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Beatrice Allegranti and Jonathan Wyatt

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# Witnessing Loss: A Feminist Material-Discursive Account

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Beatrice Allegranti<sup>1</sup> and Jonathan Wyatt<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

In this article, the authors describe and inquire into an interdisciplinary, funded, practice-based research project that investigated the experience of loss following the death of someone close. The research took place during 2010-2012 and involved several layers of investigation: facilitating workshops that combined dance movement psychotherapy and writing; creating a screendance; and interviewing participants and each other. Drawing, in particular, on the “new empiricist” theory of Karen Barad and others, and Rosi Braidotti’s call for “bodily materialism,” the authors focus on the material-discursive “entanglement” of the process of witnessing: how witnessing, throughout, within, and between the multiple aspects of a complex and affecting project, enacted a socially and ethically engaged scholarship.

## Keywords

feminist qualitative research, feminist methodologies, methodologies, arts-based inquiry, methods of inquiry, video, dance and performance technologies, narrative

*Witnessing the premier screendance,<sup>1</sup> Your Story Calls Me, London March 2012*

Beatrice



*I'm agitated. I can't decide what to wear. An evening at the Oscars or a funeral? I settle for grey and black with a splash of emerald green. I'm surprised and delighted that*

*people arrive with flowers. Someone gives me a bunch of lilies. So many flowers. Seated amongst everyone who has contributed to this project as well as seventy others, I watch myself on the screen. Searching. For you. Still. I am becoming undone by grief (Butler, 2004; Freud, 1917). Your absence matters in a way that is incomprehensibly inarticulable. You are present within me, yet I can't touch you (Derrida, 2003). This was a realization the moment you took your last breath. The moment I felt you dead in my arms. And now, I face myself on the screen and although I remind myself of you and I see you in me; you are nevertheless absent from the living of my everyday life. And what is absent within me?*

*Mater, what is left of me? You no longer occupy the physical spaces around me, your mass is not perceptible yet, you move, constantly and capriciously in the spaces in and around my body as I dance, as I witness myself on the screen.*

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### Jonathan



*I am not sure where to position myself. When the film starts I lose sight of where Beatrice is. I'm standing at the back, becoming overwhelmed, becoming lost, seeing and hearing and feeling with the size of the figures on the screen, the scale of the sound, the timbre of voices, the sparseness and the lyricism of the music, the green and the red, the sky and the grass, the pavements and the walls; sound- and landscapes of the lost and found, reaching towards something, someplace, someone, someones; pulling us in, taking us over, bodies here and there and in-between, present and absent.*

*As the credits creep up the screen, I see their names first, those whom we have lost, before ours. Your name is there. Paul Wyatt. Why? The typescript that spells your name out seems not to tell me about you and who you were.*

*A pause; movement from the audience; a certain lostness. I want to organise and guide, but don't.*

*Twenty minutes later, a group of us gathers to discuss the film. Questions and answers. The shift into words doesn't feel right. I'm irritated and tired. I want to be back where we were, the lights down, people witnessing; there, in the dark, all of us living and loving and losing.*

### Back Story

The screendance, *Your Story Calls Me*, arose out of a three-year-funded<sup>2</sup> practice-based research project, *Moving Voices* that focused on working with people who have experienced the death of a loved one. The project comprised three aspects—workshops, interviews, and a screendance accompanied by a photographic exhibition—each of which felted (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004) one into the other.

In this article, we follow a witnessing thread: how witnessing, throughout, within, and between the multiple aspects of a complex project enacted a scholarship that proposes socio-political intervention (Allegranti, 2011; McLeod, 2001). In so doing, we build on the feminist post-structuralist work of Judith Butler (2004) and the materialist posthumanist work of Karen Barad (2007). Our practices

throughout—as facilitators, film-makers, and researchers—have sought to address the feminist call for a “body materialism” or an “ontology of the body” (Allegranti, 2011; Braidotti, 1996/2011), one that is always immersed in and being produced by a process of becoming (Brians, 2011).

We work with entangled (Barad, 2007) understandings of what it is to be(come), to know, and to lose, and Barad (2007) reminds us that we are always “intra-acting”<sup>3</sup>: entangled in the material-discursive spaces in which we worked and witnessed—the workshop studio, the rehearsal studio, the outdoor film locations, the interview rooms, the performative agents such as the camera (as “seer”), props, and costume.

### This Writing

In this writing, we turn to the interview “data” about loss that was produced with each other and with eight women who participated in the three aspects of the project (workshops, screendance, and interviews). “Data” for us are “what we think with when we think about a topic” (St. Pierre, 2011, p. 621); in other words, they are *all* of this. The film and photography is “data”; it shows aspects of how loss matters, the ways in which loss is “evidenced.” The interviews that followed the making of the film are data: Together with participants, we “diffracted” (Barad, 2007) on the workshop and on producing the screendance in a way that did not take play the “god trick” (Haraway, 2008) but which saw the process as “onto-epistemological” (Barad, 2007), as being with and embodied in the event of “gathering” and “analyzing.”

The interviews took place following the workshops and screendance production; therefore, prior to the interviews, all our stories, movements, and words were already imprinted on all of us. So, when approaching and undertaking the “gathering” of “data” the process was always already *intracorporeal*: It is within and outside us and we are within and outside others. This mattering of the data led us to inquire into two entangled aspects: (a) how material-discursive possibilities emerged for all of us in the process of witnessing and being witnessed during the workshops and (b) how these possibilities demonstrated the corporeal co-implication between the witness, the person witnessed, and the person “lost.”

### Witnessing With/In the Workshops

*The light spills through the windows on three sides. Like a greenhouse: a rectangular goldfish bowl, open to the gaze of occasional passers-by. “Life and Death” (Balanesco, 2005) echoes in the studio. The strings begin, cello and viola speaking across each other; steady, violins above, together, back and forth, the melodies joining, moving apart, calling.*

*We move with and apart from each other on the grey linoleum floor; sit, watch, listen, write, read. Cold February light slants through shapes making patterns between bodies that lie, twist and stretch; fists that pound the floor. It glances off silver pens that write on white, torn paper.*

With 17 participants<sup>4</sup>—all women—some known to us, some not, and recruited through a call circulated among our professional milieu—the workshops took place over two weekends in 2011 and provided an experience of working with loss in a creative psychotherapeutic process involving dance, movement, and writing.

### **The Presence of Others**

We sit in the studio with Alex, the doors open to Spring, the three of us recalling the last session of the workshop. Alex tells us,



The Sunday, when we all witnessed each other's . . .  
—and I couldn't move anymore because that would have been too exposing—

but I could then use my words,

and to have those heard was massively important because it validated it.  
And it felt like I'd got to that point because of

all the other points

that we'd all got to.<sup>5</sup>

We, Beatrice (a dance movement psychotherapist, choreographer, filmmaker, researcher) and Jonathan (a counselor, teacher, and writer), provided a structure in which participants worked with their experience of loss through writing and felt-sense dance movement improvisation (Allegranti, 2009, 2011), in cycles: initially alone (although together in the same space), and, as the weekend progressed, alongside and in front of others as witnesses (White, 2000). The cycles of moving and writing offered a temporal shift, an oscillation, a rhythm, between being alone with loss to being with others and their losses.

We sought to open a space with and for others who had experienced the death of someone close, to discover what happens as the pen shifts in our hand, as we dance and move, with and between gestures, with and between each other; as we perform ourselves and our losses into being. The material-discursive practices of transitioning between writing and moving—as if “writing” is not always “moving” and “moving” not always “writing”—and between writing, moving, and performing.

Maura, speaking with us on another Spring day in the studio identifies the power of this witnessing, of being present with each other as we told, showed, performed:



I just felt that between [my partner and] me . . .  
it was really,  
it was very moving.

At the time I remember thinking [gasps] and feeling quite amazed by it, actually,  
at the time . . .  
It was a second movement experience, solo, with me as a witness.  
It was on the twentieth of February. Yes, and it was:  
“standing still, motion muted, let the breath breeze, time passes punctually in its wake.”

And I remember that she started to do this very slow swinging movement—  
I mean, I didn’t know what she was going to do—

But just that interplay of words with her movement, and one was affecting the other.

I think that was very apparent, maybe also to those people who were witnessing it.  
It was very powerful.  
I would say that it was really so powerful, more powerful than I would have imagined.

And I felt all the witnessing was like that.  
When [my partner] witnessed me, [exclamation] that took me on another journey . . .

Alex’s and Maura’s words call us to respond to the power—and limitations—of *witnessing*, of being present with each other as we told, showed, performed, and responded to our embodied stories during the workshops, the filming, the screening and our subsequent writing. We recognize in the layers and cycles of witnessing we have referred to something of the rituality of anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff’s (1982) “definitional ceremony”—a formal, structured process whereby people’s stories are told and heard by “outsider witnesses.” She describes definitional ceremony as dealing with,

the problems of invisibility and marginality; they are strategies that provide opportunities for being seen and in one’s own terms, garnering witnesses to one’s worth, vitality, and being. (p. 267)

Loss and grief are often experienced as hidden and lonely, and being given permission to bring our experience to others and to have them take it in, work, write, and move with it, proved a significant motif throughout this project.

### *What Can't Be Said*

Through the workshops and the filmmaking, we sought to create opportunities for the inexpressible to emerge. In her interview with Beatrice, Silja speaks of how the process of working with her loss through movement enabled her to find words she hadn't previously found—the “languages of the unsayable” (Rogers et al., 1999)—about the loss of her stepfather. After a dance movement experience in the workshop, she sat to write,

Suddenly it just became words,  
and then I realised,  
“Oh, that's what it is.” . . .  
it's the language before just putting into a language

The material and the embodied e/merged with the discursive, finding form with and between the (e)motion of dance and movement and the (e)motion of writing; “part of the universe making itself intelligible to another part” (Barad, 2007, p. 176).

### **Tangled: Witnessing the Other With/In Ourselves**

*She leaps and then tumbles, loose, onto the floor; and again, leaps and tumbles; and again—and we sense the loss and the lost in the displacement of air. Something made visible, audible; something sensed. Someone sensed.*

Our becomings are intersubjective—contingent on mutual recognition: being seen and being moved by the other (Benjamin, 1998; Reddy, 2012). As psychoanalytical, developmental, and cognitive theory explains, our early encounters are corporeally formative in terms of the development of bodily boundaries, bodily image, and cognitive schema, and these aspects may be reinforced or in tension with our social scripts. Building on this, during the workshops, we were drawn to how the process of witnessing speaks to this intersubjective process through a kinesthetic engagement with movement and writing.

In her interview, Silja goes says that, one person who witnessed her movement told her,



She [could] still see the connection.  
The connection is strong, and she can see the love.

And I really just . . . [clapping sound] I didn't realise you can see it from . . .  
well of course you can see it from the dance and movement, [laughs]  
but didn't I really think, “Oh yeah, you can actually see it.”

And it really struck me when she, when she said it to me,  
that she actually saw my relationship with my father.

On hearing this, Beatrice responded,

So there was something made visible when you were witnessed?

With echoes of Myerhoff's "definitional ceremony," we suggest that this material-discursive process allowed for participants to re-story aspects of their lives and, in so doing, to resist and disrupt the power of established, dominant narratives (see White, 2000). Within narrative therapy, definitional ceremony, is restricted to the verbal realm, with a protagonist speaking of their experience with a few carefully chosen others as "outsider witnesses," who offer back to the protagonist words that strike them, images that come to them as they listen, the echoes in their own lives, and where the protagonist's stories take them, how are they "transported" (Leahy, O'Dwyer, & Ryan, 2012).

This "transport" or being moved elsewhere in life was illustrated by Silja's account and played out in the workshops in the material embodied as well as the discursive, realm. As Jonathan relayed to Beatrice in our interview,

One of the qualities of the workshops that was very powerful  
was the observing of and being participant to,  
participating in,  
being a witness to people's stories.

I was wondering about . . .  
the extent to which the presence of witnesses allows more to be told

than we tell ourselves

The structure of the weekend workshops involved shifting, carefully and slowly, in cycles between dance, movement, and writing, alone at first, then with one other as witness and, finally, with the group as witness. We conceptualize this gradual opening to the others as providing a processual holding for participants toward a corporeal intersubjective process of mutual recognition (Allegranti, 2011; Benjamin, 1998), where we come to not only see ourselves in the other but also kinesthetically experience the other in ourselves.

### *Ourselves in the Other*

*Red silk hangs on the pillars that stand on the broad stretch of lawn. Pillars on a section of mock Greek temple that seems not to belong.<sup>6</sup> Where the grass finishes the wall drops to a valley and the wooded Surrey hills beyond.*

*At the silken pillars, a figure in a violet dress treads close, running her fingers along and between material and stone. Stops. Repeats. Stops. Repeats. Gentle touches as she drags her hand behind her, practising the movement until the camera is content.*



I very much felt that, that kind of togetherness  
 and being mindful every time of what was happening  
 in the sense of myself in relation to other people.  
 For example, I remember doing some movement in the first workshop,  
 and I had my eyes closed,

and then I came upon somebody,

who was sort of curled up on the floor,

and my curiosity was, oh,

I wonder what part of myself is being held in

that, and vice versa,  
 for the other person and just being mindful of that,  
 and, and

sometimes something would come out and sometimes it wouldn't.

Theresa attended both workshops, the first being, she described, like a preparation—a “testing of the water” and “some sort of rehearsal”—for the second, something she talks about soon after this quote. Here, with all three of us seated on large cushions in the studio, Theresa has just been telling us about how she'd approached the first workshop feeling open to what may occur, and how she held the groups “dear”: “everybody is a part of the whole, so that when I come in I bring a part of the group, and somebody else and somebody else.” Anne Marie echoes Theresa,



It feels very difficult to talk about my own experience  
 because it feels so inter-linked  
 and so I think my own . . . my sensation to body . . . bodily sensation  
 came more when I was working . . .  
 when I was observing

and sort of intuiting about somebody else.

Both Theresa and Anne Marie seem to us to be speaking here of co-implication—and more: They are referring to the material engagement of witnessing, its kinesthetic, corporeal intersubjectivity, a sense of being tied into one another's lives, into one another's becomings. And, further than this, co-implicated not just with the human but with the material “other”—the smooth, gray sprung floor of the studio, the light through the large windows along its three sides, the time of day,



[L]istening to the other . . . involves listening not just to oneself and the other, but to the boat, the river, the stars, the changing weather patterns, the waves, and their co-implication in each other. It listens to changing, emergent thought and reflects on it, is integrally co-implicated in it. (Davies, 2010, p. 57)

Co-implication in this sense extends Benjamin's (1998) account of intersubjectivity and speaks to Barad's concept of intra-action: how we are always caught up in, entangled within, the Deleuzian *haecceity*—the “this-ness” of the moment (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004); not as separate humanistic subjects but a part of a phenomenon. In this sense, we are also vulnerable: we are, from our very beginnings, indebted to the other (Butler, 2004) and to our environment, always already at a loss, so to speak (Wyatt, 2012). When Theresa describes coming upon another participant as they each move to and within their grief, the other both is and is not Theresa echoing Butler's claim that “My body is mine and not mine” (Butler, 2004, p. 21). The experience reminds Theresa of how she needs the “other” to be “herself,” how “we are only ever ourselves from that place within us where the other, the mortal other, resonates” (Derrida, 2003, p. 117).

Perhaps from this *intracorporeal* witnessing of each other's loss, the sense of the other as “within” and “outside” us and ourselves as “within” and “outside” others, the awareness that arises of our utter entanglement with material and human others, is what provides individual and collective—and political—hope.

## Forward Motion: The Politics of Witnessing

We wonder where this witnessing takes us now and how the screendance acts as a material and socio-political intervention that helps us to “see” the material-discursive intra-actions and entanglements of loss. The transition to performance and screen and the impact of the screendance will be addressed fully in another article. Here, we draw attention to the socio-political aspects of witnessing loss and grief in the workshop and the screendance production.

### Beatrice

*Turning my back to the screen I walk towards the hospital room where you lay dying. I feel your bodily presence as we lie close to each other on the bed. The neon sign just outside of your room casts its urgent message: Way Out. A daily reminder. We are already grieving for each other. Knowing that there is no exit from excruciating vulnerability. We are becoming dispossessed by who we are, and know ourselves, and each other to be (Butler, 2004).*

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*A woman lies huddled next to her mother in a hospital bed. In state of disorientation she glances at the small television screen above the bed. Interminable news footage of the Iraq war plays out before the two women. A war that started the day that the mother was diagnosed with cancer. What are the politics of this mourning (Derrida, 2003)? Is a mother's life more grievable than the hundreds and thousands of lives lost in this senseless second gulf invasion? All reason is lost when we deny the conditions of our own and others' vulnerability (Butler, 2004).*

### Jonathan

*I remember being aware of those who'd made the film with us being in the room. They had watched the film for the first time the week before, all of us in a row in a lecture room. The workshops, rehearsals, audio recording the texts, those two long, long weekends (take after take in the rain; abandoning; take after take under a relentless sun; until darkness) had become this, fifteen minutes of light, sound and movement. We sat silent except for our recorded voices, the music not yet added, watching and hearing ourselves, aware of those not with us that evening. Then, tonight—the first public screening in London, they/we were amongst many others who had no history with this project.*

Most understandings and studies of grief see the experience as “individual” rather than as a product of social and political processes. At least within the comfortable, peaceful West, isolated from stark exposure to conflict and mass disease, death—and therefore loss—has become medicalized (e.g., Arney & Bergen, 1984; Walter, 2008) and, more broadly, professionalized (Kellehear, 2007); publicly hidden, if privately ubiquitous (Mellor & Shilling, 1993).

Holst-Warhaft (2000) asserts that the profound emotional experience of grief can threaten social order, and is therefore a challenge to the establishment, which attempts at best to maintain grief as mundane and dull and at worst, to turn grief into a mental disorder (Davies, 2013).

This is the political challenge that Anne Marie hints at as a result of her participation in the workshops and the screen-dance production:

[W]hat really stands out more than anything . . .  
is that sense of loneliness that bereavement brings

and that so many people, I think especially at a young age, have not really been there  
and that whole thing of once you've been there you're in the club,  
like, you just know what it's like.

But, yeah, it's just a very lonely place to be I think  
so there's huge relief in just being with other people that know what it is  
and actually not even necessarily talking to them about your own story  
but just hearing their story,

that is just such, so comforting and really important I think  
and I think relevant to the whole reason that . . . I don't know,

it feels like the whole reason that you did the project,  
this sort of taboo around bereavement and grief

It is not only comfort that witnessing and being witnessed brings, but the potential for change, the possibilities brought by participating in ritual and performative processes. Both in the workshops and the screendance, the lost are brought into a public social arena and their unique autobiographical stories acknowledged.

We are not taking for granted that the narratives and the witnessing process are offered from a position of privilege. For example, there is an inescapable gendered component to this research project and the subsequent screendance production and all of us involved have backgrounds as therapists. Our aspiration is that it is possible, still, for this work to disrupt.

Perhaps witnessing the embodied performances both in the workshops and in the screendance, there is the hope that the witness/spectator is positioned not as a detached observer, but as entangled witness—in this way, bodies can be remade in their meeting with kinesthetic, corporeal sensations, movements, memories, and imaginings which, in turn, offers the capacity to disturb established, “grand” narratives (see White, 2000). As Willis (2009) writes, “(t)he revolutionary possibility of pain lies in rendering docile bodies into disruptive ones” (p. 88). And, it is to this political disruption that Theresa speaks,

This is the third time I've witnessed-seen the film  
But each time I've noticed in my body how much more open it is to the process. And how  
much more my body is open to witnessing everybody else's grief

Everybody else's story

It's almost as if, at the end of the film this time I felt a kind of . . .

Ahhhh

Not that it's over, that I ever feel that grief is over, in that sense  
But it just reminded me of how much I wasn't breathing before. It was really quite  
powerful

And the other point I wanted to make, in terms of the bodily felt experience was . . .  
something was sort of developing whilst I was watching and I couldn't quite verbalise it  
and then as I began to write, it became apparent that it's like . . .

when there's a movement and I keep going back to it, keep going back to it, keep going back to it

then eventually it unravels

Eventually it starts to breathe

So that was the effect of witnessing this time

Also it made me feel as if I want to do more . . . on every level . . . Yeah . . .

It's part of life, it's ongoing

I'll be doing it until I die (gentle laugh)

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### Notes

1. We use the term *screendance* to align with current discourses that identify this emerging hybrid genre wherein the combination of dance and film create a third form (Rosenberg, 2012).
2. UK UnLtd Social Enterprise Grant 2010.
3. Barad (2007) created the neologism of "intra-action" to denote the mutually constitutive process of being within and as part of the world rather than the more familiar use of interaction of separate entities. She explains "the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action" (p. 33).
4. Some participated in both workshops, each of which followed the same structure, and others in just one.
5. We follow Etherington (2004) and others in presenting participants' words in stanza form, which "allows for the disjointed natural breaks and hesitations, more normal in speech, to be maintained" (p. 56).
6. Ponsonby Temple, Froebel College, University of Roehampton: Stones from a neo-classical temple were discovered in 2000. The stones had been safely stored by the Jesuit Priests who had dismantled the temple in the early part of the last century.

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**Jonathan Wyatt** is senior lecturer in counseling and psychotherapy at the University of Edinburgh. His research examines the entanglement of self and other within and beyond the therapeutic assemblage, and troubles what we mean by "self" and "other." His most recent co-authored book is *How Writing Touches: An Intimate Scholarly Collaboration*, published by Cambridge Scholars.