loss of their own, within a same time that extends between both here and there. From this point of view, the macabre tableau of Persian corpses buffeted by waves, left to the worst fate imaginable for the Greeks, leaving the dead without a grave, gives the litany of the names of the army leaders repeated three times in the play a symbolic dimension that is not fully explained by an "orientalist" stigmatization or by being incorporated in an account opposing Athenian egalitarianism and the servile hierarchies of the Great King. The very proliferation of these names makes the stage the *monumentum* that saves them from being forgotten. We must also give full importance to those moments where the description has no other object than the extreme impotence of these soldiers who "gasp out their lives on the shore," (Aeschylus 1981, 153, v. 978) of these men who are no longer but "tuna or some other catch of fish" (*Ibid.*, 34, v. 425) yet continue to be rehumanized by the sole force of their evocation. The description overflows the apologetic aim of the account, and gives new existence to "every living man [who] was butchered." (*Ibid.*, 35, v. 464)

The logic of inversion mentioned above thus gives way to more ambivalent forms of reversibility. And the triumphalist temptation of Athenian citizens in the face of the spectacle of Persian suffering is found to be, not negated, but

exposed to the risk of being converted into suffering. Where the political law opposing "us" and "others" is underpinned by the anthropological vulnerability of all and everyone, this "us" and "others" are structurally threatened with having to trade places in the play of reversals found in every tragedy and through which "the extremes of fortune and glory change into their exact opposite." (Alaux 2002, 202; Hodges transl.)

"Painful on the stage but to the audience joy," we would say: perhaps, in the end, the cathartic operation of the play should apply even to joy itself and not only to terror and pity. When Darius, just before rejoining the land of the dead, entreats the old men, "Though in time of troubles, give your hearts each day some pleasure," (Aeschylus 1981, 49, v. 840-842) the political production of glorious affects is bordered by a horizon of experience that escapes it.

In short, while it is impossible to identify with the losers, it is not much easier to identify with the winners. This identification is less easy, in truth, because the mourning voices of the Persians, at the very moment that they send an echo of Athenian victory to the Athenian spectators, cannot do so without disturbing the language in which their cohesion was supposed to be reinforced. Here we can do no better than to refer to the stellar analyses of Loraux demonstrating how "the plaintive cry, foreclosed by the civic *logos*, operates a powerful return in the tragic text itself, even to the point of contaminating the key words of Greek politics."[10] For example, the term *aei*, "always" or "constantly," which means the repetition of the same in the legal and political lexicon of Athens, a guarantee of the permanence of the body politic through rotations of leadership and new generations. The writing of Aeschylus, using a procedure that later tragedies would copy, gives this term a singular treatment by imposing on it the proximity of a consonant term, *aiai*, "alas," which submits the time of "always" to another iterative regime: no longer the expression of continuity of a principle that would preserve its integrity through cycles of renewal but the occasion of an irreparable rupture; no longer the time of perpetuation and conservation of political Measure, but on the contrary, the illimited time of a mourning without measure

that is also imprescriptible. The essential aspect, however, resides perhaps in a third iterative register through which the interjection *aiai* is repeated and disseminated throughout Aeschylus' text, providing an overpowering bass line short-circuiting the semantism of the phrases.[11] It is not only a question then of staging the tension between the "always" of civic discourse and the "always" of the mourning voice, but of making the cry of pain heard as close as possible to the physical performance, in an effect of generalized auditory hallucination. First concerned of course is the semantic specter derived from pain and complaint (*ania, anios, ian, iakhan*), that is also found in the verbs *diainomai* and *aiazdô* ("to cry" and "to lament"). The process, however, extends until it contaminates the terms designating the enemies of the Persians, in other words, the Greeks: their cruelty (*diaios*), their land (*aian/daia*), Salamis renamed "isle of Ajax" (*Aiantos nêson*), and the name of the "Ionians" itself (*Iaonôn*)… Making the "alas" of the defeated heard *within* the "always" of the victor; or rather making heard a cry of pain that no longer has the language to speak itself *within the logos itself*, at the moment when this *logos* proclaims that this pain is that of the distant Other: this is what short-circuits the distribution of signs and affects that we mentioned at the start. It is not only the grieving voice of the (barbarian) Other but a voice that "plunges into mourning" the speech of the (Greek) Same, which alters it by carving out something like a "foreign language" in it, even a language that only counts, as Deleuze might have said, for its intensive and a-signifying limit: cries, stammering with pain, sighs of misery—*ani'ania kaka keokota / kai dai' aiai, diainesthe, Per- /sai*. (Aeschylus 1981, 28, v. 256-257). While we cannot reconstruct the musical texture that Aeschylus' play produced, we can at least be free to imagine the effect of this *logos*, literally *haunted* in its phonic material by the Persian moans. If we accept the connection between melancholy and the effect of spectrality, this survival of the dead who cannot be mourned, then Aeschylus' technique must be defined as a vast operation of *melancholizing the Greek language.*

Thus, there is a third interpretation of "*Painful to us but to our enemies joy*" since we are now entering the realm of combined affects, where joy becomes inextricably attached to the pain of the other, which continues to be heard even within the language of triumph. Is this mechanism still connected to *catharsis*? Isn't a recognition instead that Aeschylus' play invents an *anti-cathartic* mode of shaping affect? The bereavement of the Greek *logos* by the Persian complaint is no longer a way of "purging" the unmasterable violence from affect; it is on the contrary a way to make the impossibility of mastery heard. It speaks to both the impurity of joy and the impurity of *catharsis* itself.

3. Impossible Identification

Let us now turn to the present. You might think that the only way this play could be heard outside the Athenian ideological context would be on the humanist register of an ode to the fragility of the human condition or a denunciation of the violence of *war*, in all times and in all places. However, it is significant that several contemporary stagings of *The Persians* have made use of the complexity of the play of identification that was already in the play, drawing out the echoes between the Greco-Persian Wars and colonial or post-colonial conflicts. Take, for example, the famous production by Jean Prat broadcast on the ORTF in late October 1961, or the adaptation by Robert Auletta directed by Peter Sellars in 1993. Both show the inevitable strangeness produced by contemporary adaptation, whether it is found directly in the performance or left to the responsibility of the audience alone.

When Sellars, two years after the end of the First Gulf War, wanted history to be heard from the point of view of the defeated and to overcome the denial orchestrated by the media representations of the conflict, the transposition he proceeded to use played on the imaginary polarity between Orient and Occident to show war-torn Iraq under the suffering people of Xerxes. Against the derealizing rhetoric that erases hundreds of thousands of victims under hygienic "surgical strikes" and accidental "collateral damage," Sellars opposes the muddled threne of Iraqi victims. He not only makes their grieving

voices heard but also the loud airplanes and helicopters that cover them and almost make them inaudible, at a time when the distinction between frontline and behind the lines that gave Aeschylus' play its topographical structure has been replaced by constant exposure to aerial forces of destruction. To do this, the staging must simultaneously minimize the polarity Aeschylus constructed by opposing the threatening Persian imperial power (which would not correspond to Iraq) and Athenian resistance guaranteeing the shared freedom of the Greeks (which would correspond even less to the US offensive, despite its use of this language). In short, this militant oratorio could only make the Persian complaint the allegory of the forclosed voices of the victims of American neo-imperialism (not only Iraq, but by metonymy the Third World)[12] on the condition of distributing the place of the aggressor and aggressee in a more univocal manner. Bringing an end to the vertigo of double enunciation: the defeated address the victors directly; *painful to us and on you shame*.

The production of the play in the context of the end of the Algerian War produced no less unstable effects of identification, and in the end, equally improbable ones. The televised adaptation by Jean Prat refused to bring Aeschylus' play into a contemporary setting, and its resonance with the present of the audience remains hypothetical based on the connections the audience could make themselves. In 1961, how could place be given to the possible echoes between the resistance to the Persian invader and the fight for Algerian liberation, without being led to identify colonial France with the armies of Xerxes, against the filiation that French republican historiography had forged with Athenian democracy? As expressed by Jean Alaux, "how could the Athens of Aeschylus be emblematic of both Algeria at present and France of all time?" (Alaux 2001, 12; Hodges transl.). How could it be one *and* the other without being both simultaneously, a veritable *double bind* that reactivates the play of impossible identifications operated by Aeschylus while displacing it?

This vertiginous merry-go-round would thus find its source in Aeschylus' play itself, and precisely in its capacity to

articulate the impossible identification with the Persians and a disidentification with Athens in celebrating its glory. An articulation that is all the more troubling if we note its homology with what Rancière, in the mid-1990s, proposed to see as a new matrix of political subjectivation, situating its traumatic emergence in an event that occurred precisely two weeks, day for day, before the television broadcast of Jean Prat's adaptation: the massacre of October 17, 1961. We would hazard that this event could not avoid haunting the perception of a viewer on the evening of October 31, like an "absent cause."[13] This is what Rancière drew from the Parisian protest organized by the FLN and its bloody repression by the police followed by the denial of the authorities and a massive obliteration by media outlets: "We could not identify with those Algerians who had brutally appeared and disappeared as protesters in French public space. We could, however, disidentify with this State that had killed them and removed from any account."[14] (Rancière 1997, 43; Hodges transl.) On what was this impossibility of identifying with the Algerians based? Not on a particularly strong feeling of otherness, since it was on the contrary protesters exercising their citizenship in the center of the capital but on the radical absence of a scene capable of making their disappearance representable: those who had suffered the state repression exercised in the name of French citizens, had precisely been removed from all public visibility, deprived of bodies, faces, voices, and names. We could ask, however, whether Rancière, by hyperbolizing the politicizing power of this impossible identification, does not tend to minimize the ambivalence of the mechanism of derealization that supports it, in other words the ambivalence of after effects that could be produced by this foreclosure of the missing. How could this non-event [*non-lieu*] provoke a counter-appeal to this assassin state that is supposed to be "ours," or even supposed to be "us", without constituting *at the same time* the place of a highly melancholic identification, exposed to the indefinitely spectral return of these "living dead" whose death will have been denied and that will have to be "denied again and again" for failure of being able to recognize the loss and mourn it? This question would

obviously be best filed in the dossier on the melancholic structure of postcolonial racism.[15]

It is precisely the political aporia of this type of forclosure that Butler invites us to think about. We are thinking in particular here of the two dimensions of the power of mourning, of which *Precarious Life* seeks to show the articulation in the mechanisms of ascension to extreme violence. One of these dimensions relates to the effect of derealization of some lives produced recursively by the refusal to recognize their loss publicly, and to the connection of this mechanism of derealization with the type of destructive violence—potentially "exterminist" (Ogilvie 2012)—which tends to be exerted against these lives that cannot be grieved, whose loss is not a loss, whose death matters as little as their life. The other dimension relates to the connection between the exploitation of this violence against these lives that are not lives, and the denial by those that exercise this violence of their own vulnerability. When Butler emphasizes the "change in the horizon of experience" that violently occurred for Americans with the 2001 attacks, the question of mourning no longer takes place solely in relationship to an other, be it humanized or dehumanized. It is found to be overdetermined by another loss related directly to the imagination of political identification and on the mechanisms of idealization that support it: loss of the feeling of security inside the borders of the country, or again, as Butler writes, loss of this singular prerogative of the United States, "only and always, to be the one who transgresses the sovereign boundaries of other states, but never to be in the position of having one's own boundaries transgressed" (cf. Butler 2004, 39)[16]; finally, loss of the representation of its power and the collective identification with this representation. This means posing the question of knowing how their own vulnerability, at a time when they were being violently reminded of it, could be seen to be suddenly negated in an infernal *melancholic-paranoiac circuit*, turning the violence suffered into an all the more uncompromising, vengeful violence. Thus this play of *double denial* analyzed by Butler: the *denial of mourning*, distributed unequally by the norms including certain lives of the

experience of loss and repressing other, Iraqi and Afghan civilians decimated by war, but also the victims of the September 11 attacks who, for being gay, lesbian, homeless, were excluded from the public necrologies, "whose nameless and faceless deaths form the melancholic background for [our] social world" (ibid., 46); denial of mourning but moreover *denial of melancholy itself*, which wards off the narcissistic wound caused by the experience of loss, by means of the protection of a fantasy of mastery and absolute sovereignty, fantasy of an immunized self charged with "impossibly" reversing the feeling of impotence into a feeling of all-powerfulness. While melancholy is the end without end of a denied work of mourning, paranoia appears here as the end without end of a melancholy denied, like the one heard in Bush's injunction, scarcely ten days after the attacks, to replace mourning with "resolute action," (ibid., 29) to bring an end to the time of *pathos* to enter that of *drama*, as if this injunction could do anything other than continue this fantasy of conjuring all-powerfulness, or as Butler puts it, this "United States *hubris*" tasked with "fixing" the world order—"with or without" the world…

In the margins of this circular scene, Butler traces *another scene* that shows the directly political implications of her thought on mourning—and we believe with her that it concerns all so-called "developed" countries—a scene where we would have something to "gain" from loss, to endure it, to put up with remaining in its ordeal, in short to be able to "act" it in the way that we say that mourning is the object of work: mourning the imagination of geopolitical identifications, mourning the feeling of security provided to those who benefit from the inequalities of the world-system, mourning without which one could not envisage either the possibility of less asymmetrical international relations or a global economy of violence less brutally exacerbated by the border disturbances between those believe they have everything and refuse to lose it, and those who have nothing to lose because they have never had anything, not even a human life. We obviously do not want to identify or even compare this historical context with that of the Greek-Persian War. This detour simply allows us to

draw attention to the way Aeschylus' play already presents this work of mourning directly connected to the mechanisms of idealization inherent to the constitution of geopolitical identities. *The Persians* makes the complaint heard, not only in the account of the men who died in combat, but also in the spectacle of collapse of a power. Under this light, we rediscover once again the reversibility that is part of the play. On the one hand, the hyperbolic decline of this power comes to celebrate the advent of a new one; and in this respect, *The Persians* is inscribed in the ideological fabric of the Greek-Persian War, the myth by which orators and historians justify throughout the Fifth century the Athenian hegemony over the Delian League. On the other hand, by raising Athens to the height of the power that it supplants, Aeschylus places it in a game of mirrors where the fatal *hubris* of Xerxes reflects not only the victorious image of its past but exposes it to the uncertainty of the future. Everything takes place as if Aeschylus' play, at a period when Athens was just beginning to assert its domination, was already suggesting the hypothesis of its fall. The knowledge carried by this play would be that the work of mourning power always already begins with this power itself, which doubles it like its reverse or like its shadow.

4. Critical Performances of Mourning

In conclusion, we would like to offer a few paths for research, turned towards other scenes on which the normative frameworks instituting life and death and their effects of relegation are contested or disturbed, on the stage and in the streets. As Butler emphasizes for other normative arrangements, collective practices of memory and forgetting cannot avoid the necessity of spectacularly reiterating their division, and actualizing it in images and discourses through the performative play of repetition. Precisely in this place, which brings together the strike force of the dominant apparatuses of communication and the fragility that constantly obliges them to have to reassert their norms to be able to guarantee their efficacity, the possibility of a *critical performance of mourning* insinuates itself, along with a

displacement of its powers.[17] And because theater should not have the monopoly on this subversion of the sensible and political coordinates of the public space, it is necessary to recall here some of the many struggles carried out against the obliteration of the dead: all the "Plaza de Mayo" where the mothers of Buenos Aires and of Acari, the "mad women" of Nicosia and Galatasaray combat the unending erasure of the lost by laws of amnesty and rituals of "national reconciliation," the march of silence and the "escraches" through which the H.I.J.O.S. of Argentina and Uruguay resist forgetting and impunity, even in the heart of Western metropolises, the parades and the die-ins organized by Act Up against the silent proclamation of the non-existence of those sick or dying of AIDS.[18]

That said, what interests us is the way the theater can constitute a privileged operator in the critical performance of mourning. We are thinking primarily of some of the proposals of so-called documentary theater, like *The Investigation* by Peter Weiss (1998, 117-296)[19] or *Rwanda 94* by Groupov (2002), a theater built on the most contemporary events and especially the way in which they were immediately staged, theater that confronts the prose of the world through the work of repetition. Repeating discourses to make heard the performative violence of the derealizations they operate by substituting "work" and "allocation" for murder, "cockroaches" and "rats" for people, and the counting of "units" for the passage from life to death. Dismantling and rebuilding the things said to restore descriptive efficacity to language against administrative euphemisms and aestheticizing evasions. Repeating the noble forms of the tragic register to have the Chorus of the Tutsi Dead on stage and short-circuit the post-colonial refrains in a "Rwandan tragedy" relegating criminals and victims to an eternal "African tribalism." Repeating the structure of Dante's *Divine Comedy* to reconstruct the Frankfurt trials against those responsible for Auschwitz and breaking the metaphorical and sublimatory universe in which the media relegated camp prisoners to the last circles of Hell. Taking up the words of mourning to expose them in the isolation of a verse that uncovers them and to oppose the

anesthetic powers of hype with a haunting "litany of questions." Renaming the dead without graves and turning the obstinate presence of bodies and faces against amnesiac proclamations and calls for prescription. Repeating the performance itself and, as Yolande Mukagasana in *Rwanda 94*, bearing witness each evening to replay the conquest of her own voice and become an actress again of her story and her history.

In every respect, we do not see what justifies the association of the powers of resistance of mourning with the exclusive motif of the "anti-political," and we have difficulty understanding why Loraux bases our ability to hear once again the grieving voice of tragedy after decades of over-politicization of antique theater, on the advent of a world where "ruptures themselves seem obscure and where one [would] no longer be able to be tranquilly Manichean," an uncertain, aporetical world where "history [would] act convulsively" and where "manifestations of mourning [would] become […] the sole weapon of a disarmed combat or one without hope." (Loraux 1999, 26-27; Hodges transl.) We fear that these somewhat depressing formula confuse the political struggle for a "right to mourn" with a resigned mourning of politics that nothing obliges one to admit. Not even these modern Trojan women who are, for Loraux, the Madwomen of the Plaza de Mayo. Especially not them.

Translation: Ames Hodges

NOTES

[1] We are unable to provide a full description of the work of Nicole Loraux here. Her historiography of the eulogy as a privileged discursive site where the new democratic and imperialist ideology of the Athenian city-state was elaborated in the Fifth century, and her analyses of the anomie that the "grieving voice" of Greek tragedy introduces into the normative play of public speech and civic rituals dedicated to the celebration of memorable lives, encounter in a relatively obvious way Butler's analyses of post-September 11, 2001 necrological practices. On these two points, see Loraux (1981; 1999).

[2] Bringing together the analyses of Loraux and Butler on *Antigone* has been attempted elsewhere: see Sanna (2010).

[3] On this point, see Alaux (2001, 6): "Certainly the praise of Athens and the manipulations of history that it presupposes are clearly present in Aeschylus'

play: first because we find in it the widespread Greek 'myopia' that, according to the historians of Achaemenid Empire, painted in the colors of the darkest rout, a series of failures that never really threatened the power of Xerxes. Just after Salamis, the Great King was still able to crush a Babylonian revolt that posed a much greater threat to the unity of the Empire than the Aegean troubles. As the remaining Persian sources attest, Xerxes continued and bolstered the work of his father Darius and never appeared to be an unworthy son." (Hodges transl.)

[4] Cf. Aeschylus (1981, 48, v. 809-813): "Invading Greece, they felt no awe or reverence; they did not hesitate to plunder images of gods and put their temples to the torch; altars were no more, and statues of divinities were uprooted and torn right off their bases."

[5] On this subject, see Étienne (2004, 67; Hodges transl.): "Even if the 'Oath of Plataea' as handed down by tradition, is a fabrication of the Fourth century BCE, the Greeks agreed after their victories not to rebuild the sanctuaries destroyed by the Persians: there is proof that the temples remained in ruins on the Acropolis and, in Phocis, in Kalapodi, a memorial was also made of the sanctuary destroyed during the Greco-Persian Wars."

[6] On this notion of "capture," see Butler (2004, 141-147), on the faces of Osama bin Laden and Afghan women: it is not enough that there is an other or the representation of the other for the "right of citizenship" [*droit de cité*] be given to them.

[7] This is the explanation Aeschylus has the shade of Darius provide, but it is also one that the account of Herodotus attributes to Themistocles: "for it is not we who have won this victory, but the gods and the heroes, who deemed Asia and Europe too great a realm for one man to rule, and that a wicked man and an impious one who dealt alike with temples and bones, burning and overthrowing the images of the gods." (Herodotus 2018, VIII, 109)

[8] Thus the importance of the way the different *names of the human* are distributed: to the characteristic figures of Athenian civic ideology opposing the *andres* and the *anthropoid*, the virile citizen-soldiers celebrated by public discourse and simple humans without qualities, the Aeschylean lexicon adds and soon prefers this new figure which transcends the internal and external divisions of the city, those of *brotos* or *thnetos*: the mortal. On this subject, see Loraux (1999, 79-80; 1993, 151-158).

[9] Cf. Aeschylus (1981, 37, v. 537-546): "Many with the delicate hands rending their veils, drenching their breasts, swollen with tears, sharing their woe. The ladies of Persia softly are weeping, desiring each him to behold wedded but lately; forsaking their couches, soft with their coverlets, the joy of their youth, now they lament their sorrows, insatiate, full of woe."

[10] Cf. Alaux (2002, 7). Alaux relies here on the analyses of Loraux (1999, 64-66).

[11] Here we are following Alaux (2001, 7-8).

[12] This is suggested in particular by the casting of several roles, played by an actor of Palestinian origin, Joseph Haj (Chorus), and two Carribean actors from Puerto Rico, Cordelia Gonzalez (Atossa) and John Ortiz (Xerxes). On this performance, see Vasseur-Lagangneux (2004, 192 et seq.).

[13] From this perspective, the place occupied by this event would be analogous to that of the sack of Athens in Aeschylus' tragedy.

[14] "Nous ne pouvions nous identifier à ces Algériens brutalement apparus et disparus comme manifestants dans l'espace public français. Nous pouvions en revanche nous désidentifier par rapport à cet État qui les avait tués et soustraits à tout compte."

[15] Cf. Butler (2004, 33): "If violence is done against those who are unreal, then, from the perspective of violence, it fails to injure or negate those lives since those lives are already negated. But they have a strange way of remaining animated and so must be negated again (and again). They cannot be mourned because they are always already lost or, rather, never "were," and they must be killed, since they seem to live on, stubbornly, in this state of deadness. Violence renews itself in the face of the apparent inexhaustibility of its object."

[16] See also Butler (2004, 40): "Doing this involves a certain 'loss' for the country as a whole: the notion of the world itself as a sovereign entitlement of the United States must be given up, lost, and mourned, as narcissistic and grandiose fantasies must be lost and mourned. From the subsequent experience of loss and fragility, however, the possibility of making different kinds of ties emerges."

[17] That one can "perform mourning" pushes the idea of performance to its paradoxical extremity. What in fact is more "unavailable" than the ordeal of grief, that experience, as Butler says, that "tear[s] us from ourselves," make ourselves enigmatic and impenetrable to ourselves? If we consider, however, that the work of mourning is precisely that movement to reestablish a division between life and death—to repeat that there were lives here where there are now deaths, and that it makes a difference, and that the disappearance of the bodies does not make their absence disappear—then the scenes we are thinking of here are precisely those where there is a performance of mourning.

[18] "We women and men, activists, HIV-positive, HIV-negative, straight, gay, bi, trans, we have been members of Act-up-Paris for many years; we protest with our bodies. Our damaged bodies, for some, wounded bodies, our bodies put on the line in public actions, our bodies assembled in protests, gatherings, and all of our meetings; in our bodies and the image of them performed lies our strength. Our bodies that sometimes escape us, patients on life-support until 1995, we became survivors marked by the secondary effects of treatment. In this society of performance, we stand out thanks to numerous artifices, shows that we put on because we will never give up. Because AIDS affects our body and that of our friends, we joined Act up and we fight for it; by putting our bodies on the line we invented and produced a different politics for fighting AIDS." (Maison Pop 2008; Hodges transl.)

[19] On this subject, see Talbot (2015, 103-126).

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Guillaume Sibertin-Blanc is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Paris 8 Vincennes/Saint-Denis, researcher at the Laboratoire d'étude des Logiques Contemporaines de la Philosophie, and co-director of the journal Actuel Marx. He published especially Deleuze et l'Anti-Œdipe: la production du désir (Paris, PUF, 2009), Politics and State. Deleuze and Guattari on Marx (Semiotext, 2017), La Ville inconscience (with Livio Boni, Paris, Hermann, 2018), Direito de sequência esquizoanalítica. Contra-antropologia e descolonização do inconsciente (Sao Paulo, n-1 Editions, 2022).

Address:
Guillaume Sibertin-Blanc
Université Paris 8 Vincennes/Saint-Denis
UFR Arts, Philosophie
Esthétique 2 rue de la Liberté – 93526 Saint-Denis cedex
Email: guillaume.sibertin-blanc@univ-paris8.fr

Armelle Talbot is Associate Professor [Maîtresse de conférences] in performing arts at Paris Cité University, member of the CERILAC laboratory, and director of the electronic journal thaêtre (https://www.thaetre.com). She coordinated its first two issues: "Scènes du néomanagement" (with B. Hamidi-Kim, 2016) and "La Révolution selon Pommerat" (with F. Aït-Touati, B. Hamidi-Kim and T. Karsenti, 2017). Her latest work focuses on Rainer Werner Fassbinder's cinema and theater and on theatrical representations of history. Since the beginning of the pandemic, she has also devoted her research on the effects of the health crisis on the performing arts.

Address:
Armelle Talbot
Université Paris Cité
UFR LAC
Bât Grands Moulins, 5 rue Thomas Mann – 75013 Paris
Email: armelle.talbot@u-paris.fr