

Notes on Hope

Revisiting *Unmarked* 30 Years Later

Peggy Phelan

This essay originated as a talk I gave at ASTR's November 2023 conference on "Hope."

When *Unmarked* appeared in 1993, it included an Afterword called "Notes on hope—for my students." I conceived of *Unmarked* as a long argument, with each chapter elaborating and developing the central thesis. The Afterword continued that argument, although sections of it employed a different mode of readerly address. Rather than proceeding by scholarly argument and citation, the Afterword employed poetic rhythm and the narrative architecture of the fairy tale to illuminate how and why pedagogy believes so fervently in the future tense. I wanted to propose a pedagogy that instead emphasized teaching's present tense, a mode of educating that accepted, rather than worked against, forgetting, overlooking, and misunderstanding. Or, as I put it in the Afterword, "How can one invent a pedagogy *for* disappearance and loss and not *for* acquisition and control? How can one teach the generative power of misunderstanding in a way they will (almost) understand?" (1993:173). The fairy tale that takes center stage in the Afterword was written for my students generally, but it was motivated by a particularly gifted PhD student who was dying of AIDS while I was writing. Despite his terminal diagnosis, he chose to continue to come to class. His decision to attend our seminars made my interest in the present tense, explored throughout *Unmarked*, even more urgent. Thus, I thought of the Afterword as a kind of real-world example of what it requires to stay alive to the complexity of the always fleeing present tense, rather than blindly acceding to the power of the future tense that most pedagogy employs. While my argument was dedicated to students embedded in the AIDS crisis in the US in the early 1990s, I believe much of it remains all too relevant today, as our students confront global climate disasters, the after(?)-effects of Covid-19, and in the United States, mass shootings, fentanyl overdoses, suicides, and other kinds of early deaths that are now part of campus life.

For better or for worse, however, readers of *Unmarked* were silent about the Afterword and focused instead on the chapter that immediately preceded the Afterword, chapter 7, "The ontology of performance: representation without reproduction." And before long that chapter stood in for the book as a whole. A few years after that, the first paragraph of chapter 7 stood in for the full book:

Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations *of* representations: once it does so it becomes something other than performance. To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays

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UNMARKED
the politics of performance
Peggy Phelan

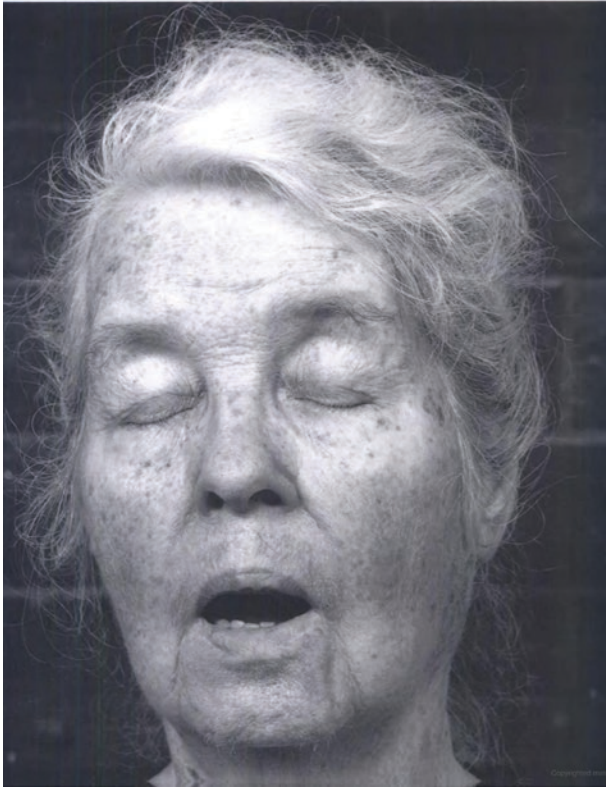


Figure 1. The cover of Peggy Phelan's *Unmarked* (1993), cover image photo of Alice Neel by Robert Mapplethorpe (1984).

vast increases in access to information of all sorts, on the other. I now see genuine advantages to this radical reduction—for example, my many errors in the book's argument have been glossed over and no one has called me to public account for my excessive use of the words “always” and “never.” And in a strange way the nursery rhyme version of *Unmarked* has helped consolidate the larger field of performance theory. During the last 30 years, I have heard and read innumerable people say something to the effect of: “Phelan thinks live performance disappears! I am here to tell you it certainly does not!” Sure, OK. Great, tell us. But most crucially, because readers found a way to reduce the book's argument to a few sentences the argument itself became light enough to carry—or to put it slightly differently, the mini version of my argument helped it stay around. And I remain astonished and grateful that it has.

Nonetheless, I feel sad about the failure of two important aims I had when I was writing. My first grief is rooted in the fact that I wrote *Unmarked* in part because I wanted to amplify the anticapitalist potential of live art; the ephemerality of performance seemed critically important to me precisely because it resisted commodification. Live art's ephemerality, I argued, was a bulwark against the larger violence of late capitalism. However, I failed utterly to advance this claim and I often feel like Wile E. Coyote after the plummeting anvil that always lands on his head flattens him completely. In recent years, we have witnessed powerful collectors, galleries, and museums the world over greedily purchase extraordinary collections of performance art and its documentations with nary a complaint from this field. While I am not blind to the many advantages of this institutionalization of performance art, I nonetheless feel these acquisitions have seriously tamed and defanged the radical possibilities of live art.

and lessens the promise of its own ontology. Performance's being, like the ontology of subjectivity proposed here, becomes itself through disappearance. (1993:146)

And then shortly after that *Unmarked* became a book known for one, or two, sentences.

If representational visibility equals power, then almost-naked young white women should be running Western culture. (10)

Or slimmer still,

Visibility is a trap. (6)

So, while the final chapter in *Unmarked* explored the generative possibilities of the fairy tale for critical arguments, readers handed my book back to me after it had been compressed into a sentence or two. While I had been dreaming that fairy tales could be the basis for critical theory, the real world responded in the compressed narrative of a nursery rhyme: “Jack Spratt can eat no fat and his [unnamed, unmarked] wife can eat no lean.” What a portrait of a marriage that is! No matter, we still have not licked the platter clean.

The slimmed-down Ozempic reading of *Unmarked* was inevitable; a symptom of shorter attention spans on the one hand, and

My second regret stems from calling the last essay an “Afterword,” because I fear that heading rendered it something of an indifferent postscript, a kind of take-it-or-leave-it essay. Maybe the task became one more item on a too long to-do list and weary readers said, “Oh I will read that after I do x or y...” and given that the power of x and y is infinite, it never got read. Or, more depressingly still, maybe my error was calling it “Notes on hope—for my students,” a series of words that designate things that academia often does not value: notes, hope, students. Let me signal my continuing allegiance to all three words: notes, hope, students. I offer these remaining remarks as, again, mere notes, scribbles and scrawls in the margins of this field’s history. Rather than seeing me as the flattened Wile E. Coyote’s avatar, perhaps I can ask you to imagine me now as a ragged gaffer penciling and jotting marks and smudges beneath stage directions composed long ago.

He sits there again in our class. Sullen. Eyes downcast. He says he doesn’t have any, no more hope, not any more. Not now. It’s all gone to hell—the little time, the infected body, the imploding space. Sometimes he yells at us and sometimes we just look at him with nothing to say. He makes things—videos, poems, letters—that explain in meticulous detail why he has had to leave Hope. Like the familiar stories of beseeching lovers narrating their past, his story, history, is full of lies, lacunae, sutured narratives. It’s all composite—a strange autobiographical fairy tale. It repeats in an exact fashion all the conventions of traditional Romance—his youth, her seduction, his dreams, her abrupt betrayals, his warnings to her, her indifference to them. But still he clung to Hope. He did not know what the alternative was. So he loved and he loved and he loved some more. And she teased him—threw him high in the air and listened to the sound of his laughter breaking across the sky.

Sometimes she caught him in the soft down of her expansive lap, other times she watched him fall hard onto the unyielding cement ground. Once she threw him so high he thought he was free—unbounded, beautiful, a form of ecstasy. He tasted the air rushing around him and he smelled the very top of a forest of fir trees, and he felt the strange nothingness of the bottom of a pale cloud. He was, at last, deliriously happy, in a state of bliss. And as he tumbled down so full of gratitude and love and wonder at his own ability to see and feel and smell such an exquisite array of sensations he thought of all the questions he would put to her [...but] this time when she did not catch him when he fell, his body shattered in a thousand pieces [...] After the doctors came and the stitches were stitched and the bones were set and the medications given, she returned. She offered him her breast to succor him, but he would not, not this time, take it. [...] He told her to go [...and] as he waited and watched his body’s health return, he resolved to strengthen his will to live without her. (174–75)

The fairy tale about Hope and the young man goes on longer than I have time to recount here. Nonetheless, I hope—that word again!—I have given you enough of its flavor to understand that by including this fairy tale, written in a different rhythm than most of the prose in *Unmarked*, I was trying to offer more than the expository rhetorical mode to advance critical writing. Even as I was quoting Jacques Lacan, Michele Wallace, Jacques Derrida, Adrian Piper and carefully footnoting my citations throughout, I kept feeling that the expository mode of scholarly writing was insufficient for what I was trying to say. The usual structure of rhetorical address that most scholarly books employ—whereby the writer is the *subject supposed to know* (or for any remaining Lacanians here today—the *supposed subject of knowing*) and the reader is the *addressee eager to learn*—was too narrow and too one-way to capture what I wanted to express. My next book, *Mourning Sex* (1997), took up the implications of these hypotheses and proposed a writing toward disappearance in the manner of



Figure 2. The cover of Peggy Phelan's *Mourning Sex* (1997), cover image photo by Peggy Phelan.

Maurice Blanchot. These experiments, along with other investigations of various writerly forms by many other scholar artists came to be called performative writing. But that is a story for another day.¹

Here, I want simply to say that readers of *Unmarked* taught me what my book was about. In the consolidation and reduction of the book, there was much distortion. And I will not pretend that some of those distortions were not painful. But there was also pain in the writing. When composing *Unmarked's* final essay, I was consciously addressing, and indeed dedicating, the Afterword to my students and especially to Jay Dorff, the student who was dying right in front of our eyes, the student who asked me to leave his own name unmarked within the book and unspoken until he died, which he did shortly after the book was published.

Thirty years on, I am only beginning to grasp that what the Afterword was enacting, what it was performing, was an invisible, indeed an unmarked aspect of writing itself. While I was nominating the present tense as a pedagogical goal, I continued to assume that I was securely within the role of the professor, and surely the writer of my book. What I now see though is that the book's readers are the authors of its arguments.

My hope today is that writers will not need 30 years to learn that your books are not yours. Just as your voice only becomes your voice, ontologically, when it exits your body, so too does a writer only get to be one when she finds readers. Your books will come back to you, most likely as a strange transmission, one that you might misunderstand because the book you thought you were writing can only be created by its readers. While I believed I was writing the Afterword as an argument to value the always fleeing present tense, I relied too little on the future reception of my own argument, one I did not imagine at all. Today my hope as a writer, a reader, and a teacher is to continue to be misread and to misread your books and papers brilliantly enough to try again.

Thank you.

November 2023

References

- Phelan, Peggy. 1993. *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. Routledge.
 Phelan, Peggy. 1997. *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories*. Routledge.

1. The other day has arrived. "A Second Take: On Performative Writing and Reading" follows in this issue of *TDR*.