

On the Moral Registers of Bearing Witness

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It is a pleasure to respond to Mario Di Paolantonio and Lara Okihiro's elegant and moving article. I am sympathetic with how they both conceive and enact their undertaking. I have no fundamental disagreement or objection to their core claims and interpretations. The article feels very "present," very much a part of my present since I first read it some weeks ago. It has me thinking in fresh ways about our present, with "our" encompassing every person in the United States. I would like to use this response to think with the authors about how this present can come to embody, through our educational efforts, an ethical relation with the past. It seems to me this topic is intimately bound up with one of the threads of the 2018 conference theme, having to do with what it is to be and to become a human being who can dwell ethically with others.

James Baldwin states, toward the close of the film we've been hearing about: "History is not the past. It is the present. We carry our history with us. We *are* our history."¹ I note Baldwin's "ontological" accent, that we *are*, not that we were, our history. Baldwin's concern is that many white Americans do not know this. Or, they know it selectively, acknowledging in their ways of life only those things they find inspiring, comforting, and consoling. Baldwin would say they do not allow themselves to feel the "touch" of the past, echoing here the title of a superb study of witnessing and remembrance by Roger Simon.² Baldwin would add that, as an inevitable consequence of their selective acknowledgements, these white Americans dwell in illusions, myths, and fantasies (all terms he uses in his public talks that are featured in the film).

A fateful ramification of this partiality is that many white children and youth appear to take on, unawares, their community's skewed narrative and outlook, and thus perpetuate the cultural pathology.

Di Paolantonio and Okihiro address in their article how Raoul Peck's film models a way of realizing – literally, *making real* – a genuine, which is to say transformative, relation with the past. They elucidate what they call “juxtapositional pedagogy,” a term of art they draw from Walter Benjamin's ever-trenchant reflections on the dynamics of remembrance and forgetfulness. The authors illuminate moments in the film where Peck's narrative decisions radically juxtapose what seems “pretty and nice” with what is damningly ugly and violent. Images of consoling fantasy and of a never-never land – a land which truly has *never* been real – jar with very real images of very real racism.

As Di Paolantonio and Okihiro write, Peck “brush[es] history against the grain” of a comforting presentism. This brush, this touch, which occurs for the viewer pre-cognitively and somatically – i.e., before they can turn their eyes and minds away – can “unleash sparks” that light up realities of the past and present. As the authors put it, the juxtaposition of clashing cultural elements “emit[s] sparks that allow us to see the contours, depth and dimensions of our time.” History “leaps” out of the past, it “flares up,” and instantaneously propels us into awareness that the past did not have to be so, and that our present societal trajectory is neither an expression of a glorious destiny nor of a mechanistic universe, but rather of concrete, fateful choices and decisions, both made and not made. At least for a moment, we *see* that we are indeed influenced by, and implicated in, the consequences of those choices and decisions. Baldwin argues that the latter will continue to reverberate uncontrollably and sometimes violently without an intervention on our part, however modest the step each might take given their particular circumstances

and resources. Through a juxtapositional pedagogy, Di Paolantonio and Okihiro suggest, we have a chance to recognize the choice of either denying our past or reckoning with it. In confronting this choice, we may realize that we ourselves will one day be “the past.” This truth can trigger questions such as: Would we like to be remembered, or are we content with being obliterated from cultural memory alongside much of our traumatic past? Do we wish our “effect,” which like the pebble tossed in the sea may ripple for a long time, to be just or unjust?

These lessons can become ethical rather than solely epistemic, especially if teachers support them through other pedagogical moves. They can become not just a matter of grasping a chronology of facts while also engaging schools of historical interpretation that pivot around causes and consequences. Such familiar classroom fare remains significant and worthy of inclusion in the curriculum. However, as mentioned, the lessons from a juxtapositional pedagogy can be ethical: they can lead us outside our comforting criteria of what shall *count* as a lesson, criteria whose uncritical application will simply confirm rather than disconfirm prior expectations. In contrast, an ethical “lesson” is transformative, not necessarily in a direct sense, but indirectly through our being cast into a space we’ve perhaps never known before, a space where the touch of traumatic reality is *felt*. The teacher who is poised to accompany students into this space can help them stay there, metaphorically speaking, because being there will be morally unsettling if not vertiginous.

In referring to moral unsettlement, I have in mind the other platform for ethical education that the authors draw out from their experience with Baldwin’s writing and Peck’s film. They refer to ways in which Peck conveys, through his fusion of images and Baldwin’s own words, the “irredeemable and seemingly unremitting losses that riddle ‘the story of America.’” Peck achieves this through motions both bold

and delicate. The film features endless scenes, both bold and delicate. Time and again, the film spotlights the actions and voices of Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King Jr., all murdered before the age of 40. The loss of these extraordinary human beings, and thus of all the further, incalculable good they might have accomplished for the nation, can lead – if truly faced – to a feeling of loss for which nobody, perhaps, has yet invented a name. But Baldwin gestures toward that name. The narrator in the film who is reading his words, Samuel Jackson, lends a tragic and devastating tone to Baldwin's simple (but hardly simplistic) response to the fact of the murder of Evers: he is, says Baldwin, *GONE*. *Gone – gone – gone*. I hear an echo in Baldwin's word of the Sorrow Songs of the black slaves in America. W. E. B. Du Bois argues, in his *The Souls of Black Folk*, that these songs constitute the most American of all American cultural creations.³ They express a haunting, yearning, and anguished hope – “a hope not hopeless but unhopeful,” writes Du Bois.⁴

Medgar Evers. Malcolm X. Martin Luther King Jr. *Gone – gone – gone*. How many times can we and our students say that word? How many times should we and they try, together, to say it? How many times might lead to a time of remembrance, and of the ethical action that can ensue in the light of remembrance? I take remembrance here to denote embodied knowledge of injustice – and of justice achieved, if only piecemeal – fused with a permanent feeling of care and concern. Remembrance fuels an ethically responsive and nonviolent engagement with the world in which we dwell. It brings into being a sense of responsibility which can grow and mature across a life.

A witness like Baldwin can help guide us into a condition of remembrance. The term “witness,” it bears highlighting here, covers a broad range of activities. The witness in court attests to the facts relevant to a case. The expert witness has a different responsibility, being

called upon to offer informed interpretation rather than just facts. The witness at a wedding or a bank signs a document, attesting to the validity of what has just transpired. The religious witness speaks to spiritual insight and inspiration. The social witness dwells amidst the poor and the marginalized, publicizing their oppression and their need. The moral witness evokes the reality and the effects of large-scale trauma, calling upon people to seek justice.

Baldwin's witness incorporates aspects of these diverse forms, ranging from a rigorous attention to fact, to the prophetic, morally charged cadences of his prose. He is also, as the authors point out, a "witness-survivor," calling to mind others who have accepted that role such as Primo Levi and numerous soldier-witnesses who made it through the killing fields of war. Baldwin has borne witness to the deaths and sufferings of his fellow black Americans near and far. At the same time, the very fact of his witness, as embedded in his written and spoken word, attests at once to his tenacity and to that of black Americans despite a centuries-long history of racist violence. Baldwin moves as a social and moral witness, attending both lovingly and soberly to the many-sided experience of others, including that of his three murdered friends whom he revered. He makes plain the limitations in the witness' role. He states that the line between a witness and an actor is a "thin one." "Nevertheless," he emphasizes, "the line is real."⁵ Baldwin has not become a Black Panther, a community leader, or a preacher, and he has not organized anything. Instead, as he says: "My responsibility as a witness was to move as widely and as freely as possible" – and, above all, to write of what he witnesses, for his witness cannot be complete until heard by others.⁶

Similarly, most teachers and students in schools today in America will never be community organizers and leaders, and nor should we demand that of them. I don't think that's what Baldwin expects them to

do. But he does urge them toward remembrance, and to take an agentive role in bringing that very remembrance into word and deed. Peck's film enacts Baldwin's hopes. That is, Baldwin's witness becomes the center of Peck's witness. In a manner of speaking, Baldwin passes the baton to Peck. And we can ask: As Peck brushes the past against the grain of our forgetful present, might this friction throw we and our students – before we can stop ourselves – into the role of witness? Might we and our students learn to bear witness, too, however modestly in comparison with thinker-artists like Baldwin and Peck? Might we bear witness, in our ever-imperfect but endlessly refine-able ways, to the traumas in the nation's history which have yet to be worked through, but whose unacknowledged reality pulses throughout today's societal ethos? It seems to me that what Di Paolantonio and Okihiro call juxtapositional pedagogy, allied with other ethically oriented, formative pedagogies, holds out the possibility for cultivating the witness in each of us or, at least, of nurturing the ethical orientation constitutive of the witness – an orientation that fuses listening, inquiring, tenacity, patience, and speaking.

1 *I Am Not Your Negro*, Film, dir. Raoul Peck (California: Magnolia Pictures, 2017), 1:26.

2 Roger I. Simon, *The Touch of the Past: Remembrance, Learning, and Ethics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). For an insightful account of Simon's pioneering work on the relation between witnessing trauma and education, see Mario Di Paolantonio, "Roger Simon as a Thinker of the Remnants: An Overview of a Way of Thinking the Present, Our Present...", *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 34, no. 3 (2015): 263–277.

3 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Penguin, 1996/ 1903), 170. Du Bois' extended witness in his book also yields the conclusion that the Sorrow Songs evoke "a faith in the ultimate justice of things" (213) that mirrors Martin Luther King Jr.'s well-known rendering of the idea that "the arc of the moral universe" is long but bends toward justice. Yet faith and hope may not be coterminous.

4 *Ibid.*, 205.

5 *I Am Not Your Negro*, 21:25.

6 *Ibid.*, 23:18.