

Heather Raffo's Solo Performance 9 Parts of Desire: The Traumatic Story of War

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Abstract

Heather Raffo's play *9 Parts of Desire* (2004) weaves together the stories of nine Iraqi women, the portraits of which are all based on interviews conducted by the author. Thus, by focusing on the personal, *9 Parts of Desire* draws attention to the commonalities of women who are both the subjects of, and witnesses to, trauma. Thus the aim of this paper is to show how in *9 Parts of Desire*, Raffo explores the effects of war and trauma on the women of Iraq. Raffo presents her characters' memories within a nonlinear framework spanning several decades of unrest - from the Gulf War to the beginning of the United States' engagement in Iraq after September 11. Therefore, the paper attempts to illustrate how Raffo demonstrates, within the complexity of these connections, the trauma of a single person transcends its specificity to create a communal experience of events. This narrative collectivity does not minimize the significance of each individual's trauma, but rather forms a completely separate account of cohesive and/or conflicting details that can be judged on its own, a whole distinct from the parts with which it was created.

Keywords: Crises of witnessing, narrative collectivity, Trauma, War narratives,

□ الأداء المسرحي المنفرد لهيثر رافو "تسعة أجزاء من الرغبة": قصة الحرب الصادمة

المستخلص

تقوم مسرحية "هيدر رافو" (9 أجزاء من الرغبة) (2004) بتجميع قصص تسع نساء عراقيات، تستند صورهن جميعاً إلى مقابلات أجرتها "رافو". وهكذا، من خلال التركيز على الشخصية، تسترعي 9 (أجزاء من الرغبة) الانتباه إلى أوجه التشابه بين النساء اللاتي يتعرضن للصدمات النفسية والشهود على حد سواء. وبالتالي فإن الهدف من هذه الورقة البحثية هو إظهار كيف تستكشف "رافو" في 9 (أجزاء من الرغبة) آثار الحرب والصدمات النفسية على نساء العراق. تقدم "رافو" ذكريات شخصياتها في إطار غير خطي يمتد لعدة عقود من الاضطرابات - من حرب الخليج إلى بداية تدخل الولايات المتحدة في العراق بعد 11 سبتمبر. وبالتالي، تحاول الورقة البحثية أن توضح كيف تستطيع "رافو"، ضمن تعقيد هذه الروابط، تتخطى صدمة شخص واحد خصوصيته لخلق تجربة مجتمعية للأحداث. لا تقلل هذه المجموعة السردية من أهمية صدمة كل فرد، ولكنها تشكل سرداً منفصلاً تماماً لتفاصيل المتماكة و / أو المتضاربة التي يمكن الحكم عليها بمفردها، وهي مجموعة متميزة تماماً عن الأجزاء التي تم إنشاؤها. الكلمات المفتاحية: أزمنة معاصرة الشدائد، السرد الجماعي، الصدمة، روايات الحرب.

Introduction

Heather Raffo's play *9 Parts of Desire* (2004) weaves together the stories of nine Iraqi women, the portraits of which are all based on interviews conducted by the author. Being half-Iraqi, Raffo felt that the women she interviewed opened up to her immediately because she was one of them, but the fact that she was American allowed her interviewees to "express fears or secrets that might otherwise be judged more harshly

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by someone from their culture" (Raffo, "About *9 Parts of Desire*"). Raffo's time spent with these women was more about the sharing of meals, love and experiences rather than a formal process of questions and answers. This kind of emotional exchange is representative of the dialectical nature of Raffo's play, as the voices of her nine characters are juxtaposed in such a way that they engage with one another across the monologic structure of the script.

In her introduction to the published version of the play, Raffo writes, "I consider all the women in my play to be dramatized characters in a poetic story. I liken it to songwriting - I listened deeply to what each woman said, what she wanted to say but couldn't, and what she never knew how to say. Then I wrote her song" (5). Thus, by focusing on the personal, *9 Parts of Desire* draws attention to the commonalities of women who are both the subjects of, and witnesses to, trauma. Thus the aim of this paper is to show how in *9 Parts of Desire*, Raffo explores the effects of war and trauma on the women of Iraq.

Raffo presents her characters' memories within a nonlinear framework spanning several decades of unrest - from the Gulf War to the beginning of the United States' engagement in Iraq after September 11. Therefore, the paper attempts to illustrate how Raffo demonstrates, within the complexity of these connections, the trauma of a single person transcends its specificity to create a communal experience of events. This narrative collectivity does not minimize the significance of each individual's trauma, but rather forms a completely separate account of cohesive and/or conflicting details that can be judged on its own, a whole distinct from the parts with which it was created.

The Wound of Trauma

Trauma is a complex experience that is emotionally distressful, painful, and overwhelming. According to Judith Herman, a traumatic event is one that would be almost unavoidable during wartime: it "overwhelms the ordinary human adaptations to life" (33). Cathy Caruth, a leading scholar in trauma theory, states: "trauma is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind ... it is always the story of wound that cries out, that addresses us in an attempt to tell us of

a reality or truth that is not otherwise available to tell” (*Unclaimed Experience* 3-4). Through war narratives, using Caruth’s view, in *9 Parts of Desire* the characters’ minds are often conflicted and fragmented as a product of trauma.

Traumatic memories seem more vivid and immutable than ordinary memories but that only makes them more meaningful and important. A helpful aspect of dealing with trauma is that those who suffer are sometimes willing to tell a story. However, such stories are so raw and real that can be difficult to understand; they are told in fragments, or garbled in a non linear telling. Processing trauma can require expressing of feelings, or working with talk therapy, or writing out the trauma story, or sometimes even revisiting the destructive site. In *The Trauma Question* (2013), Roger Luckhurst considers trauma theory a thread “that bridge[s] the mental and the physical, the individual and collective” (15). He argues that this theory is not a monolithic and one-sided body of criticism, but a “hybrid assemblage” of questions, elements and concepts that dismantle the enigma of trauma. Moreover, In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), Caruth edits a collection of essays dealing with traumatized individuals’ various responses to their overwhelming experiences through history, psychiatry, literature, and film. She observes:

There is no single approach to listening to the many different traumatic experiences and histories we encounter, and ... the irreducible specificity of traumatic stories requires in its turn the varied responses- responses of knowing and of acting - of literature, film, psychiatry, neurobiology, sociology, and political and social activism. ... It may be only through this variety that we learn, in effect, not only to ease the suffering but to open, in the individual and the community, new possibilities for change, a change that would acknowledge the unthinkable realities to which traumatic experience bears witness. (ix)

Caruth argues that victims of trauma have no willed access to their traumatic memories, which compulsively remind survivors of the original, traumatic event. Furthermore, she points out that survivors of trauma are bothered by the terrifying nightmares that are “entirely outside their wish

or control" (*Unclaimed Experience* 2). Although Caruth emphasizes the individual's lack of will over his/her traumatic memories, traumatized subjects may still be able to recount and represent their trauma.

In turn, the act of narrating an overwhelming experience may point back to a crisis. In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (1992), Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub argue that trauma also causes crises when survivors attempt to recollect their terrible memories. Felman and Laub consider the recollection of these memories "as the indirect expressions of - or belated testimonies to - the radical crisis of witnessing ... and to the consequent, ongoing, as yet unresolved crisis of [personal] history, a crisis which in turn is translated into a crisis of literature insofar as literature becomes a witness, and perhaps the only witness, to the crisis within history" (xviii). The traumatized subject's testimonies include gaps, holes and silences, which suggest a crisis in telling. The crisis makes the traumatized "retreat into a [disjointed] prose profoundly questioning the very possibility of representation" (xviii). Thus, survivors of trauma cannot comprehend their traumatic experiences, and when they try to remember them, they seem incoherent and partially amnesic.

Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart also ascribe the "crisis of witnessing" to the traumatic memory. Based on the theories of the French psychiatrist Pierre Janet, they argue that the traumatized victim is divided between traumatic memories and ordinary memories. Traumatic memories are not part of the accessible history of survivors and clash with ordinary memories through intrusive nightmares and flashbacks. These nightmares and flashbacks "provide a form of recall that survives at the cost of willed memory or of the very continuity of the conscious thought" (1995, 152). Van der Kolk and van der Hart further argue that it is impossible for survivors of trauma to have a grip on their disturbing experiences. The outcome of this uncontrollable memory creates what Pierre Janet calls "restitutio ad integrum," a state in which dissociation and fragmentation characterize traumatic memories (152).

The enormity of the traumatic event effaces the boundaries between past and present and causes chronology to collapse. Geoffrey Hartman explains that the traumatized subjects' memories are like ghosts that follow them and unwillingly force themselves into their lives. The painful memory is distorted and comes in form of unpredictable flashbacks and nightmare that challenge coherent representation in literature. In *The Longest Shadow: in the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (1995), Hartman contends that such historical events as the First and Second World Wars "affect[ed] - enlarge[d] - risks incurred in literary representation[s]," in that "the axes of [the writer's] traditional frames of reference are then shattered" (3). The result of this shattered, non-representational history is typically fragmentation and silence.

Heather Raffo in *9 Parts of Desire* "represents" the world-fictionalizing Iraqi people's wounds in such a way that expresses such damage strongly. Dominick LaCapra in *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001) maintains that early trauma theorists direct the attention towards "acting-out," the literal and compulsive repetition of trauma: "in acting-out, tenses implode, and it is as if one were back there in the past reliving the traumatic scene" (21). Nevertheless, "working-through", which was neglected by the early trauma theorists, suggests that the traumatized subjects distance themselves from their overwhelming experiences and see them as events happening in the past. Traumatized subjects can "distinguish between past and present and to recall in memory that something happened to one (or one's people) back then while realizing that one is living here and now with openings to the future" (22). LaCapra insists on the agency of the traumatized individuals to represent their painful experiences as events to be recaptured and transformed rather than as unbidden flashbacks and dissociative images.

"Working-through" helps the survivors of trauma recall or at least imitate their traumatic memory like most of the characters in *9 Parts of Desire*. It is therapeutic for survivors to tell their stories, even as they distance themselves from them. According to LaCapra, "[i]n recent criticism..., there has perhaps been too much of a tendency to become fixated on acting-out, on the repetition-compulsion, to see it as a way of

preventing closure, harmonization, [and] any facile notion of cure" (145). Thus, LaCapra underscores the "possibility of working through" not as a "closure, totalization, full cure, full mastery" of the traumatic experience, but as interacting processes that should not be utterly separated from acting-out (143). In *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), Judith Herman does not believe in a complete erasure of traumatic memories and maintains that "it is understandable for both patient and therapist to wish for a magic transformation, a purging of the devil of the trauma. Psychotherapy, though, does not get rid of the trauma. The goal of recounting the trauma story is integration, not exorcism" (181)

The Telling and Testimony of Trauma

Felman in "Education and Crisis" (1995) calls the act of testimony "that of bearing witness to a crisis or a trauma" (13). Testimony gives way to thinking about how trauma circulates and how we relate to catastrophic events (16). Felman points out that testimony does not offer an all-encompassing recounting of the traumatic event; crucially, the event itself is inaccessible. Rather, since the memory of the traumatic event returns against the will of the survivor, the survivor can only ever give a glimpse into the memories of an overwhelming event:

As a relation to events, testimony seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference. (16)

It is clear, then, that by being in excess of our frames of reference the trauma returns against the will of the survivor, but does not return in full, rather only in the fragments of a memory. Testimony offers a method through which these fragments can be assembled and assimilated into a frame of reference; assimilated yet still imperfect precisely because memories are as such only a reflection of the event and not the event itself. While testimony might offer a means through which trauma can be witnessed, it is still plagued by aporia. Thus, testimony is conceived as a "discursive practice, as opposed to a pure theory" (17). Testimony, then,

is inherently a narrative practice and is encumbered with the notion of speech acts: “To testify - to vow to tell, to promise and produce one’s own speech as material evidence for truth - is to accomplish a speech act, rather than to simply formulate a statement” (17). As a speech act, then, testimony becomes less a statement of what is known to be true than it is a narrative mode through which the truth of trauma might be accessed.

The move to consider testimony as a narrative mode, rather than as establishing a sort of objective truth, is heavily influenced by Freud’s own work on dreams and wish fulfillment. Felman points to the second chapter of Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams*, which focuses on the Irma Dream: a recurring dream in which Freud is distraught about the incomplete treatment of his patient, the dream’s namesake, Irma (“Education” 22). Responding to this sort of recurrence, Freud takes to writing down everything he can in relation to the dream, including his own thoughts and feelings of Irma’s treatment. Through this sort of confessional mode, Freud comes to understand dreams as a means of wish fulfillment: “[t]hus its content was the fulfillment of a wish and its motive was a wish” (Freud qtd. in Felman, “Education” 22).

Testimony can thus be understood to exist in relation to confession. However, there is a key distinction to be made between notions of testimony and notions of confession because the two, while similar, are not identical. Confession can be envisioned, and Felman’s work points to this direction, as a vehicle through which the content of the testimony can be transmitted (“Education” 23). It is not that one confesses their trauma and that acts as a sort of mode of testimony that is readily assimilated into one’s own psyche, rather, the testimony is found by the clinician within the confessional. The parsing out of the differences between confessional and testimony in Freud’s work allows for the establishment of a more dialogical process whereby there is not a strict binary of patient and clinician, but rather both are, at once, engaging in reciprocal roles. The reciprocal relationship here is what is termed psychoanalytic dialogue: “an unprecedented kind of dialogue in which the doctor’s testimony does not substitute itself for the patient’s testimony, but resonates with it, because, as Freud discovers, it takes two to witness the

unconscious" (24). The effect of this sort of reciprocal relationship, then, does not necessarily fall back on traditional clinician/patient power dynamics. However, it does not imply that this relationship has no power dynamics, it certainly does.

Bearing witness, especially in terms of psychoanalytic dialogue, is key in the work of testimony. Indeed, as Felman establishes:

Psychoanalysis, in this way, profoundly rethinks and radically renews the very concept of the testimony, by submitting, and by recognizing for the first time in history of culture, that one does not have to possess, or own the truth, in order to effectively bear witness to it; that speech as such is unwittingly testimonial; and that the speaking subject constantly bears witness to a truth that nonetheless continues to escape him, as truth that is, essentially, not available to its own speaker. ("Education" 24)

Here the notion of bearing witness to one's trauma is put to the forefront. An important concept indeed, for it allows for a connection between Felman and Caruth's own interpretations of Freud's insights. The idea that the truth is not available to the speaker and requires another to listen and to witness directly ties into how Caruth conceptualizes, through Freud, trauma's latency as something that cannot be known until after the fact, through its repetition. Thus, the psychoanalytic dialogue established in Freud's work forms the basis of what can be called an events-based model of trauma through which trauma is conceptualized as an event in one's life. However, as Felman shows, to access trauma there needs to not only be an instance of testimony, but an instance of witnessing as well. It is important to note that there is an intact temporality here that indicates that the trauma did happen at a certain time. However, during the latency period of trauma, it is as if the event has not yet occurred and thus is not yet 'signifiable'. While bearing witness does allow for access to trauma, the trauma itself remains unstable.

The idea of bearing witness emerges prominently in the writings of psychoanalyst Dori Laub, specifically in his essay in Caruth's collection: "Truth and Testimony: The Process and The Struggle". Reflecting on his experience as a child survivor of the Holocaust, Laub constructs three interdependent levels of witnessing: witnessing one's self during the experience, witnessing another's testimony, and being a witness to witnessing (61-62). These three levels of witnessing are necessary for Laub, for the witness only witnessing their own trauma is insufficient because by experiencing the event, or, as Laub writes, "being inside the event" (66), they are at once a witness and a non-witness. Laub expands on the incomprehensibility of the traumatic event in positing that "there are never enough words or the right words, there is never enough time or the right time, and never enough listening or the right listening to articulate the story that cannot be fully capture in thought, memory, and speech" (63). In highlighting the simultaneous subject position of both witness and non-witness that the survivor occupies, Laub's work is important in further establishing both Felman's and Caruth's argument that there needs to be a witness to the witnessing.

For Laub, the telling of trauma is necessitated by the survivor's imperative to tell their story (63-64). The process of telling, however, is fraught with the impossibility of telling in such a way that "the pressure thus continues unremittingly, and if words are not trustworthy or adequate, the life that is chosen can become the vehicle by which the struggle to tell continues" (63). Put differently, there needs to be someone to listen to the testimony of the latent trauma, even if, as Laub argues, there is never enough or the right kind of listening. Thus, the telling of one's trauma and the listening of the other allows for access to the truth of the testimony and, by proxy, the truth of the experience.

For Laub, trauma cannot be known by the witness alone. Referencing the horrible nature of the Holocaust, Laub claims that because the events of the Holocaust were so overwhelming, there was in fact no self that was in existence during the event that experienced the trauma:

And indeed, against all odds, attempts at bearing witness did take place; chroniclers of course existed and the struggle to maintain the process of recording and of salvaging and safeguarding evidence was carried on relentlessly ... However, these attempts to inform oneself and inform others were doomed to fail ... The degree to which bearing witness was required, entailed such an outstanding measure of awareness and of comprehension of the event - of its dimensions, consequences, and above all, its radical otherness to all known frames of reference - that it was beyond the limits of the human ability to grasp, to transmit, or to imagine. (68)

It is precisely in this moment that the witnessing of another's trauma becomes important. Testimony can make up for the need of a witness during the event by allowing survivors to bear witness to their trauma belatedly. In this process, both the witness to the trauma - the survivor - and the witness to the witnessing - the listener - form a joint relationship and take on the responsibility for producing the truth of the event (69).

In Laub's "Bearing Witness, or the Vicissitudes of Listening" the relationship of the survivor and listener is explored. When one listens to a narrative of trauma, one at once "comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma himself" (57). Although a sort of co-owner of the trauma, the listener still maintains a distance from the traumatic event. In effect, the listener of trauma at once witnesses both their own witnessing and the trauma witness. In this dual witnessing, testimony is formed as a distinct event of its own. As Laub writes, "knowledge in the testimony is, in other words, not simply a factual given that is reproduced and replicated by the testifier, but a genuine advent, an event in its own right" (62). Though, as Laub, Felman, and Caruth have pointed to in their writings, trauma can never be captured or truly known, bearing witness to one's own traumatic experience, and having a listener present, can help one to know the event. By knowing the event, the survivor may construct a narrative that works to externalize the traumatic event itself so that it may be transmitted and assimilated into one's understanding, thus

resolving the crisis through the work of reparation (69), as represented in Raffo's *9 Parts of Desire*.

9 Parts of Desire and Witnessing Trauma

Within the context of *9 Parts of Desire*, each character experiences a traumatic event (such as the death or disappearance of a loved one) that is tied to the continuous state of national unrest and conflict in Iraq. The characters' trauma, as Felman and Laub pronounce, causes crises and they try to recollect their "terrible memories". In *Unclaimed Experience; Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Caruth notes that:

The crisis at the core of many traumatic narratives ... often emerges, indeed, as an urgent question: Is the trauma the encounter with death, or the ongoing experience of having survived it? At the core of these stories, I would suggest is thus a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a crisis of death and correlative crisis of life: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival. (7)

The structure and content of the individual monologues in the play demonstrate the ways in which the life of each woman is haunted by a past tragedy and how the survival of that event is itself an ongoing struggle. Their shared liminality, shaped by their personal histories - having narrowly escaped death only to know that it will come again - is exacerbated by the ongoing uncertainty regarding the fate of their country. The trauma experienced by each character in Raffo's play is the result of decades of hostility, yet over the course of the play these women find very little opportunity for closure or peace.

The most striking example of the unyielding effects of trauma in *9 Parts of Desire* is present in the story of Umm Ghada.¹ The character tells how she came to have this unique name after the American attack on the Amiriyya bomb shelter in 1991:

¹ Ghada, as she informs the audience, is the Arabic word for tomorrow, and Umm means mother.

Yes I was inside
with nine from my family
talking, laughing
then such a pounding, shaking
everything is fire
I couldn't find my children
I couldn't find my way out
but somehow I did.
In the whole day later
I am searching, searching charred bodies
bodies that were fused together
the only body I did recognize
is my daughter Ghada
so I did take her name (With so much pride.)
I am Umm Ghada, Mother of Ghada. (*9 Parts of Desire* 31)

This kind of broken narrative - full of phrases rather than sentences, incomplete ideas, repetition, sensory recollections - demonstrates the intrusive nature of trauma and the temporal divide between the traumatic event and the memories of it, which arise without warning and are only fully experienced in their deferred repetition. Caruth frames the relationship between memory and trauma as one that is "not so much a symptom of the unconscious, as it is a symptom of history. The traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess" (*Unclaimed Experience* 5). Part of this inability to possess the past is tied to the burden of survival; Umm Ghada is still haunted by this moment of catastrophe because the cycle of her trauma is not complete.

As a result of Umm Ghada's unfinished encounter with a traumatic event, Raffo's play can be effectively viewed through the theory of witnessing created by Giorgio Agamben and his study of Auschwitz. Agamben asserts that it is nearly impossible to bear witness to profound trauma, given that "[t]he 'true' witnesses, the 'complete witnesses,' are those who did not bear witness and could not bear witness" (34). That is,

those who witnessed the full extent of a traumatic event are no longer alive to share their stories or are so traumatized that they are unable to speak about their experiences. As with the Holocaust, for example, the people who endured the greatest trauma did not survive, and many of those who did live cannot bring themselves to articulate the details of what occurred; the true witnesses remain silent. Agamben continues:

The survivors speak in their stead, by proxy, as pseudo-witnesses; they bear witness to a missing testimony. And yet to speak here of a proxy makes no sense; the [dead] have nothing to say, nor do they have instructions or memories to be transmitted ... Whoever assumes the charge of bearing witness in their name knows that he or she must bear witness in the name of the impossibility of bearing witness. But this alters the value of testimony in a definitive way; it makes it necessary to look for its meaning in an unexpected area. (34)

The unexpected area is that gap between the actual event and the struggle to articulate the unspeakable, an emptiness that, according to Agamben, can be filled in by an act of an "author." Thus, the difficulty of adequately expressing traumatic experiences through language and direct testimony creates an open space in which fiction can begin to express that which cannot be accurately described in reality.

Umm Ghada, in this sense, is bearing witness to the deaths of her daughter and her family members, as well as to a historical moment in the Gulf War. While we as an audience may accept the veracity of her testimony, she is not, by Agamben's definition, a true witness: she survived the attack, thus making her a pseudo-witness and her testimony is incomplete. Even though Umm Ghada was present during the bombing, it was, for her, an inexperienced experience in that she did not die as well. Ikram Masmoudi, in her article on Iraqi women novelists, makes the point that any testimony stemming from such experiences "is necessarily a part of fiction" because the person did not experience the full trauma. She goes on to suggest that when Agamben "proposes that testimony is an act of an author, he implies the creation process where the insufficiency existent in the experiences of the survivor (lack/lacuna) can be completed

and made valid" (Masmoudi 63). Here then we have an author (Raffo) bearing witness to another author (Umm Ghada) who is bearing witness to a moment of trauma, and neither of them can fully testify to events of that particular day. While these degrees of separation from the trauma itself might suggest an inherent dilution of both fact and emotion, it is precisely this distance - the gap to which Agamben refers - that offers an opportunity for substantial revision to the representation of Arab women on stage. That is, the fact that Umm Ghada remains a pseudo-witness instead of a true witness reinforces her position as a survivor, which allows her to share testimony of an event that otherwise may have been glossed over in traditional wartime narratives.

Umm Ghada narrowly escaped the destruction of the Amiriyya bombing, and subsequently exists in a space between life and death. She is capable, however, of bearing witness to that liminal position, giving a voice to her own experience and those of other female survivors of wartime violence in Iraq. Within that open space, Raffo creates a counternarrative to an existing storyline of collective trauma perpetuated in mainstream Western media. While there are countless women in Iraq who have experienced trauma, I would argue that much of what is shown in news reports is trauma produced by representation. That is, we are presented with a narrative created by media outlets to promote a specific agenda which, in the years following September 11, frequently centered upon the suffering of women in several Middle Eastern and South Asian countries. In an effort to dismantle the collective identity of Iraqi women as helpless victims of trauma, a trope that quickly became an accepted reason for American intervention in the Iraq War, Raffo instead constructs a collective of witnesses, a group of strong female survivors whose stories can finally be heard.

Within Umm Ghada's story, Raffo extends the collective identity of those witnesses to include members of her own audience. Following the bombing, Umm Ghada decided to live in a small yellow trailer next to the burned-out shelter, keeping watch over the structure and explaining its significance to passersby as though she were a docent at a national monument. She tells us:

This trailer is my witness stand.
All photos on this wall- and here- are me
with emissaries from the world
who come to Amiriyya shelter to look
what really happen here
not what they read in papers
or see in the CNN.
Here is the guest-book they all sign,
your name will be witness too.
La, I must show it to you first. Ta'al. (*9 Parts of Desire* 31)

She then takes spectators on a “tour” of the facility, pointing out the charred hand and footprints on the walls, but avoiding the areas she deems to be too gruesome, where bits of hair and skin are still stuck to the concrete. While Umm Ghada is bearing witness to the actual traumatic event, the audience members are bearing witness to the remnants of that trauma, both physically (in the description of the shelter) and psychologically (through Umm Ghada’s vivid narrative). At the end of her monologue, Umm Ghada says to the audience, “Come. / Now you sign the witness book” (33). Though she is not actually requesting that the spectators cross the fourth wall and sign her book, symbolically she is asking us to confirm that we have heard and understood her story, that we are now witnesses too.

Rendering Body Memories Tellable: A Scheherazadian Legacy

This same compulsion to witness and memorialize can also be found in the character of Layal who, of the nine women in the play, is the closest approximation to a narrator in the piece.² Layal as envisioned by Raffo is described in the stage directions as “sexy and elegant; a resilient and fragile woman. She is a dare devil with a killer smile”(9 *Parts of Desire* 12).

² Raffo’s creation of Layal is based on the true story of Iraqi painter Layla Al-Attar, a nationally renowned artist and a favorite of Saddam Hussein; she was appointed director of the Saddam Art Center during Hussein’s rule. She is perhaps best known for allegedly creating the unflattering mosaic doormat of George H.W. Bush on the floor of the Rashid hotel entrance in Baghdad. Raffo’s version of Layla is reminiscent of her namesake - although with a one-letter name change - in that she too is a successful painter favored by Hussein’s regime and the curator of the Saddam Art Center.

She is a self-assured and creative female presence, and the emotional anchor of the play; through her frequent appearances on stage, we are given a broader sweep of her life, rather than a singular defining moment around which many of the other characters' narratives are structured.

Addressing the audience, she vows never to leave her country because the idea that her existence would be better or easier in the Western world is a fallacy:

I will never leave
not for freedom you do not even have
call me what you like, look at me how you will
I tell you so many women have done the same as me
everywhere they have to do the same.
If I did the same in your England and America
wouldn't they call me a whore there too?
Your Western culture, sister, will not free me
from being called a whore
not my sex
women are not free. (59)

In an article analyzing *9 Parts of Desire*, Magda Romanska interprets this speech as representative of the way in which "Layal's fractured self is stuck in the posttraumatic moment of misrecognition," as the character uses this rationale to explain her actions without having to acknowledge her own moral culpability (222).

While it does not appear that Romanska is purposefully devaluing Layal's choices, her idea that this woman is a stranger to herself (even if such a state is the result of trauma) nevertheless strips Layal of her agency in the same way that much of the Western media has done to Arab and Muslim women in recent years. Layal may not be in complete control of her situation, but she is fully aware of her circumstances and the decisions she makes in order to survive. She frankly admits "I wish I were afraid / I am beyond afraid- / I am just running, running / straight into it" (*9 Parts of Desire* 49). The fact that an oppressive patriarchal hegemony has forced Layal into this tenuous position can certainly be interpreted as a means of

victimization, but it also highlights her ability to endure and her desire to bear witness.

Loyal, as someone who has both experienced and witnessed violence, takes as her task the ability to “render body memories tellable.” As Roberta Culbertson explains, in order to both honor and understand traumatic events, “the survivor must tell what happened,” sharing the memories of the violence perpetrated on their bodies through narrative. The memories must be ordered and arranged “in the form of a story, linking emotion with event, event with event, and so on,” thereby “undoing the grasp of the perpetrator and reestablishing the social dimension of the self lost in the midst of violation” (179). Loyal accomplishes this through the survival of her own near-death experiences and subsequent artistic success, which together inspire her to create in her artwork a kind of collective representation of the women in her country. Within her paintings, Loyal bears witness to the stories of Iraqi women who have endured unimaginable suffering, memorializing their trauma in oils and watercolors. She tells the audience of a piece she painted based on a university student who went on a date with Saddam Hussein’s son and, when she returned home covered in bruises from the beating he gave her, made the mistake of telling her roommate the truth of what happened. In retaliation “Uday, he took her back / with his friends, they / stripped her / covered her in honey / and watched his Dobermans eat her.” Loyal transforms the young woman into a painting of a branch’s blossom, “leaning over the barking dogs / they cannot reach / no matter how hungry they are” (*9 Parts of Desire* 14). Her artwork offers both an illustration and the testimony of a traumatic event, filling in the narrative gap left by brutal death of an innocent girl framed within the context of a larger metaphor for her own experiences and those of her fellow female citizens.

Both Loyal’s representation of traumatic memories through her painting and Raffo’s theatrical interpretation of such stories demonstrate the significance of creative outlets in promoting active resistance against the devaluing or erasure of Arab women’s voices. In her first appearance onstage, Loyal explains to the audience that although she is painting other

women's stories, she paints them as herself. She does not want to expose another woman's body, "so I paint my body / but her body, herself inside me. / So it is not me alone / it is all of us / but I am the body that takes the experience" (*9 Parts of Desire* 13). It is, in part, the weight of these experiences that make Layal's death at the end of the play inevitable; as Layal draws closer to the moment of passing, she appears to crack under the many stories and images that she has taken on. She begins to repeat fragments of lines spoken by other characters in the play, seemingly possessed by their power. Such an uncontrolled, overwhelming reaction exemplifies Culbertson's notion of "body memories," or the recollections of the body's response to a trauma, in that the "memories of these split bits of experience ... are intrusive and incomprehensible when they reappear ... They make one appear crazy, because there is no temporal, single self, but an asynchronous mass of firing images, randomly, breaking through the dull film of the surviving self" (178). In this sense, Layal in particular, but also the play as a whole, becomes the theatrical embodiment of a fractured self and fragmented memories, a reminder that collective trauma is never a closed cycle. Layal's trauma is finally complete, but it is now the responsibility of her audience to bear witness to her story and the stories of those that she shared.

Raffo's choice of the one-woman show as the narrative structure for her play both evokes and dismantles yet another of the most prominent images of Arab women: that of the captivating storyteller Scheherazade. Like Scheherazade, many of the women in *9 Parts of Desire* are simply trying to survive in the midst of unimaginably cruel circumstances. Layal is the one that bears the greatest resemblance to the famously alluring and evocative storyteller. Nevertheless, the other evocative storyteller in *9 Parts of Desire* is Mullaya, an older Iraqi woman dressed in a traditional headscarf who is singing an old song of her country. A Mullaya, indicated in the stage directions, is a professional mourner who is hired to lead the call and response at funerals. It is unclear who she is mourning, but she appears to be weeping for her entire nation as she kneels at the river's edge: "the river again will flood / the river again will be damned / the river again will be diverted / today the river must eat" (*9 Parts of Desire* 10). Mullaya paints for the audience

the picture of a troubled land with a history of conflict, a place that is home to wars and disparate peoples who share both honored customs and collective trauma.

Commemorating Wartime Trauma Narratives

While many of the characters in *9 Parts of Desire* experience traumatic events related to acts of war within the geographical borders of Iraq, the character of the American is different. Raffo's analysis of the consumption of war narratives in the United States is particularly palpable through the words of The American, as the character comments on the rather detached nature with which the footage is presented on television, and the similarly nonchalant way in which people take in such distressing reports. She remarks that she "can watch it at the gym / people work out / to the war / on three channels. / They drink beer at the bar to the war" (*9 Parts of Desire* 46). Even she, a woman with family in Iraq about whom she is deeply concerned, realizes that she is engaging in a casual conversation about the war's rapidly rising death toll with a stranger while they are both getting pedicures. In contrast, whenever there is a crisis in America, the response is far more substantial in both action and emotion: "seven men get trapped underground / and we stop everything / we fly in engineers / to save / everything / we make a movie / we go on Oprah, we talk about it" (44). The lack of American understanding for the gravity of the traumatic situation in Iraq and the general attitude of detachment by her fellow citizens, juxtaposed with a twenty-four hour news cycle displaying footage of Iraqis searching for their loved ones in mass graves, eventually begins to cripple her psyche and makes her physically ill.

The American's trauma stems from a combination of guilt and powerlessness instigated by the barrage of images on her television screen and the ease with which they are accepted by much of the country. She is devastated when she realizes that the initial continuation of her routine frivolities positions her as just another one of the detached Americans, despite her familial connections to the region. After that recognition, she spends much of the day at home, on her knees in the middle of her apartment, staring at the television and clutching her rosary. The continuous availability of troubling images from her family's

Iraqi neighborhood exacerbates The American's struggle to reconcile her diasporic identity and furthers her feelings of alienation. She wonders, "How I can ever / go home again / and sit / in my amma's kitchen / and say / I'm sorry / I'm sorry / I'm" (*9 Parts of Desire* 47-8). The televised war fractures her identity, causing her to reevaluate her patriotic and personal allegiances in the shadow of horrific violence. The trauma, as Romanska suggests, comes from the fact that The American "cannot escape the memories of what she has seen because escape means betrayal" (230). It is, however, her position as a privileged American citizen, watching the war from the comfort of her New York City apartment, that feels to her like the more profound betrayal.

While The American and her father sit in front of the television, the screen glowing green with night vision footage of bombings in Baghdad, the audience learns of the effects experienced by Iraq citizens as a result of the United States bombardment. The Doctor explains the horrible birth defects and incurable cancers caused by chemicals released from American bombs dropped during the first Gulf War that continue to pollute the local water and food supply. Sammura, the young Iraqi girl, is so accustomed to bombings in her neighborhood that she can recognize the type of missile by the sound it makes as it hurtles toward the ground. Moreover, Umm Ghada describes the devastation of the bombing in 1991 that destroyed the Amiriyya bomb shelter and killed her family. While so many characters in the play speak to life under the constant threat of bombs, in performance their collective experiences are physicalized in Layal's final monologue. As she proclaims her intent to create a mosaic of George W. Bush's face on the floor of the Rashid Hotel in protest of his actions in Iraq, she becomes overwhelmed by the destruction she has seen in her country and the heartbreaking stories of the Iraqi women who feature in her paintings.

Layal starts destroying her studio, smashing pottery and anything else she can grab, becoming more frenzied as she seems to physically embody the bombings in her country: "they're making their own map of / me anyway- sure after every / bomb / first bomb drilling bomb [...] second bomb come inside exactly the same spot [...] third bomb - boil the

people” (*9 Parts of Desire* 60). Both her physicality and her language are repetitive and violent, mirroring the blasts happening throughout Baghdad as she speaks snippets of lines from the play’s other characters. As Layal repeats the words of the other women in the play, she reinforces her assertion as a representative of the characters’ collective trauma: “I am the body that takes the experience” (13). Through Layal’s character, Raffo was able to give voice to an influential Iraqi artist who passed before her time. The fictionalized presence of the real Layla in *9 Parts of Desire* gives her the opportunity to speak for another generation of traumatic women fighting to survive in a country continually at war.

Furthermore, the moment of Layal’s death in the play contradicts the proposed war story of institutionally submissive Iraqi women in need of rescuing. This sequence elucidates, as Krista Hunt and Kim Rygiel assert, that the dominant narratives of war are used “to camouflage a politics of control, that is a politics which depends on identifying outsiders, defined variously through the intersection of gender, race, religious, national, and class-based differences” (15). Within the traditional Western perspective of the war story, Layal would be framed as an oppressed Arab Muslim woman abused by Hussein’s regime and utterly lacking in agency. This process of identification through “othering” allows the American government to maintain narrative control of the conflict. Although she does not survive in the play, however, it would be reductive to categorize Layal as a victim. Through her artwork, she transcends death and memorializes the traumatic stories of Iraqi women, herself included, providing a resistance against social and political injustice that outlasts her corporeal presence.

The addition of the female voice into Iraq’s political history is explored most substantially in the character of Huda, an Iraqi exile living in London. The stage directions indicate that she is a woman in her seventies, a “whiskey drinker with over fifty years of smoking” (*9 Parts of Desire* 22), and she describes herself variously as an intellectual, bourgeois, a communist, and always political. As a character, she functions as the source of institutional knowledge, having witnessed several traumatic wars in Iraq and observed others throughout the world.

Huda is a survivor from a particularly brutal era in Iraq's history, and it is significant that Raffo situates the crux of her story within the context of the rise of the Ba'th Party and Saddam Hussein's ascension to power.

Caruth's assessment of trauma, which is also referenced in the discussion of Umm Ghada, is equally applicable to Huda here: "[t]he traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess" (*Unclaimed Experience* 5). Nevertheless, while Huda continues to struggle with the brutal memories of her past that still haunt her present, however, her appearance in the play is ultimately a commemoration of her survival. She is one of the few who can give voice to events that would otherwise remain unspoken, lost in the primarily male dominated perspective of traditional war stories. Within the context of *9 Parts of Desire*, Huda becomes the political authority that she could never be under Hussein's rule in Iraq. In addition to providing a counter-narrative for the history of the events themselves, she also speaks to the effects of those political actions and policies on the women in her country. Just as Layal gives voice to other Iraqi women through her paintings, Huda returns Iraqi women's wartime traumatic experiences to the country's political history.

Conclusion

In short, as presented in the paper, Raffo skillfully portrayed different stories of women, who are both the subjects of and witnesses to war trauma. Raffo's balanced treatment of the politics surrounding the traumatic events she explores on stage has been applauded. In her assessment of *9 Parts of Desire* for *Theatre Journal*, Maria Beach asserts that the piece is "a provocative work because of the multiplicity of ideas, emotions, and political viewpoints Raffo incorporates into her collective portrait" (102). Charles Isherwood's review in *The New York Times* warns that "Bush foes expecting a polemical broadside will be disappointed" because Raffo approaches her work like "a journalist, not a purveyor of propaganda" (Isherwood). This is not to say that the play avoids criticism of the actions taken by Saddam Hussein or American military operations during the Gulf and Iraq Wars. As evidenced here, Raffo's text does not

soften the horrors of trauma that pervade everyday life in Iraq as she describes the brutal rapes of women, bombs that vaporize entire families, and the children who play with stray bullets tipped in depleted uranium. Raffo's evenhanded treatment of the play's perspective allows her to achieve a revolutionary act through the insertion of women's voices into the traumatic narrative of politics and power in Iraq.

Raffo's presentation of distinct and individual stories maintains the integrity of each character's memories. Raffo has stated that she did not specifically set out to create a one-woman show and was simply concerned with "telling a story in a structure that 'heightens what is being said,'" but to achieve that she needed to find "a form that matched the function of the collected consciousness and spirit of one person playing nine Iraqi women in what she calls 'a psychic civil war on stage' (Najjar 210). *9 Parts of Desire* bears theatrical witness to overlooked political and social crises. It is the amalgamation of traumatic and diasporic experiences within this solo-performance that challenges the prevailing master narratives.

Raffo resists such master narratives by challenging stereotypical representations of Arab and Muslim women in the media as well as in official government communications, and she asserts the significance of her wartime roles as civilians, mothers, activists, and survivors through intentionally gendered performance. Although Miriam Cooke was writing in the mid-1990s about the development of women's war stories during the preceding decades, her analysis of the significance of such counter-narratives remains applicable to Raffo's *9 Parts of Desire*. She observes:

Women in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s recognize the social possibilities inherent in political resistance and bring to their war participation the awareness that if political victory is to have any meaning at all, it must entail social transformation. Armed with this awareness, these women improvise ways of participating that are unlike those of their male counterparts, ways that do not negate their identities as women [...] These women write out of their own experiences, transforming the meanings others have traditionally

attached to what they have done and to who they are, demanding recognition at the time of participation. (11)

Raffo's "improvised participation" in recent wars is accomplished through her solo performance, all of which foreground her experience as Arab and Muslim American woman during times of conflict. The female perspective of the play's creator, as well as the singular focus on female characters in the play engenders war narratives in a way that gives voice to women who had previously been excluded from the story or used only to promote a political agenda. Together they destabilize the meanings that have been constructed on their bodies by both governmental and media forces, revising the representation of Arab and Muslim women on stage in an effort to challenge broader public perception. It is likely that only through hindsight will we be able to determine whether or not Raffo's *9 Parts of Desire* truly influenced the kind of social transformation referenced by Cooke, but there is no doubt that her solo performance has put to rest any concerns about the viability of contemporary political theatre. By staging resistance to hegemonic narratives, the multiplicity of Raffo's voice and experience demonstrates that there is no single knowable truth when it comes to the history of war.

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