



PROJECT MUSE®

**Local and Transnational Dialogues on Memory and Violence in
Jamaica and Toronto: Staging Letters from the Dead among the
Living**

Honor Ford-Smith

Canadian Theatre Review, Volume 148, Fall 2011, pp. 10-17 (Article)

Published by University of Toronto Press

DOI: 10.1353/ctr.2011.0080



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/ctr/summary/v148/148.ford-smith.html>



Local and Transnational Dialogues on Memory and Violence in Jamaica and Toronto: Staging *Letters from the Dead* among the Living

by Honor Ford-Smith

If there is such a thing as social memory, then as Paul Connerton reminds us, “we are likely to find it in the social ceremony” (4) since “images of the past commonly legitimate a social order” (Connerton 12). The series of performances that comprise *Letters from the Dead* are interventions in social memory across a range of locations. They stage ceremonies of mourning for those many would like to forget, creating a symbolic space for connecting criminal and innocent; individual and social; global and local, and colonial past and neoliberal present. The performances attempt to create dialogue between communities of mourning. Supported by less spectacular forms of everyday intervention carried out by organizations working for social justice, they raise questions about a global order in which whole populations, deemed disposable, forage for survival while a few achieve unimaginable wealth (Giroux 175).

Below I describe performances of *Letters from the Dead*, their context, iconography, and the dialogue they generate, explaining that they start from the assumption that contemporary urban violence is related to the renewal and re-composition of old imperial hierarchies globally, and that this complicates easy assumptions about criminality, innocence, guilt, power, violence, and of course ideas about what to “fix.” I suggest that facilitating performances of memory and mourning can generate dialogue between communities facing violence in different contexts and lead to shared insights and new forms of solidarity.

The Toronto performance

Letters from the Dead was first performed near the spot where a young white Canadian woman was killed outside Toronto’s downtown shopping mall, the Eaton Centre. The



Letters from the Dead in downtown Toronto 2007. (l-r): Leonarda Carranza, Danielle Smith, and Tanisha Sri Bhaggiyadatta.
Photo by Errol Young

performance was a response to the publication of images of youth killed in urban violence in that city under the grim front-page headline, “2005 Year of the Gun. Is this the End?” (“2005”). The publication shocked communities of colour because the media flurry took place only after the death of the young woman. Her murder was clearly dreadful, but the uproar in the media contrasted with the silence around the murder of racialized youths in cities across North America, demonstrating that there is inequality even in death.

The performance began with a funeral procession that brought the ghosts from Aboriginal, African Canadian, Latino, Asian, and working-class white communities into a space from which they had been erased. Kara Springer, who designed the event, built a coffin lined with repeating images of dead youth. Four ghosts painted grey and white carried the coffin. Behind them, three women in black held each other and wept. Image corrals juxtaposed images of street violence with war and invasion by the US or its allies as the ghosts lowered the coffin onto the sidewalk. The mourners placed memorabilia beside



Performers writing the names of the dead on the sidewalk outside the central shopping mall in downtown Toronto in 2006.
Photo by Kara Springer

it while the ghosts chalked the names of the dead on the sidewalk and then handed letters from the dead to audience members and asked them to read them aloud to the gathering. In warnings for the living, the letters told of disappointed hopes. One letter, written by Leonarda Carranza, began, “I want you to remember me the way I was the morning we left El Salvador for Canada—smiling and full of hope. Don’t remember me lifeless, a bullet in my head, blood on my face. Don’t remember me as I was in the newspaper—a portrait of violence.” After the performance, as the procession receded, the shoppers walked away—stepping on the names of youth, slowly erasing them.

The ceremony brought images of death into the world of consumption—disrupting habit, inscribing the fragile traces of the lives of forgotten youth on the commercial cityscape, and questioning the global social relations that underlie urban violence. Two years later in Kingston, Jamaica, this intervention was transformed into a commemorative walk when 300 participants walked across the borders of communities in conflict, honouring the victims of urban violence from all spaces.

Toward an iconography of memory and mourning as protest

In 2008 the murder rate in Jamaica reached sixty per 100,000—one of the highest in the world (“UNODC Homicide Statistics”). The dead are mainly young working-class men and women. This violence has affected so many close to me that creating *Letters* seemed an obvious way to mourn its personal and social costs while building a dialogue that rejects moralistic blame and attends to the global nature of the issue. How can we explain why impoverished and working class youth of colour are drawn into violence against each other in places as varied as Jamaica, El Salvador, Colombia,

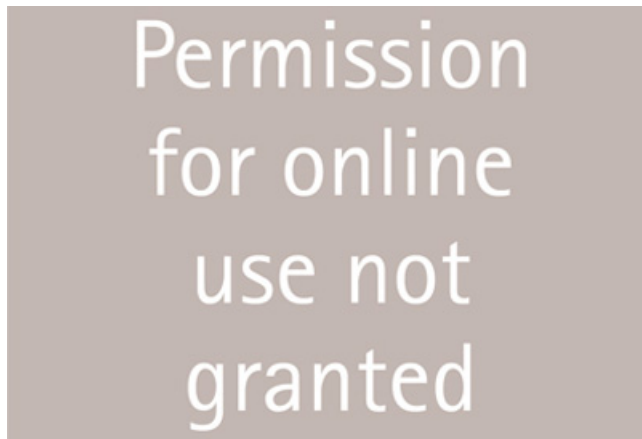
the US, Brazil, and Canada? The expansion of “youth violence” in inner cities around the world is so widespread that it is impossible to explain it as a “natural” phenomenon or a “personal” choice. Perhaps it can best be understood in relation to persistent old scripts of power and new manifestations of these as a result of the reorganization of work, production, wealth, and communication globally. Scholars observe that new forms of imperialism have developed over old structures (cf. Bienefeld, Harvey *The New Imperialism*, Razack)¹. Communities affected by urban violence are often those that have histories of colonial dispossession, cold war conflict, and cultural marginalization. Under neoliberalism, as economies have opened up to highly mobile capital and old forms of wage work disappear, access to weapons has become a means to entrepreneurship and participation in informal commercial networks. *Letters* intervenes in the forgetfulness that normalizes violence by dramatizing its cost to individuals who are victims of violence because they are members of particular social/racial groups.

Commemoration becomes a protest against the human cost of neoliberalism.

Commemorative performances that publicly mourn the wasted lives of hundreds of people can be a form of protest against the human cost of neoliberalism. Recognition of the social suffering caused by violence can lead to reflection and dialogue about the complex social and political causes of that loss (Riaño-Alcalá “Encounters” 5–6). Collective public mourning in this context can act as a form of protest against the political economy of violence, as long as it recognizes the collective nature of the injury done. Mourning and grief can create opportunities for critical social and political reflection—and ultimately reparation if communities marked by violence engage in dialogue, comparing their situations across local and national borders.

Ideology moulds what it is possible to say and not say about power.

Conceptually, *Letters* drew on imagery from social movements in which commemoration becomes a protest against neoliberalism. We linked this to the symbolism of popular street memorials and Caribbean spirituality. We drew on the protest imagery of mourners like the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina who publicly questioned the role of the military in the disappearance of over 30,000 in Argentina’s



Madres de la plaza de Mayo with supporters and images of the desaparecidos in Buenos Aires.

Photography from “En Negro y Blanco: desde el Cordobazo al Juicio de Juntas” (2008) presented by Pablo Cerolini, Centro Cultural “El Cabildo,” www.embajada-argentina.org.py/V2/2008/10/se-cumplen-25-anos-del-retorno-a-la-democracia.



A commemorative Thanksgiving table from the Revival tradition. The lit candles and drinks in different colours represent particular spiritual properties.

Photo by Camille Turner

Dirty War. The images of the weekly walks of middle-aged and elderly women wearing white scarves and carrying photographs of their missing children is a statement of the power of ideology to mould what it is possible to say and not say about power in the context of state violence. Where words could not critique power, the mothers silently subverted official narratives of memory by refusing to allow the state to kill memories of their children and of alternatives to military dictatorship. To accomplish this, they turned the conventional caring role of iconic mothers and housewives into the role of active and critical mothers of nation (Taylor).

Images of these and other vigils are compelling statements about the performance of collective memory as enactments of opposition to the imposition of power through vio-

lence. They have migrated across borders, becoming a global template for women in protest against state violence. They are recalled in images of the disappeared in Colombian protests and street theatre, in the work of Women in Black against the occupation of Palestine, and in Rwandan and other memorials of violent conflict. *Letters from the Dead* recreated elements of this by developing a participatory structure through which community members could cut and mix this visual language with other influences. Popular street memorials made up of memorabilia like artificial flowers, toys, shoes, or notes to the dead were combined with funeral programs and images and colours from African diasporic spirituality. Through their choice of colours (red and black), Jamaican marchers gestured to the historic role of spirituality as a covert site for storing unwritten memory and creating alternative futures. In this way, local and global iconographies of memorialization were placed into visual dialogue to provoke comparisons between what we share and don't share in our different geographies.

Toward a dialogue about the dead among the living: Creating the Jamaican performance

Before the event, with support from Sistren (Sisters) Theatre Collective, the Peace Management Initiative and others active in the peace movement,² we shared ideas and held workshops in communities affected by fighting. Folks explored memories of the years of violence, creating community letters to the dead. They wrote expressing their grief and lost hopes to their loved ones. Later, they discussed the issues that emerged. One woman who had lost all of her children to violence spoke of her complete isolation, of shutting herself in her house, of leaving her yard and being completely disoriented on a street where she had lived for years. Her story shows how violence can lead to alienation from neighborhood and community, how it multiplies, turning those we care for to enemies and familiar spaces to containers of terror. For several, forgetting is an attempt to cope with the pain of loss, but it is also a way to avoid the desire for revenge triggered by remembering the injury and death of loved ones.

Forgetting is an attempt to cope with the pain of loss, but it is also a way to avoid the desire for revenge triggered by remembering.

The discussions of everyday violence raised the troubled question of who and what should be remembered and reminded us of the deeply contested memories of events lead-

ing to the present. Cycles of revenge and reprisal that claim the lives of children in targeted community are the least complicated to memorialize. But should we remember only the dead who are "innocent" and ignore those who may be "guilty" of wrongdoings? Is grief and recognition of the dead who have been criminalized something to be ashamed of? What can we learn from this?

For the middle class, Jamaica, like Canada, is a liberal democracy, but for those in the inner city, liberal freedoms enshrined in the UN Charter of Human Rights are repeatedly violated by state forces as well as by so-called gangs. Police do not report or account publicly for those they kill. For the urban poor, this is tantamount to an endorsement of extrajudicial execution and is linked to the manipulation of state forces by political and economic elites. In other words both the state and the so-called gangs are to be feared. As Horace Levy, Jamaican peace activist, argues, the word "gang" is completely inadequate to convey the difference between corner crews of unemployed youths and highly organized illegal transnational networks (Personal interview).

But should we remember only the dead who are "innocent" and ignore those who may be "guilty" of wrongdoings? Is grief and recognition of the dead who have been criminalized something to be ashamed of?

Memory is also heavily gendered. One woman pointed out that the young men remembered in memorial street murals in urban communities are rarely selected by community consensus. Area leaders immortalize their crew members as heroic street soldiers and mark their turf with their murals. She proposed that we remember those who contribute to the life of the community, and that communities decide this collectively. The caring work of women could therefore be remembered and memorialized—not just the lives of men who are crew members or fallen street soldiers.

Letters puts the losses of the living into dialogue with the dreams of the dead.

These issues raise the question of what we use memory for. We remember the thousands of wasted lives so as to reimagine a human community in which all lives can have value in the present. *Letters* puts the losses of the living into dialogue with the dreams of the dead. It enacts how violence transforms community by eroding the reciprocal relationships

that sustain life. Mbala, a Jamaican artist working on the 2009 performance, commented in a preparatory workshop: “What’s important to remember is what the act of remembering means. You remember how valuable life is. It is part of a process of realizing that we the living, we have value as well. Our lives mean something.”

His words remind us that the violent events that brought the Americas into modernity occurred because the lives of Africans and Aboriginal people were categorized by European invaders as “less than human” (Mbala Personal interview). This past has never been laid to rest because its cruel legacies persist in spite of efforts at change. It haunts

Our lives mean something.

the present in the persistent repetition of racialized/gendered and other acts of disrespect and systemic exclusion that reproduce racialized/class trauma. As Fanon shows, lack of recognition across social/racial difference leads to identity formation based on alienation. This explodes into violence toward those from whom the injured subject struggles to differentiate himself or herself—but who stubbornly remain a mirror of the subject’s injured self. Reflecting on deep layers of social memory demonstrates how deeply ideas of justice and injustice are intertwined with histories of power that give rise to contradictory ideas about innocence/guilt and power. Mapping the temporal routes of memory allows us to peel back the complex historical geology that shapes the present. Put more hopefully perhaps, these acts reveal the sites where psychic, personal, social, political, and economic reparations need to take place if ancient injuries are to heal.

In workshops, some found it hard to share their experiences publicly because they did not want their individual suffering to become a spectacle. Nevertheless, they wanted the society at large to pay attention to the enormous social waste that marks everyday life. As a result, participants chose not to read their personal stories. Rather than sensationalizing their pain for voyeuristic others, they cut and mixed different stories, writing collectively-created letters that mixed moments of hope and caring alongside anger and loss. Then they gave them to others to read.

The Commemorative walk and performance at the Monument for the Children

The performance in Kingston on 3 June 2009 vividly dramatized enormous collective loss. Women, men, and children gathered in a churchyard in Hannah Town. Wearing black, heads tied with red cloth, each person bore witness to the devastating effects of violence. Working with Kara Springer, they had selected images of those they had lost, enlarged



Community members carrying images of the dead assemble with marshals outside a shop in Hannah Town, Kingston, Jamaica.

Photo by Deborah Thomas

them and pasted them onto cardboard. *The Starbroek Times* in Guyana carried a report of the afternoon:

As we prepared to take to the streets for the march that afternoon, we were surrounded by faces of the dead mounted on placards, buttons with pictures of family members were pinned to T-shirts and pictures of loved ones hung on cords around the neck. On a poster held up by one elderly woman, an infant who died in urban violence stared out solemnly at those gathered in the churchyard.

As the procession began its trek through downtown Kingston, participants formed a long line, bearing thirty-five yards of red cloth that rippled as they walked, symbolizing the blood of the thousands killed in community wars over the last decades. Two young women dressed in white—cultural workers from Toronto—performed as ghosts, urging the marchers on. Women sang spirituals punctuated by clapping. Some carried a copy of the Toronto coffin, linking violence in Canada to Kingston through use of repeating images of the black youth murdered in Toronto. Onlookers—many of whom asked questions or greeted familiar faces—were urged to join us and some did.

The ‘walk’ culminated at the site of the Secret Garden or Monument to the Children, dedicated to those killed under violent and tragic circumstances since 2000. The bronze sculpture depicts the face of a weeping child, with names of the dead inscribed around its perimeter; almost three sides of the monument had been filled with hundreds of names, children ranging in age from a few months to seventeen years.

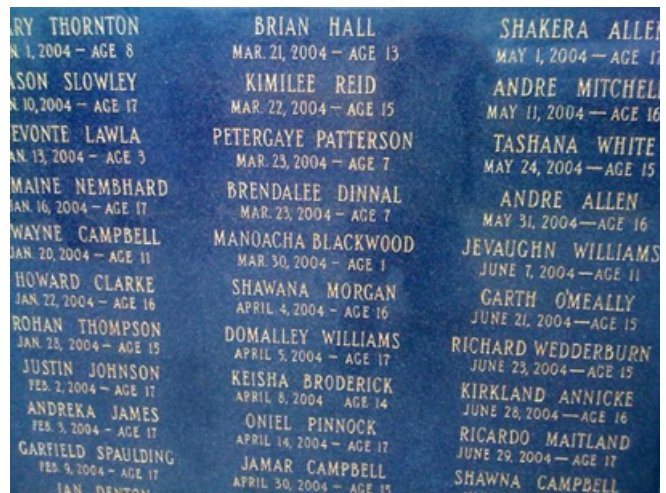
As a young woman sang a tribute to the dead children, the red cloth was laid out on the pavement and placards and mementos laid along ... (its) ... length. Sistren member Afolashade invited performers to the micro-



Community members carrying images of the dead assemble with marshals outside a shop in Hannah Town, Kingston, Jamaica.
Photo by Deborah Thomas

phones to share the letters they had written to their dead. Audience members read letters aloud. Music by reggae musicians accompanied and witnesses were invited to walk round the cloth. People pointed out faces they knew. There was silence as people circled the monument to read the names of children. One woman who had been leading us in song along the march collapsed on the sidewalk in grief, surrounded by other women trying to comfort her.

It was by no means a perfect affair; for some the triggering of the memories was deeply unsettling. In one community, youth were too terrified of the consequences of crossing community borderlines to participate. For the organizations that supported the walk the work must go on, for it is in these every day, difficult and less spectacular ways that real change is made possible. But that afternoon, *Letters from the Dead* was a moment that deliberately moved across hard lines of political, ideological and group affiliation, echoing other such efforts in the past and urging passersby to consider the more recent violence—and in particular the increasing numbers of women and children among the dead and wounded in the last four or five years—against the backdrop of the neglect and destruction of social safety nets. The Monument to the Children is a stark reminder of the destruction of the future, and of a society's collective responsibility as guardians of its young, custodians of hope. In a growing climate of individualization amidst deepening social and economic exclusion, people took to the streets for a few hours in June to show that collective strategies and responses were not only necessary but still possible, knitting together the city space in public mourning, commemorating those whose lives have been shattered by violence as belonging to all and as deserving of support across all hardened and deadly divisions.
 (Ford-Smith and Trotz)



Monument to the children: "Secret Garden" in downtown Kingston.
Photo by Deborah Thomas

Postscript

Out of this work a solo theatrical piece performed by Jamaican actress Carol Lawes has been created and has been performed in Jamaica, Bogota, Colombia, the US, and the UK. The ongoing work is also recorded on a developing weblog, www.forevermissed.wordpress.com. Images of popular RIP murals from the walls of Kingston's communities, video clips of the march, discussions and links to organizations working

Permission for online use not granted

Passersby look at images of the dead at the culmination of the commemorative walk in Kingston.

Photo by Tiumion Fross

Collective strategies and responses were not only necessary but still possible, knitting together the city space in public mourning.

on peace, justice, and memorialization are all there. The discussions these generate aim to nurture global solidarities where people explore new cracks and openings for performing alternatives. Transnational links among the victims of violence can take people beyond the fragmented, walled spaces where they are often set against one another in cycles of fear, recrimination, and revenge. Mourning collective violence is public work that demands community support—for it is not just a matter of creating personal closure, but also a way to link memory and forgetting with social reconciliation and reparation in the present.

Notes

- 1 Harvey reminds us that neoliberalism is an institutional framework that valorizes private property rights, the opening up of expanding markets to free trade, and the rapid movement of capital. Often violently, it re-establishes conditions for capital accumulation, dismantling the redistributive mechanisms of the state, reorganizing the international racial and sexual divisions of labour, and eroding notions of the public good in the interest of notions of individual. This is accompanied by the development of the global financial sector, facilitated by technologies of information that compress time and space. Alongside a growing gap between rich and poor, a new class has emerged with enormous fortunes in media and information technology, biotechnology, and retailing. He draws on statistics collected in the Human Development Reports of the UNDP of 1999 and 1996 to assert that “the net worth of the 358 richest people in 1996 was equal to the combined income of the poorest 45 per cent of the world’s population—2.3 billion people and the assets



Carol Lawes performing *Vigil for Roxie*, a solo performance in the series *Letters from the Dead*.

Photo by Honor Ford-Smith

- of the top three billionaires were by 1998 more than the combined GNP of all least developed countries and their 600 million people” (*A Brief History of Neoliberalism* 34–35).
- 2 I gratefully acknowledge the support of the following: The Sistren Theatre Collective and the Peace Management Initiative (PMI) of Jamaica, which mediates violent conflict; in particular we would like to thank those members of PMI and Sistren who marched with us; we also thank the members of Jamaica Constabulary Force who protected us; the office of the KSAC and the Mayor of Kingston who gave permission for the march; Lana Finikin, Joan French, Carol Lawes, Horace Levy, Jahsen Levy, Mbala, Colin Smickle, and Alissa Trotz who were advisors, reporters, organizers, and comrades; women from Hannah Town, Rockfort, Grants Pen, and Denham Town Cultural Groups; the Schools of Drama and Music at the Edna Manley College of the Visual and Performing Arts, and finally, thanks to the Community Arts Practice program of the Faculty of Environmental Studies, Mayworks Festival where *Letters* was performed in Toronto, and the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada who funded the research on “Memory, Urban Violence and Performance in Urban Jamaica.”

Works Cited

- Bienefeld, Manfred. “The New World Order: Echoes of a new imperialism.” *Third World Quarterly* 15.1 (1994): 31–58. Print.
- Connerton, Paul. *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989. Print.

- Ford-Smith, Honor and Alissa Trotz. "Taking it to the Streets II: Commemorating Victims of Violence in Jamaica" *Starbroek News*. 28 Sept. 2009. Web. 12 July 2011.
- Giroux, Henry A. "Reading Hurricane Katrina: Race, Class, and the Biopolitics of Disposability." *College Literature* 33.3 (2006): 171–196. Print.
- Harvey, David. *The New Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005. Print.
- . *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006. Print.
- Levy, Horace. Personal conversation. 26 June 2009.
- Mbala. Personal conversation. 28 June 2009.
- Razack, Sherene. *Dark Threats and White Knights: The Somalia Affair, Peacekeeping and the New Imperialism*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2004. Print.
- Riaño-Alcalá, Pilar. "Encounters with Memory and Mourning: Public Art as Collective Pedagogy of Reconciliation." *Public Acts: Curriculum and Desires of Social Change*. Eds. Erica R. Meiners and Jose Francisco Ibáñez-Carrasco. New York: Routledge, 2004. 164–188. Print.
- Taylor, Diana. "Trapped in Bad Scripts: The Mothers of the Plaza De Mayo." *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's Dirty War*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1997. 183–222. Print.
- "2005 Year of the Gun?; Is this the End?" *The Toronto Star* 31 Dec. 2005, met ed.: A1+. Print.
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. "UNODC Homicide Statistics." *Unodc.org*. 2008. Web. 19 May 2011.

Honor Ford-Smith is Associate Professor in Community and Environmental Arts at the Faculty of Environmental Studies, York University. Her most recent publication is *3 Jamaican plays: a postcolonial anthology (1977–1987)* published by Paul Issa Publications in Kingston, Jamaica in 2011.