

# Repertoires of remembrance: violence, commemoration, and the performing arts

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*Abstract:* This essay argues for a reconsideration of performative and embodied memory in illuminating how the performing arts—and music in particular—offer a unique means of embodying knowledge and of performing memories of violence. Incorporating insights from these fields provides an alternative approach to the questions of who, what, and for how long we should remember. After establishing a conceptual framework for the mobilisation of rituals of artistic practice and cultural memory, this article discusses examples from a range of cultures and performance practices to explore aesthetic and ethical characteristics of performative memorials. It concludes that performance’s self-consciously ephemeral, temporal, and iterative character means performative memorials can refocus the commemorative impulse away from the past by shifting our collective attention from the question of what should we remember to the question of what should we remember *for*?

*Keywords:* Commemoration, embodiment, ethics, music, performance, performing arts, repertoire, violence.

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It has become a truism amongst 21st-century scholars in memory studies to comment on the central position of memory in the contemporary world; nearly as common is the lament over the perceived negative effects of such a ‘surfeit of memory’.<sup>1</sup> This memory is presumed to reside in a range of different practices and locations in which we commemorate events and others, from physical memorials and monuments,<sup>2</sup> to namesake streets and buildings, to museums, exhibits, art, and even to what Jack Santino calls ‘spontaneous shrines’.<sup>3</sup> Yet, the recitation of such a catalogue without further explanation obscures the unique textures (to borrow James Young’s formulation) of differing memory practices. Moreover, no catalogue is exhaustive: all of the above-mentioned commemorative forms are examples of material culture, and scholarship has likewise tended to focus on commemorative objects.<sup>4</sup> In this article I suggest that one lesser-explored aspect of commemorative practice—that of the performing arts and embodied memory, and particularly that engendered by music—offers us a new approach to the central enduring questions of memorialisation: namely, who, what, and for how long we should remember. Furthermore, renewed attention to the work of the performing arts within commemoration suggests a new potential for repertoires of remembrance that commemorate and even ameliorate violence.

## EMBODIED PERFORMANCE

Before embarking on this argument, some definition of terminology is required: what do we mean when we talk about embodied performance? From the perspective of the performing arts one meaning of the term ‘performance’ seems clear: a performance is an instantiation or iteration of something (a play, a musical ‘work’, etc.). In this sense, a performance is a real-time aesthetic experience consisting of practices and events

<sup>1</sup> Huyssen (2000: 28); cf. Maier (1992: 136–51).

<sup>2</sup> Although I here use memorial and monument as near-synonyms, there are many who make distinctions between the two. Michael Rowlands suggests that memorials are associated with personal practices of remembrance and healing, while monuments are collective, often celebratory, glorifications of the dead; furthermore, he claims that ‘Memorials become monuments as a result of the successful completion of the mourning process’ (Rowlands 1999: 131). Likewise, Maya Lin writes ‘I consider the work I do memorials, not monuments; in fact, I’ve often thought of them as anti-monuments’ (untitled essay (1995: 13).

<sup>3</sup> See Santino (2006).

<sup>4</sup> For instance, in the section of *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning* entitled ‘Cultural Codes and Languages of Mourning’, Jay Winter (1995) turns from physical monuments to other forms of art; however, despite the section’s talk of ‘codes’ and ‘language’ that imply embodied activity, the subjects of Winter’s investigation (film, visual art, literature, and poetry) are written about as abstract locations for memory and mourning rather than active processes. An alternative approach that focuses on embodied processes of theatrical re-enactment is outlined by Bartie *et al.* (2017).

created by performers and audiences working with materials (whether sonic, textual, gestural, or other). In addition, performance is an abstract concept that has been developed as a methodological lens across multiple fields, most prominently in linguistics (in the work of J. L. Austin and John R. Searle), gender studies (Judith Butler), and theatre or performance studies (Richard Schechner and Victor Turner).<sup>5</sup> In this sense, performance encompasses both how we create our selves and how we present ourselves to each other in our everyday lives. While the expansiveness of performance as a concept suggests that almost anything can be seen as performative, what this highlights is its fundamentally social and relational character. Whether performance is seen as contributing to structural codes of normative behaviour, as something actively shaped by individuals and societies, or as a singular event undertaken by a symphony orchestra, we always perform for and with each other.

In the first sense of performance I outline above, the import of embodiment is apparent: it is of course bodies that play instruments, give life to characters in a play, or make gestures in a dance. Likewise, the concept of the performative as methodology cannot be abstracted from the body. By bringing these two concepts of performance together, we can open up new areas of performance. If performative linguistics seeks to answer Austin's question of *How to Do Things with Words*, Butler's extension of the performative to our bodies and Schechner's and Turner's extension to the iterative stage open the way towards asking a slightly different question: namely, how do we do things with embodied performance?

The significance of this question has prompted some scholars to seek additional language to describe the nature of embodied performance. Among these is Diana Taylor, who proposes embodied performance as a distinct method of knowing: 'a system of learning, storing, and transmitting knowledge' that 'enacts embodied memory'.<sup>6</sup> She refers to this system of performative knowledge as a 'repertoire' that encompasses dance, gesture, and singing alongside other real-time performative acts. As a knowledge system, the repertoire can be contrasted with the archive, which comprises not only 'documents, maps, literary texts, letters' but also other enduring forms of knowledge, including 'archaeological remains, bones, videos, films, CDs, all those items supposedly resistant to change'.<sup>7</sup> Both of these systems are interpretations of experience that construct and disseminate knowledge according to particular kinds of logic. Thinking of knowledge in terms of actions—as a doing, rather than an abstract possession—shifts our focus to how knowledge and the memory it requires are created and transmitted in specific cultural and social contexts.

<sup>5</sup> Austin (1962), Butler (1990), Schechner (1985), Searle (1989), Turner (1988).

<sup>6</sup> Taylor (2003: 16, 19).

<sup>7</sup> Taylor (2003: 19).

The performing arts occupy a unique intermediary position in relationship to the archive and repertoire in that they include repertorial forms (such as traditional forms of dance or music that are passed on via imitating gestures or sounds) as well as hybrid forms that rely on archival objects (scripts, notated scores, etc.) in order to produce a repertoire of actions. Yet, the connection between the body and performance means that even recordings of the performing arts, which fall under Taylor's vision of the archive as reproducible objects, foreground embodiment and presence. In the case of certain performers (for example, Canadian pianist Glenn Gould), this is notoriously evident even in the case of studio audio recordings, but Roland Barthes suggests that scrubbing away these traces of the body is tantamount to erasing the vitality of the sound itself.<sup>8</sup> In its emphasis on real-time embodied aesthetic activities, the repertoire focuses our attention on questions of ephemerality, particularity, and the kinds of knowledge that can be gleaned from a study of what exactly happens when a performer speaks, sings, or gestures. While this attention to the fleeting moment may seem initially to be contrary to the demands of enduring memory implied by commemoration, as intrinsically temporal practices that bridge the divide between the archive and repertoire, the performing arts open avenues of exploring change and continuity in commemorative practices.

## COMMEMORATION, VIOLENCE, AND THE PERFORMING ARTS

Thinking about embodied practice in the performing arts as a distinct means of knowledge offers several advantages in the context of commemoration, particularly when it comes to the commemoration of violence. This is not only because violence is often experienced in the body, but also because, as Patrick Anderson and Jisha Menon acknowledge, 'enactments of violence are both *spectacular* in their cultural impact and *embodied* in their transaction and effect'.<sup>9</sup> Scholars in a variety of fields have theorised violence itself as a kind of performance, one that is frequently expressed in terms of performing an identity (such as sexual violence being linked to particular forms of performing masculinity) or as a kind of mediated spectacle oriented towards an audience (such as some kinds of protest violence or terrorist activity).<sup>10</sup> Jeffrey Juris takes the connection between violence and performance a step further by defining performative violence in theatrical terms as 'a form of meaningful interaction through which

<sup>8</sup> Barthes (1977).

<sup>9</sup> Anderson & Menon (2009: 4).

<sup>10</sup> On gender and violence see, for example, Anderson & Umberson (2001) and Shepherd (2008); as well as Juris's work on activism and violence (2005) and Juergensmeyer on terrorism (2013).

actors construct social reality.<sup>11</sup> The development of a performative ontology for violence works against deep-seated assumptions about violence as intrinsically irrational or uncontrolled, yet the introduction of the language of artifice suggests a perhaps uncomfortably intimate connection between violence as performed in the world and violence as represented in the performing arts.<sup>12</sup> This becomes explicit in discussions of representations of violence (for example, some kinds of agitprop theatre), which, according to Anderson and Menon are ‘actively engaged in the promotion of violence as a cultural force’.<sup>13</sup>

Although very few would question the ability of the performing arts to represent violence, the intimacy of the relationship between representation and promotion gives rise to ethical tensions over the role of violence in the performing arts. In particular, the question of whether the representation of violence in art can have ethical value has animated discussions of the purpose of art for centuries. Several distinct positions have been developed, including that of radical moralists who suggest that every moral violation in a work means that the work is itself morally flawed. This presumably includes, for instance, the obligation to condemn art that depicts violence without denouncing it. At the other end of the spectrum, radical autonomists claim that such ethical concerns have no place in judging the aesthetic value of art, while in between more moderate claims present various conditions under which a work might be judged to be ethically or morally suspect.<sup>14</sup> Although these disputes may seem irrelevant to the commemoration of violence, they form an important backdrop to the specific ethical questions inherent in commemoration to which I will return in a later section.

A full discussion of the ethics and aesthetics of representing violence is beyond the scope of this argument, but one area where the tensions between the arts and violence have been especially significant is in aesthetic responses to historical violence. In the late-20th and early-21st centuries this has been framed as a dispute over the capacity for art to address violence and suffering at all—commonly (if somewhat simplistically) encapsulated in Theodor Adorno’s (in)famous statement that ‘to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric’.<sup>15</sup> Yet, despite the sense that silence (and perhaps especially

<sup>11</sup> Juris (2005: 415).

<sup>12</sup> This discomfort has been incorporated into theories of theatre, including Antoine Arnaud’s *Theatre of Cruelty* and Bertolt Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt* [distancing effect]. (See, for example, Jameson 1998, Bermel 1977).

<sup>13</sup> Anderson & Menon (2009: 4, 6).

<sup>14</sup> See *inter alia*, Anderson & Dean (1998) and Carroll (1996). Radical positions are now widely seen as reductionist, but radical moralists would include Leo Tolstoy and Pierre Bourdieu, while radical autonomists include Oscar Wilde.

<sup>15</sup> The original is part of a longer sentence: ‘Kulturkritik findet sich der letzten Stufe der Dialektik von Kultur und Barbarei gegenüber: *nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch*, und das frißt auch die Erkenntnis an, die ausspricht, warum es unmöglich ward, heute Gedichte zu schreiben’ [The critique

aesthetic silence) is the appropriate response to such monumental suffering, the arts have always played a significant role in recognising and remembering violence. Indeed, Adorno himself later wrote:

extreme suffering ... demands the continued existence of the very art it forbids. It is in art alone that suffering can be voiced without being immediately betrayed by it. However, by transforming this suffering, despite all attempts at irreconcilability and severity, into an artwork it is as though the deference owed to the victims were violated.<sup>16</sup>

Given this tension, it is unsurprising that significant questions over the ethical consequences of representing violence remain salient in the realm of commemorative works of art where the demands of appropriate response are particularly acute. Philosopher Lydia Goehr notes that commemorative works always walk a fine line: they must avoid exploitation by keeping a sufficient distance from the reality they commemorate even as they promote an illusion of reality in order to move an audience to the desired reaction.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, as Marita Sturken notes, commemorative works can easily collapse into kitsch, or the false assurance ‘that the good feelings that come from acknowledging the pain and grief will make everything better, that innocence can be regained’.<sup>18</sup> In spite of the pitfalls that face artists and audiences in framing violence in commemoration, artistic reckonings with the past remain significant parts of social rituals of commemoration. Without denying these dangers, then, it behoves us to examine more closely how violence is remembered and represented in the performing arts.

## VIOLENCE, MEMORY, PERFORMANCE

In her work on ‘Performing Ruins’, Taylor suggests that commemorative processes involve at least three separate layers: revelation, witnessing, and transmission.<sup>19</sup> Revelation refers to the recording of a factual account of the past and includes efforts

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of culture is confronted with the last stage in the dialectic of culture and barbarism: to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric, and that corrodes also the knowledge which expresses why it has become impossible to write poetry today] (Adorno 1977: 30).

<sup>16</sup>Adorno (1965: 125): ‘Das Übermaß an realem Leiden [...] erheischt auch die Fortdauer von Kunst, die es verbietet; kaum wo anders findet das Leiden noch seine eigene Stimme, den Trost, der es nicht sogleich verriete. Aber indem es trotz aller Härte und Unversöhnlichkeit zum Bild gemacht wird, ist es doch, als ob die Scham vor den Opfern verletzt wäre. Aus diesen wird etwas bereitet, Kunstwerke, der Welt zum Fraß vorgeworfen, die sie umbrachte.’

<sup>17</sup>Goehr (2008: 182).

<sup>18</sup>Sturken (2007: 285).

<sup>19</sup>Taylor (2009: 24–5).

to establish the truth of history—for instance, via compiling lists of names of participants in events or determining the circumstances in which violence occurred—while witnessing establishes a social history in which the experiences of individuals are acknowledged and recorded. Transmission is concerned with expressing these facts and experiences in ways that allow the histories they constitute to be shared with others who did not have the same experience. Within the performing arts, commemorative works have focused on the latter two of these layers, particularly through the development of a testimonial aesthetics. This artistic testament is designed in part to create and sustain a particular subject position on the part of the audience: that of the secondary witness. When seen in combination with the theoretical concepts of post- and prosthetic memory, these elements create a framework within which individuals and societies mobilise rituals of artistic practice in the service of commemoration and cultural memory.

Key components of these rituals include spaces, objects, and activities that serve to both symbolise and enact memory, thereby providing points of suture for identity and community. This is notable in the case of violence, where violent encounters profoundly shape the experience of the self. Katharina Schramm has suggested that violence and memory are brought together in three primary situations, each of which hinges on identification: the constitution of national identity, narrations of victimhood or trauma, and assessments of the roles of perpetrators of violence.<sup>20</sup> In all three, memory is instrumentalised in order to integrate individual experiences within a larger narrative structure, whether this means an agreed interpretation of a nation's past, an acknowledgement of suffering on the part of the oppressed, or attempts at reconciliation in a divided society. These narratives depend on shared frameworks of memory which are sustained by socially agreed forms of expression, or rituals of commemoration, that are themselves deeply intertwined with what and how we remember. Moreover, all of these situations imply the existence of an external audience who authenticates and assents to this narrative. Consider the documentary film *The Act of Killing* (Oppenheimer 2012), in which participants in the 1965–66 mass killings of Communists in Indonesia were invited to acknowledge, boast about, and even restage the murders in which they took part. This is an unusual means of engaging in revelation, witnessing, and transmission; however, when an audience watches a participant restage a massacre in the style of his favourite film the interplay of identity, aesthetics, voyeurism, and violence takes on a markedly disturbing cast.

In addition to its re-creative aspects, *The Act of Killing* demonstrates one of the most pronounced characteristics of contemporary commemorative performance in the incorporation of archival material ranging from text to sound recordings to dance

<sup>20</sup> Schramm (2011: 8–10).

and gesture. This reflects a trend towards the documentary in wider memorial culture; nevertheless, by actively re-situating this material within the context of a performance, creators and performers transform it. This is particularly notable in regard to the common strategy of incorporating witness testimony, whether presented directly (for example, the use of survivors of apartheid-era violence as narrators in Duma Kumalo's play *The Story I am About to Tell*) or indirectly (as in the incorporation of testimonial fragments from the archives of Holocaust survivors in Steve Reich's composition *Different Trains*). This serves the dual purpose of recording individual experience and authenticating the overarching narrative. However, the reframing of survivors' experiences, particularly when it occurs in an indirect fashion, depends on turning the artwork into what Amy Lynn Wlodarski (following Lawrence Langer, Geoffrey Hartman, and others) calls a 'secondary witness': 'intellectual interpretations of survivor testimonies that are advanced without the author revealing his or her own subjective standpoint'.<sup>21</sup> The layers of mediation created by secondary witnesses can result in distortions that undermine the very claims of authenticity and objectivity the testimony is intended to support.

One example of such mediation can be found in Philip Miller's composition *REwind: A Cantata for Voice, Tape, and Testimony*, which incorporates testimony taken from the hearings of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. As the de facto curator of this testimony, Miller's description of his process reveals the difficulties in finding representative samples: 'I began to get caught or almost snagged by a word or a phrase from the testifier and consequently I would rewind and listen again.'<sup>22</sup> The artistic constraints mean that hours of testimony are splintered into seconds, rearranged, and put into new interpretive contexts within the cantata. This amplifies the impact of witness testimony, but at the cost of narrative integrity. Only the most evocative moments are preserved and, even then, the audience-oriented nature of a commemorative work means that the linguistic character of the original testimony is often overshadowed by the sound of the English-language translator on the recordings.<sup>23</sup>

Testimonies themselves often are recorded with the understanding that they will be preserved for posterity. This future orientation dovetails with the mandate 'never forget', which implies that, as a generation of survivors disappears, a new generation of witnesses must arise. Thus, in the performing arts adoptive narrators (performers, writers, choreographers, and composers) bring testimony to life and 'make [the

<sup>21</sup> Wlodarski (2010: 103).

<sup>22</sup> Miller (2015: 4).

<sup>23</sup> For more on *REwind*, see Phillips-Hutton (2018).

audience] feel like close and empathetic observers'.<sup>24</sup> Scholars have adopted various terms for the resulting relationship established between original testificants and new audiences, but many choose to preserve the quasi-judicial language of witnessing. Geoffrey Hartman calls those who engage with testimony 'witnesses by adoption', while Rachel Bennett suggests that artistic stagings of traumatic histories 'offer an opportunity, by translating experience ... for the audiences to become witnesses'.<sup>25</sup>

Witness-creation operates in tandem with other aspects of contemporary memory culture. In particular, scholars have recently begun to focus on how memories are created, shaped, and sustained across time and space. Marianne Hirsch has developed the concept of 'postmemory', which is distinctive to those who come after the initial witnesses to trauma. It 'is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection ... [and] its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation'.<sup>26</sup> Although Hirsch has developed this indirect memory in relationship to photography, the stipulation that it be mediated 'through an imaginative investment and creation' means that it is an excellent lens through which to examine the performing arts.

The externalisation of memory via ritual processes reflects the aims of much of the recent scholarship on memory. Advocates for 'active externalism' such as Steve Mithen, who argues for our capacity to download mental contents (including memories) to material objects, and Andy Clark, whose 'extended mind' thesis encompasses both cognitive processes and mental states, seek to dislodge memory from its traditional location inside the heads of individuals and push it into the light as externalised activity.<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile, Alison Landsberg has explored the relationship between internalised and externalised memories via the idea of a prosthetic memory. She suggests that prosthetic memories are a new form of public cultural memory that 'originate outside a person's lived experience and yet are taken on and worn by that person through mass cultural technologies of memory'. 'They are', she argues, 'privately felt public memories that develop after an encounter with a mass cultural representation of the past'.<sup>28</sup> Prosthetic memories exist at the interface of individual and collective experience and therefore offer a means of multilayered identification.

The emphasis on prosthetic and externalised memory might seem to privilege archival forms of knowledge, but it also focuses attention on how memories are created and sustained through the rituals of what Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan have called

<sup>24</sup> Hartman (2006: 260).

<sup>25</sup> Hartman (1996: 8–9), Bennett (2015: 168).

<sup>26</sup> Hirsch (1997: 22).

<sup>27</sup> See Mithen (1998: 185–92) and Clark & Chalmers (1998).

<sup>28</sup> Landsberg (2004: 19).

‘collective remembrance’: where individuals ‘[gather] bits and pieces of the past, and [join] them together’.<sup>29</sup> The implied collaborative relationship enacted between the individual and the group and between the material and immaterial reflects Paul Connerton’s claim that ‘We situate what we recollect within the mental spaces provided by the group. But these mental spaces ... refer back to material spaces that particular social groups occupy.’<sup>30</sup> By bringing together communities that might otherwise occupy very different material and mental spaces, collaborative repertoires of remembrance can contribute to shared memory frameworks.

### PERFORMING REMEMBRANCE

When we look at the purpose of commemorative art a fuller picture of it as an activity emerges. Commemoration processes serve multiple ends for both individuals and the state. For the individual, acknowledging and remembering past experiences in their factual specificity may be the primary feature of memorials, but the state has a demonstrable interest in shaping the ways in which we remember the past and then in transmitting that historical narrative. This is accomplished by gathering particular kinds of information and framing it in particular contexts; memorials thereby foster the sense of an agreed interpretation of the past. Almost any activity or object might be used as a symbol of the remembered event, but, traditionally, one of the primary physical means states use in propagating particular narratives about past events is the memorial or monument in which individuals and events are ostensibly immortalised. However, although the power of the state to shape memorial narratives is undeniable, its power to control the effect of artefacts is ultimately limited. All memorial objects and practices are palimpsests and thus susceptible to multiple, possibly conflicting, interpretations.

The struggle over the historical narrative is implicit in the discussions over who or what to memorialise and how to frame these narratives. Well-known examples of controversial monuments include the Soviet-era memorial to the victims of the Katyn massacre erected in Warsaw in 1985, where the false inscription ‘To the Polish soldiers—victims of Hitlerite fascism—reposing in the soil of Katyn’ was eventually replaced after the USSR acknowledged in 1990 that it had been the Soviet NKVD who carried out the murders with Stalin’s approval, and the Memorial to the Victims of the German Invasion erected in 2014 in Budapest which, opponents argue, attempts to whitewash the Horthy government’s collaboration with the Nazis. In Spain, General

<sup>29</sup> Winter & Sivan (1999: 11).

<sup>30</sup> Connerton (1989: 37).

Franco's vanity project-cum-memorial Valle de los Caídos was framed as a national act of reconciliation, yet it both refused to recognise Republicans amongst the fallen and employed imprisoned Republicans as part of the workforce, thereby pointedly excluding the defeated from any memorial narrative. Beyond these examples of selective remembering, there are also more subtle shapings of memorial narratives. For instance, Reinhart Koselleck has claimed that the semi-standardised text found on many pre-World War I German war memorials ('In memory of those killed in action, in recognition of the living, for the emulation of future generations') exemplifies how war memorials offer a layered experience of identification in which the deceased are identified in particular ways (as heroes, victims, kin, etc.) and the surviving observers are put into a position where they are offered an identity (as survivors and as future generations) that includes an obligation to emulate the dead. After World War I, when modelling oneself on the generation swept away by war became unpalatable, the interpretation of these memorial subject positions was altered so that the dead become identified as those who have died in the service of a noble goal or ideal; survivor-observers, then, are expected to align themselves with that ideal (whether liberty, patriotism, or something else) so that the dead will not have been sacrificed 'in vain'.<sup>31</sup>

This leads us back to the question of what do the performing arts do, and in particular, what do they bring to a study of commemoration that is distinct from other types of commemorative efforts such as physical memorials? In this section I argue that a performance that commemorates violence is more than a receptacle for memories of violence—just as the materials that make up a performance are more than just a prosthesis for memory. Instead, performances are metonyms of societies. As such, they both profoundly shape and are shaped by the ways in which violence is experienced, performed, and remembered. Through the real-time negotiations of memory and identity inherent in performance, a collective meaning for commemoration may emerge. Moreover, by engaging with the work and its metonymic significance, audiences are drawn into relationship with the past such that they are better able to approach the trauma of historical violence in ways that are conducive to its incorporation and amelioration within a larger historical narrative.

This argument does not only apply to official commemorative works; rather it encompasses how performances of different kinds work in popular memory and how knowledge about the past is disseminated and mediated in the public sphere. Hence, the next section examines several different examples of commemorative music from semi-official memorials, personal memorials, and one example of a work that has

<sup>31</sup> Koselleck (2002: 295). Cf. Winter (1995), which makes a similar point.

been constructed as a memorial only after its creation.<sup>32</sup> Although the principles of this argument are applicable across the range of performing arts, the examples I have chosen to highlight are of commemorative music composed in the Western art and popular music traditions. This is in part because these traditions span formal and informal commemorative efforts and have currency across wide portions of the contemporary world, and it is in part because, as I mentioned earlier, music (and Western art music in particular) offers an acute view of the connection between archival and performative knowledge that animates this argument. For example, in writing of a collection of Yiddish commemorative songs, Shirli Gilbert writes that ‘the songs are distinctive in being simultaneously remnants of the events themselves and retrospective memorials, fulfilling the roles of both “original” artefacts from the time and post-war commemorative imaginings’. She goes on to say: ‘What is more, they encode the ongoing, dynamic ways in which succeeding generations choose to remember and forget.’<sup>33</sup> Within the specific repertoire she covers, this is accomplished via creative re-imaginings as the songs are passed from performer to performer, but an analogous process operates across music and the performing arts more generally. Despite its reputation as the most abstract of the arts, notated music exists at the interface between the performer’s embodied interpretive creativity and the script-like archival object of the score. This productive relationship creates a space for music to engage in particular kinds of knowledge transfer where ‘the telling is as important as the writing, the doing as central as the recording, the memory passed down through bodies and mnemonic practices’.<sup>34</sup>

Music has been a staple of commemorative occasions for generations: examples from the Western art tradition include battle pieces such as Beethoven’s *Wellington’s Victory* or Tchaikovsky’s *1812 Overture*, and celebratory works such as William Walton’s *Te Deum* and *Orb and Sceptre*, composed for the coronation of Elizabeth II. These high-status pieces were frequently used to burnish a country’s self-image in moments of celebration;<sup>35</sup> but contemporary commemorative music is more frequently framed as providing an opportunity for public mourning of violence. With a few exceptions, these commemorative pieces are occasional, with short performance lives

<sup>32</sup> Retrospective memorials are common across many forms of art, and the association of a work with memorialisation often brings significant benefits. In popular music, one of the most prominent examples is ‘Candle in the Wind’ which was originally written by Elton John and Bernie Taupin as a memorial to Marilyn Monroe but which achieved enormous success when it was reworked as a tribute to Diana, Princess of Wales in 1997.

<sup>33</sup> Gilbert (2008: 123).

<sup>34</sup> Taylor (2003: 35).

<sup>35</sup> See for example, Alexander Rehding’s argument that 19th- and early-20th-century Germanic cultures used musical works by the Austro-German composers Beethoven, Liszt, Bruckner, and Mahler as sounding monuments to greatness (2009).

due to their connections to contemporary events. This ephemerality has sometimes led to their dismissal as objects of serious study. However, rejecting these works runs the risk of ignoring the embodied work that they accomplish. In contrast to physical memorials, musical ones privilege particular kinds of memory work, including the capacity for embodiment and enaction of memory through performance. Furthermore, music's iterative, temporal nature (not to mention the comparative ease with which it can be disseminated via reproductive technology) allows these memorials to be transmitted widely, thereby providing a way for a range of audiences to experience its immersive character and to potentially take part in commemoration. Some contemporary musical memorials also employ a testimonial aesthetics that collapses space and time in performance, even as the use of testimony buttresses claims of authenticity and historical veracity. Finally, the impermanent nature of music is in this case an advantage in that this flexibility allows for works to either slip out of the canon or to take on new kinds of meanings as memorial needs change. The ephemerality of musical memorials indicates that there are multiple potential answers to the question of how long should we remember.

### WHY ALL THIS MUSIC

In this section, a few brief examples of music demonstrate some of the ways violence is commemorated through performance. We begin with one of the most prominent evocations of violence within Western art music: Krysztof Penderecki's *Threnody 'To the Victims of Hiroshima'* (1960). The piece is perhaps best known for being a belated memorial: after hearing the first performance, the composer decided against the original title of *8'37"* and instead dedicated it to the victims of the atomic bomb. Many early listeners were unsure of the new dedication; in his review, Paul Griffiths notes that the piece 'makes me uneasy for choosing to refer to an event too terrible for string orchestral screams'.<sup>36</sup> With its disorienting, screechingly dissonant string textures, use of numerous extended techniques, and overall impression of aleatoric chaos, the work might be said both to depict violence and to enact it on its performers as well as its audience. It is certainly far from the solemn hymn of mourning implied by the title of *Threnody*. Nevertheless, without the memorial frame provided by the work's title (and subsequently by its programming and reception) it is unclear that Griffiths' unease would exist. What is clear is that, by positioning *Threnody* within such a frame, it has undoubtedly come to occupy a more prominent position in the modernist canon than it might otherwise have done. Unlike Penderecki's more

<sup>36</sup>Griffiths (1976).

forthrightly memorial work *Dies Irae (Auschwitz Oratorium)* (1967), which has remained rooted in its specific memorial function, the violence of Hiroshima as enacted in *Threnody* has become a metonym for the general violence of the modern world. In this sense, the external violence of the atomic bomb offers an interpretive pattern for commemorating violence in performance.

In contrast, Mary Kouyoumdjian's *Bombs of Beirut* (2014)<sup>37</sup> interweaves memory and violence into a musical narrative of life before, during, and after the Lebanese Civil War. The sense of Beirut as a symbolic space constructed by someone who did not experience the trauma of its destruction suggests instructive parallels to both Hirsch's postmemory and Landsberg's prosthetic memories: Kouyoumdjian's grandparents settled in Lebanon after surviving the Armenian Genocide, while a generation later her parents fled the Lebanese Civil War. Both of these historical evacuations echo in her work. Her audience is made up primarily of persons who share neither of these experiences; nevertheless, the simultaneous presentation of both the physical violence that caused the dislocation and the psychological violence engendered by destruction allows the audience to share, however briefly, in them. By re-creating and sharing these memories with the audience in each performance, the performers open up the post- or prosthetic memory of the Armenian and Lebanese experience for exponential dissemination.

Split into three sections entitled 'Before the War', 'The War', and 'After the War', *Bombs of Beirut* brings the documentary flavour epitomised in contemporary commemorative music by Steve Reich's *Different Trains* and *WTC 9/11* to a new height. Alongside a live-processed string quartet, Kouyoumdjian includes a pre-recorded spoken track containing fragments of interviews with her family and friends. In the first section she matches wandering, obsessive fragments in the strings with half-remembered, half-imagined constructions of life in Beirut, but this fantasy is brought to a brutal halt at the end of the second section where Kouyoumdjian interpolates a nearly four-minute-long recording of a missile barrage. In between the shrieking sounds of the incoming missiles and the thunder of detonation one hears snatches of movement and the occasional gasp—the only aural hints that the track consists of tape recordings of actual bombardments in Beirut between 1976 and 1978. In performance, the illumination of the quartet is turned off for the initial part of this recording, resulting in a near-total darkness that (in combination with the volume of the recording) makes this section of the work both immersive and disturbing. This is violence not just commemorated but re-created, which is why the programme notes warn the audience that that 'audience members may wish to avoid this piece if there is

<sup>37</sup>A recording can be found here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pNegch1\\_dyU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pNegch1_dyU) (accessed 20 April 2017).

any history of PTSD, anxiety disorders, or other psychological or medical conditions that would likely be exacerbated by exposure to such sounds [that is, aerial bombardment].<sup>38</sup> Although the final section returns to the Middle-Eastern-inflected string writing overlaid by a few fragments of text, the extreme compression of these texts and the concurrent domination of the texture by the strings suggests that Beirut in 'After the War' is no longer a place for these speakers to create new memories. Instead, the city exists only in relation to the destruction depicted earlier.

Kouyoumdjian frames *Bombs of Beirut* as presenting 'a sonic picture of what day-to-day life is like in a turbulent Middle East not filtered through the news and media, but through the real words of real people'.<sup>39</sup> In this deployment of a testimonial aesthetics of veracity it looks outward towards new audiences who may have no connection to Lebanon, but it also speaks to those directly or indirectly affected by the events it memorialises, arousing in them 'feelings of disorder and nostalgia' through the collective construction of an imagined Beirut.

In their immersive and physically invasive sounds, Kouyoumdjian's and Penderecki's compositions bring violence that occurred far away in time and space to new audiences; nevertheless, they remain what Thomas Turino calls presentational works, wherein a group of experts (the string players, the audio technicians, the recorded speakers) create music for another group (the audience). This contrasts with participatory works, which have more limited distinctions between artist and audience and a correspondingly higher level of interactive engagement. The result is that participatory works tend to engender greater feelings of togetherness, with potentially greater impact on the creation of collaborative memories and collective identity. According to Turino this is most clearly evident in unison singing, where:

The very fact of many voices sounding together creates the experience of unity, directly and concretely felt. The call-and-response structure of ['Carryin' the Cross of Our Lord'] and so many gospel songs, like all interlocking practices in participatory music, both articulate and are the result of social coordination and unity. The constant repetition of a few simple ideas in the texts cement them in people's minds as truth, and thus help generate courage to act on that truth in the face of opposition.<sup>40</sup>

With this ideal of unity in mind, I turn to another example of how historical violence may be acknowledged via the performing arts. This is 'Sorry Song', a straightforward pop-style song for chorus written by Australian composer Kerry Fletcher as part of an effort to recognise the suffering experienced by Indigenous Australians who

<sup>38</sup> The programme notes for the Kronos Quartet's performance of *Bombs of Beirut* are available here: <https://hancher.uiowa.edu/kronos> (accessed 12 January 2017).

<sup>39</sup> See <http://musicofarmenia.com/mary-kouyoumdjian-bombs-beirut> (accessed 8 October 2017).

<sup>40</sup> Turino (2008: 271).

were removed from their families and homes as part of the Stolen Generations. In terms of a direct representation of violence, there is very little: the melody is simple and repetitive, with a limited range and uncomplicated rhythms that make it suitable for a wide range of singing abilities, while the accessible instrumental accompaniment harmonises the melody with a three-chord progression playable on a variety of instruments. Instead, this placid musical surface is paired with a text that focuses on acknowledging the violence of the past with images of families crying over their stolen children. These memories are initially confined to those directly affected (implicitly, only those of Indigenous heritage), but by the third verse, the act of crying over lost children is extended to all Australians. The chorus follows these images of suffering by exhorting everyone to ‘sing loud’, to ‘break through the silence’, and to ‘let “sorry” start healing this land’.

In a performance that took place in commemoration of the Australian Parliament’s official apology to the members of the Stolen Generations in 2008, the reconciliatory message of the song’s lyrics was emphasised and enacted through physical gestures. These ranged from the gentle swaying of the choir and the sign language employed by schoolchildren performing alongside to the spontaneous response of the crowd, who climbed to their feet when the song began. As the song came to a close, the audience joined in with the final series of choruses, holding hands and swaying in time with choir.<sup>41</sup> In these small but telling moments ‘Sorry Song’ affirms the value of the performing arts in acknowledging the past alongside making communal gestures of apology and reconciliation.

Through their engagement with memory, all of these memorial works transform imaginative and physical spaces. Performance thus offers a way of understanding and transmitting knowledge and memory across archival and performative boundaries. As I have argued, this is in part because performance offers a means of embodied knowledge: a way of or acting out histories and memories in ways that can reconfigure memorial processes. Moreover, music can resist traditional monumentalisation by offering temporary, yet iterative, memorial narratives. The ephemerality and multivalent connotations of music—its ‘floating intentionality’, to borrow Ian Cross’s term—makes it hard to fix any meaning in place. This is why, despite its frequent use to bolster state narratives, Lindelwa Dalamba warns that music ‘may not be as comfortingly conciliatory as guardians of the national biography would wish.’<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, its very temporality suggests that it may be more open to revision than physical memorials and, in some cases, presenting multiple voices and perspectives allows music to resist

<sup>41</sup> A video of this performance may be accessed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eKHExD3sIR4> (accessed 14 April 2018).

<sup>42</sup> Dalamba (2012: 313).

the imposition of a state-sponsored vision of the past. The palimpsest of potential meanings engendered by musical memorials thus offers an important space for approaching the past.

## CONCLUSION

In an essay entitled ‘The Musicality of Violence’, Lydia Goehr argues against the proposition that the arts are somehow more pure or more abstracted from the messiness of reality than other activities. She writes: ‘acts of art, even when they look like politics have no victims (or so it is said)’, before following this with the wry comment, ‘It does not follow, though, that they contain no violence.’<sup>43</sup> Goehr’s point is that commemorative works of art often end up replicating the very violence they seek to ameliorate and, while I agree with her about the potential dangers of commemoration, I would also argue that works of art have important roles to play. Without unnecessarily elevating the performing arts as a means of memory, I suggest that they offer a distinct perspective on the nature of commemoration that enriches our understanding of how memories of violence can be incorporated into something bigger.

One prominent criticism of memorials is that they do not actually preserve memory, but rather help us to forget. Thus, Pierre Nora writes that memorials remove some of the work of remembering from us: ‘the less memory is experienced from the inside, the more it exists through its exterior scaffolding and outward signs’.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, James Young suggests that not only the more externalised the memory, the easier it is to forget, but also that the ways in which we have tended to remember the dead—namely, as the symbolic, idealised, ‘glorious dead’ rather than as individuals—only perpetuates the violence done to them.<sup>45</sup> Yet, memorials are not about changing people forever, any more than they are about eternal remembrance—despite inscriptions to the contrary. The idea that the violence of our own times will echo in the same way for future generations is an example of the teleological hubris Percy Bysshe Shelley attributed to the mythical Ozymandias. Instead, I suggest that the participatory rituals of the performing arts offer opportunities not only for the creation and transmission of memory but also for integrating such memories into a wider narrative via practices that can accommodate changing memorial needs. Like a monument, performance has the potential to transform a physical space into a site of contemplation, but, unlike a monument, it is transportable and iterative. In its punctuated, yet

<sup>43</sup> Goehr (2008: 196). For my part, I am sceptical even of the claim that art has no victims.

<sup>44</sup> Nora (1989: 13).

<sup>45</sup> Young (1993: 133).

continually temporal narrative, performing commemoration makes the experience of remembering available to new audiences in a live sense. Moreover, the multitude of voices that can be presented in performed memorials engages audiences in a kind of memory work that is vital to communicating historical traumas in something of their fullness. Even though the performing arts are not the only way to appropriately remember past violence, the close connection between performance, the body, and time offers audiences an experience that foregrounds the transmission of embodied memory until the point such memories are no longer necessary.

In spite of these advantages, performed commemoratives are not some kind of panacea to the knotty problems of remembering violence, and the performing arts have the potential for misrepresenting violence and distorting memory as well as providing new perspectives. Performance cannot avoid the ethical questions that haunt the field of memorials, including the potential damage done to victims by perpetuating memories of violence and the enduring issue of the aestheticisation of violence. In a searing image from the essay I quote above, Goehr writes that ‘murder as fine art is about ... the transformation of blood into aesthetic transcendence’ and suggests that ‘to render violence beautiful is to erect the Apollonian veil to protect humanity from direct confrontation with Dionysian power’.<sup>46</sup> While this warning is salutary, I contend that neither beauty nor traditional aesthetic pleasure is necessarily the goal for commemorative works in the performing arts. The representation of violence may provide a context in which the audience, shielded from its reality by the performing frame, is enabled to excuse or minimise violence, but the performing arts also stage and frame violent acts, thereby containing them within a space where they may be confronted and perhaps overcome.

In positioning the performing arts as reflecting a broader and more flexible kind of remembering than is possible in a physical memorial or monument, I am suggesting that such performed memorials offer a distinctive approach to the popular memory of traumatic events. Examining commemorative processes in the performing arts can expand our understanding of how violence may be remembered through our individual and collective repertoires even as we recognise their limits. Speaking of music, the ethnomusicologist and social anthropologist John Blacking reminds us that it ‘cannot change societies ... it cannot make people act unless they are already socially and culturally disposed to act. Music cannot instil a sense of fellowship, as Tolstoy expected, or any other state or social value.’<sup>47</sup> Despite this necessary reminder, I suggest that the value of the performing arts (and perhaps especially music) is that they can open up a space in which people can become socially and culturally disposed to act.

<sup>46</sup> Goehr (2008: 176–7).

<sup>47</sup> Blacking (1995: 35–36).

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