The Ethics of Witnessing and the Politics of the Governed

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Abstract
During the 20th century, witnessing outgrew its original affiliations with legal evidence and religious belief and became a social vocation in its own right. This essay explores the ethical expertise with which witnessing has been infused as the witness became the deferred result of a process of subjective transformation by probing some of the meta-testimonial discourses that emerged in response to the Great War, the Holocaust, and Third World emergencies. Against the ethical redefinition of witnessing advanced by Jean-François Lyotard, Shoshana Felman, and Giorgio Agamben, it analyses ethical witnessing as a practice of self that binds individual autonomy to institutional platforms, technological innovations, and reflective procedures that tackle the pitfalls of witnessing, maximize its potential, and trace its most adequate and resonant forms.

During the 20th century, bearing witness grew to be not just the most available solution for an increasingly pressing need to cope with political atrocities (Wieviorka, 2002; Kurasawa, 2009; Felman and Laub, 1992) but also, and simultaneously, an intricate problem.[1] As the experience of victims, ex-perpetrators, and activists acquired unparalleled authority as a source of moral and political truth, its unique capacity to generate adequate testimonies was consistently called into question. While practices of witnessing gained a growing popularity, they were also thought of, conceptualized, debated, and problematized in a yet unknown intensity. Works and projects that sought to evaluate testimonies, to outline the appropriate and resonant forms of witnessing, to untangle the

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challenges that witnesses face, and to shape the mode of insertion of witnessing into the political field proliferated, as new devices, specialized institutions, and more proactive and detailed schemes of witnessing were forged.

This article follows the trail of the vibrant meta-testimonial discourses that have emerged since the Great War in an attempt to retell the contemporary history of bearing witness as the story of the success of a failure. Moving beyond the image of the witness as a modern-day prophet (Dulong, 1998: 16) or a prolific source of 'sad and sentimental stories' that generate humanitarian concern (Rorty, 1993: 119), it explores what witnesses have brought to ethical and political life through their preoccupation with and reflections on the work of memory and advocacy and its predicaments. In order to trace the public ascent of the witness from the vantage point of the persistent questionings of witnessing and its various portrayals as a compromised, vexed, and even impossible venture, I follow three projects of reflexive witnessing that engaged with the potential and limits of witnessing and testimony in particularly ambitious, rigorous and innovative ways: Jean-Norton Cru's *Témoins* (1993 [1929]), a comprehensive review of war books written by veterans of the Great War; The Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University, the first initiative that set out to record survivors' testimonies on video; and the versions of humanitarian witnessing to Third World emergencies elaborated by Médecins Sans Frontières, a multinational humanitarian organization specializing in medical relief.

This condensed genealogy of witnessing and its discontents follows some of the disparate trajectories through which the witness has been recast as a persona that individuals desire to be, need to become, and must work on themselves in order to craft, and tracks some of the origins of the novel understanding of the witness's moral knowledge as the deferred end-result of a process that requires would-be witnesses to fine-tune their perception, memory, professional skills, or public statements. By highlighting the multiple perils of witnessing, as well as the range of model witnesses who skilfully managed to address them, it brings into relief the various regimes of witnessing that actually make up the so-called 'era of the witness' (Wieviorka, 2002).

The fervent appropriation of witnessing as an identity marker by photographers (http://www.jamesnachtwey.com), journalists (Tait, 2011), anthropologists (Marcus, 2010), artists (Bordo, 1996), human rights practitioners, and political activists of all colours and the mobilization of testimony as, alternately, a vocation and a practice, a therapeutic protocol and a public narrative, an overarching framework for action and a single tool within a broader repertoire of protest have turned witnessing and testimony into ethical and political concepts that are at once cardinal and murky.[2] Without attempting to clear up the semantic

confusion currently surrounding witnessing and testimony, this article sets out to chart the ontological mutations that enabled their proliferation and that cast witnessing and testimony as polyvalent instruments of self-fulfilment, moral concern, and political indignation. Going beyond the preoccupation with the disciplinary regulation of witnessing (Shapin, 1994: ch. 5; Shapiro, 1991: chs 1, 4; Fabian, 2000: ch. 3; Grandin, 2011: introduction) and its spectacular instrumentalization for state-building purposes (Wieviorka, 2002: ch. 2; Wilson, 2001: chs 1, 2), it interrogates the political repercussions of the pivotal role that witnesses themselves have come to play in scrutinizing testimony and carving out the conditions and criteria for adequate witnessing. Rather than examining how practices of witnessing unfold and what witnesses actually do when they purport to bear witness, it brings to the fore the widening gap between the fact of witnessing – being on the spot, observing with one's own eyes, living through the historical events – and being a witness. The reconfiguration of the witness as a daunting mode of being that has to be proactively assumed and the concomitant embracing of crises of witnessing as catalysts for the formation of new subjectivities are key, so I argue, to the impressive variety of contemporary forms of witnessing and, even more importantly, to its ethical transformation and political sway.

Originally conceived in the context of the Jewish Holocaust and later transposed on to atrocities worldwide, the idea that witnessing is undergoing a 'historical crisis' that has transformed it into a 'critical activity' (Felman and Laub, 1992: 206) has been at the heart of the poststructuralist paradigm of ethics, in which witnessing features as a metonym both for the inevitable demise of ethical doctrines and for the emancipation of moral sensibility from the yoke of normative and discursive conventions. While the groundbreaking works of Jean-François Lyotard (1988) and Shoshana Felman (Felman and Laub, 1992) have already alluded to the epochal crisis and the philosophical opportunity that witnessing epitomized (cf. Peleg, forthcoming), these themes were developed most forcefully in the latest work in testimony theory to date, Giorgio Agamben's *Remnants of Auschwitz* (1999). For Agamben, this title referred not just to the witnesses who had survived the Holocaust but also, and most importantly, to their very act of testimony. The latter was the sole modality of ethical response that stood the 'decisive test' put to ethics by the radical version of biopolitics pursued by the Nazis, in which the separation of bare life from political existence was pushed to its limits and materialized as an 'absolute biopolitical substance' in the form of the Muselmann (Agamben, 1999: 13, 85).

Based on a 'commentary' of survivors' testimonies, Agamben considered the Muselmann, a 'walking corpse' that occupied a twilight zone beyond life and death where the human and the inhuman were indistinguishable, 'the guard on the threshold of a new ethics, an ethics of a form of life that begins where dignity ends' (Agamben, 1999: 13, 70, 69).

The ethics of this new form of life was made up of testimonial gestures that, while engaging with and seeking to give voice to the forced silence of the Muselmann, brought its bare life back in contact with the meaningful speech of the witness, thereby reversing the biopolitical project that sought to divorce them. In its infinite debt to the Muselmann, Agamben's ethics of testimony was irrevocably bound up both with impossible testimony and with the ethical doctrines it had debunked, without ever transcending the crisis of witnessing and the failure of ethics. Moreover, related as it was neither to the human nor to the inhuman as such 'but rather to the very fact that they are in relation' (Chare, 2006: 48), ethical witnessing turned out to have its ultimate dwelling not in a particular realm of human practice but rather in the structure of subjectivity, which 'in its very possibility of speech, bears witness to an impossibility of speech' (Agamben, 1999: 146).

In what follows I wish to show that Agamben's portrayal of the ethics of testimony as a remnant of a never-ending disaster and a universal modality of being is both too modest and not specific enough. I argue that in its confinement of the ethicality of witnessing to the reenactment of a crisis and in its transfiguration of the witness into a philosophical paradigm, this most recent example of testimony theory turned a blind eye to the original, positive, and elaborate forms of subjectivity promoted by the practice and ethos of witnessing and testimony. Based on Michel Foucault's understanding of ethics as a premeditated 'practice of self' (Foucault, 2005), I claim that the ethicalization of witnessing involved its recoding not just as a scene of the displacement of the subject but primarily as an authentic expression of individuality that could not be materialized in a solitary and haphazard manner. By juxtaposing three episodes from the history of contemporary witnessing I argue that one of the decisive features of the 'era of the witness' has been the reframing of witnessing and testimony as gestures that, given the proper guidance and support, are bound to instigate a subjective transformation and not just produce empirical or metaphysical truths.

In Foucault's later studies on the care of the self in antiquity he propounded a rather unusual definition of ethics that, set against its normative and disciplinary versions, viewed it as a structured and yet self-chosen art of existence through which individuals cater to their own subjectivity (Foucault, 1990b, 1997a, 1997b, 2005). According to Foucault, ethics encompassed the cluster of discourses and practices that individuals adopted so as to style their own lives as meaningful and worthy endeavours. It took the form of a guided self-labour that combined duties with formalized techniques, 'fundamental obligation[s] and a set of carefully fashioned ways of behaving' (Foucault, 2005: 16, 494). Ethics, as he emphasized, was not the practical path that individuals would follow to discover their true and authentic self but, rather, the conceptual and technical support on which they relied – and which, in

turn, they would refine, elaborate, and modify – in their methodical attempts to become other than who they were (Foucault, 1997a: 262, 271). More than a self-absorbed life-style or a 'moral dandyism', ethics was the realm of practice in which individuals cultivated themselves as responsible, or in Foucault's words, 'rational' subjects who, by virtue of this prior crafting of character, could accomplish their philosophical, moral, and governmental tasks in more competent ways (quoted in Gros, 2005: 537).

The philosophical and spiritual exercises on which Foucault dwelled in his studies of ancient ethics seem far removed from contemporary acts of witnessing and testimony, whose regulation has involved an open-ended cultivation of skills and sensibilities and rarely commanded a strict and all-encompassing way of life. However, as I argue in what follows, it is precisely the laxity of reflexive witnessing and its framing as an ethical practice geared toward the crafting of autonomous subjects that made it so well-suited to and expressive of contemporary political settings in which freedom is equated with autonomy (Rose, 1999: 83–93). While it undoubtedly corresponded to an idiosyncratic urge or sense of obligation, witnessing was reconfigured since the Great War as, to borrow Foucault's (1997b: 284) terms, a 'conscious [*réfléchie*] practice of freedom' that channelled individual quests and concerns into similar patterns. As witnessing and testimony began to operate as a matrix of committed and responsible conduct, they came to be informed by exemplary modes of being and associated with clear signposts, specific methods, effective contrivances, and charts of possible drawbacks that rendered individual ventures of witnessing more practically attainable. Viewed as acts that could not generally be performed in a self-sufficient way, they were embedded in ethical reflections and technological platforms that were designed to identify the pitfalls of witnessing, maximize its potential, and articulate its most adequate and resonant forms.

This ethical transformation of witnessing in response to catastrophe has not just expanded and honed the available repertoire of moral practices but also opened up new avenues of political existence. Below I broaden the historiographical scope of reflexive witnessing beyond the obvious case of the Holocaust in order to bring into fuller view its affiliation with and contribution to what Michel Feher has dubbed 'nongovernmental politics' (Feher, 2007). I argue that beyond its widely acknowledged role as a privileged building-block of public claims that speak truth to power (Redfield, 2006; Keck and Sikkink, 1998: 18–22; McLagan, 2006; Shaffer and Smith, 2004), testimony has also operated as a path to truths not already possessed (cf. Foucault, 2005: 501). For activists who sought to assist the downtrodden or advocate a cause, witnessing was more than a launch pad for testimonies, and testimonies were more than an especially compelling way to establish the truth and tell a larger story. Built into the forms that witnessing has variously

assumed during the composite age of the witness – such as a faithful narration of experience, a performance of trauma, an alarmed viewing of others' narratives of misery, a proximity to the victims, or the making of defiant public statements – was a process of conversion through which distinctive subjectivities were formed that allowed the governed as such to 'establish themselves in politics' (Feher, 2007: 19).

As a rationality of contestation that opts, according to Feher, to confront 'the normative procedures to which the governed are subjected' and to follow the trails of suffering and loss that these procedures leave in their wake, nongovernmental politics stands out as one of the major schemes of political engagement of the late 20th century (Feher, 2007: 14). For Feher, it denotes the shared and yet by no means unified endeavour of individuals and groups who seek not to take over, reform, or abolish the institutions of government but, rather, to unravel and call into question the regular, entrenched, and often diffuse ways in which freedom is constrained and bodies are controlled and violated, regardless of how these practical procedures originated and who pulls their strings. Even as it invokes legal norms or professional standards as the basis for its legitimacy, nongovernmental politics ultimately founds its indictments and demands on the actual or anticipated consequences of power, policies, laws, discourses, and ideologies.

A wellspring of techniques of monitoring, documentation, and protest that put into practice the critical dissatisfaction with government, witnessing also formed the focal point of sustained (and often contested) procedures of self-formation that generated and maintained the public personae that could ground and carry forward these techniques. Nongovernmental politics has been enmeshed with what Judith Butler called 'a critical practice that has self-transformation at its core' (2002: 218), propelled by the obligation to bear witness. The title of the witness that many of its related initiatives embraced came to hinge on individuals' proactive stylization of attitudes and skills that was intertwined with schemes and mechanisms for the certified production of collective witnesses. In this sense, ethical witnessing has been to nongovernmental politics what discipline has been to the modern state (Rose, 1999: ch. 2): a procedure whose thrust is to bring into being the moral subjects that liberal citizenship – whether in its state or non-state version – requires and presupposes.

The migration of witnessing and testimony into the realm of the regulated relationships between individuals and their selves meant that even as they channelled reactions to political violence into more consistent patterns, scripts for ethical and political witnessing were hardly as codified, meticulous, and invasive as the microphysical mechanisms of discipline. Indeed, once the witness was no longer construed as something that one *is,* based on objective criteria, but rather as something that one seeks to *become,* the practice of witnessing became at once more

demanding and more permissive in terms of the self-involvement of witnesses in defining, challenging, contesting, and modifying what witnessing and testimony entailed.[3] The ethicalization of witnessing exacerbated the polysemy of the notions of witnessing and testimony, which ensued from their tortuous genealogy and manifold etymological roots (Fassin, 2008; Frisch, 2004). It provided those who sought to act in the political field without becoming involved in the political game not just with practical solutions but also with productive ethical problems. As will be shown in the next section, the indeterminacy of witnessing and testimony channelled and helped crystallize the prospects, limits, and stakes of nongovernmental action while maintaining the responsibility of nongovernmental witnesses and the procedures that bring them into being as open and contested issues.

Witnessing as a Reflexive Endeavour

While testimonies on war, disaster, and atrocities circulated in the public sphere long before the 20th century (Harari, 2008; Vernon, 2007: Ch. 2; Sliwinski, 2009), the understanding that spontaneous depositions cannot always qualify as public acts of witness began to crystallize following the Great War. In his monumental book *Témoins* [*Witnesses*] (1993 [1929]), a detailed review, annotated bibliography, and condensed compilation of three hundred war books published in French during and after the Second World War, a veteran named Jean Norton Cru set out to classify war narratives and designate the most trustworthy witnesses as a service to contemporary audiences and future historians alike. The aim of *Témoins* was to 'create a spectrum of combatants' testimonies on the war and to imbue them with a force and an influence that they can only acquire by the grouping of the voices of the front, which alone are authorized to speak of the war not as an art but as a human phenomenon' (Cru, 1967 [1930]: 35). Its dual mission was to establish the distinction between 'relations of narrators who acted and lived the facts' and 'stories of spectators' who glorified the war, while purifying testimony of the persistent 'legends' and war myths that falsified the lived experience of the combatants and diminished its political impact (Cru, 1993 [1929]: 9; 1967 [1930]: 57). For Cru, such a critical screening was vital for testimony to fulfil its potential as a counterweight to both patriotic and pacifist discourses, to military history and its view from above as well as to graphic accounts of extreme brutality (Cru, 1967 [1930]: 42, 132–3).

For all his admiration of the political traction of the combatant-witness, Cru believed that the latter was a title to be granted sparingly by the community of witnesses, based on a procedure of intertextual criticism that was itself construed as a (particularly laborious) work of witnessing. Cru's efforts to craft a collective witness to war were intermingled with

his own ambition to turn himself into an authoritative meta-witness, which he undertook by 'expand[ing] [his] experience as individual witness by the assiduous reading of stories from the front' (Cru, 1967 [1930]: 121). They relied on textual devices such as a unified format for presenting information on the units, places, and combats in which each witness had fought, elaborate tables in which war books were ranked and classified, and an index that pointed up recurrent themes, which facilitated the crosschecking of combatants' testimonies and created a forum in which witnesses could virtually address and inspect one another. More than a work of literary critique, *Témoins* was actually a platform for the production of certified public witnesses by making each witness a spokesperson of a public. In this witnessing enterprise, the intersection of comrades' testimonies emerged as the necessary condition and the ultimate test of adequate witnessing of individuals.

While this may sound like a familiar criterion for the verification of eyewitness testimonies, Cru's efforts to authenticate combatants' testimonies and his painstaking attention to detail were not meant to assess the quality of testimony as such so much as to provide an indirect standard for the integrity of the witness. Meticulous corroboration was actually called for by the new substance of testimony which, according to Cru, was to be made up of 'psychological facts' (Cru, 1967 [1930]: 50) whose truthfulness could not be ascertained directly. Against most of his contemporaries, who believed that the production of 'a faithful image of a life that was lived' (Cru, 1993 [1929]: 145) hinged on nothing but literary talent (Rousseau, 2005), Cru thought that authentic testimony required a strict adherence to lived experience and a particular state of mind that could only be brought about by self-discipline. His most cherished mechanism for this self-formation of the witness was diary-keeping, a technique of writing whose formal subjugation to dates constituted 'the best of disciplines and an invitation to precision' and functioned as 'an obstacle to invention and a call to probity' (Cru, 1967 [1930]: 88). In *Témoins,* a volume that brought together texts from a wide variety of genres, including diaries, memoirs, personal correspondences, essays, and novels, witnesses indeed occupied centre stage; by setting the identity of the author and not the style of the text as the distinctive feature of testimony, by scrutinizing the testimonial narrative for evidences on the witnessing self, and by understanding witnessing as a matter of guided self-labour, Cru's oeuvre prefigured the literary, therapeutic, and humanitarian forms of ethical witnessing that would proliferate from the late 1970s onward.

In the realm of Holocaust survivors' testimonies that took shape since the 1970s, however, the critique of witnessing gave way to the view that every act of witnessing is valuable either for therapeutic, pedagogical, or moral purposes. This position corresponded to the anxieties that witnessing at once accentuated and sought to lift, which were no longer associated with the contaminating influence of myths but rather with the

silence imposed by trauma and mass death. Among countless global initiatives to collect and disseminate survivors' testimonies, the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University, founded as a grass-roots community project in New Haven in 1979, stood out in its attempt to provide the institutional conditions in which survivors could become witnesses to their predicaments in their own singular way (Stier, 2003: ch. 3). Its founders acknowledged the potential of video technology to make witnessing more widely accessible to survivors and the need to forge communities of care and 'testimonial alliance[s]' to propel and contain the survivors' painful memories (Hartman and Ballengee, 2001: 220). While challenging the solipsistic image of witnessing, however, they also found it necessary to restrict the social intervention required for the making of testimony. Taking the survivors to be 'experts on their own life experiences', the procedures of witnessing implemented in the Yale project assumed that Holocaust memories could only be liberated by an empathic listening that would allow the stories of survivors to unfold as uninterruptedly as possible (Rudof, 1996: 70, 69).

This self-restrained solicitation of testimony was informed by theoretically-informed guidelines for secondary witnessing, which wedded the unique dynamics of survivors' testimony to the crafting of competent interviewers and spectators. In the famous book he co-authored with Felman, psychoanalyst and survivor Dori Laub, who was among the founders of the Holocaust Survivors Film Project subsequently affiliated with Yale, conceived of testimony as a quasi-therapeutic encounter in which 'the cognizance, the "knowing" of the event' that could not hitherto be witnessed, would be 'given birth to' (Felman and Laub, 1992: 57). Laub believed that survivors did not fully register their horrendous experiences due to the fact that the Holocaust created 'a world in which one *could not bear witness to oneself*' by extinguishing 'the very possibility of address, the possibility of appealing, or of turning to, another' (Felman and Laub, 1992: 82; emphasis in original). Rather than a consequence of witnessing, giving testimony was primarily a means to resuscitate the kind of internal witnessing of which the survivors had been deprived. As such, it was a life-saving operation that protected the survivors from 'the ultimately faithful blow' of non-recognition and allowed them to 'continue and complete the process of survival' (Felman and Laub, 1992: 68, 85).

For the vital process of testimony to be unleashed, the survivor had to be assisted by an interviewer who, according to Laub, would 'become the Holocaust witness before the narrator does' (Felman and Laub, 1992: 85). Laub's theory of testimony, which has been too readily equated with that of his co-author, Felman, was fundamentally a blueprint for a division of ethical labour between the survivor and the interviewer. In order for the survivor to be able to undergo the dramatic and seemingly

miraculous psychic transformation that would ensue from re-externaliz-
ing her trauma, the interviewer had to carefully stylize her behaviour in
the testimonial scene (cf. Trezise, 2008). To become secondary witnesses
to and midwives of trauma, interviewers had to be familiarized with the
history of the Holocaust but also to learn how to navigate, in Laub's
words, the 'vicissitudes of listening' in the most non-intrusive way pos-
sible so as to prevent their prior conceptions from obstructing the emer-
gence of traumatic elements (Felman and Laub, 1992: ch. 2). Laub
exhorted potential interviewers to be, 'paradoxically enough', 'both
unobtrusive, nondirective, and yet imminently present, active, in the
lead' (Felman and Laub, 1992: 71). Closely tuned both to the survivors'
and to their own upheavals of witnessing, they had to 'recognize,
acknowledge, and address' the silence of the survivors, to enhance the
flow of traumatic fragments when they faltered and reign them in when
they became too intense (Felman and Laub, 1992: 58, 71). Laub's general
directives for secondary witnessing and the vignettes that accompanied
them laid down a vivid model of the secondary witness but did not offer
any concrete advice on how this required approach could be fashioned.
They evinced a daunting image of secondary witnessing to survivors as a
task that required a willingness 'to feel the bewilderment, injury, confu-
sion, dread and conflicts that the trauma victim feels' and to face the
'hazards to the listening to trauma', while simultaneously assuming that
some of the interviewer's skills of empathic listening were already in
place. Rather than a vocation in and of itself, secondary witnessing
was thereby portrayed as a particularly bold and ethically ambitious
psychoanalytic specialization (Felman and Laub, 1992: 56, 72).

   This therapeutic modality of becoming a witness, whose application
was restricted to the direct participants in the testimonial encounter, had
a pedagogical equivalent that was potentially unlimited in scope. After
watching hundreds of films from the collection of the Fortunoff Archive,
literary scholar Lawrence Langer, who acted as advisor to the first edu-
cational programme to make use of the archive's films (developed by the
non-profit Facing History and Ourselves), concluded that video testimo-
nies were living proofs of the arbitrariness of survival and the inability to
draw any reassuring moral lessons from it. In his view, the filmed record
of witnessing-in-the-making exposed the true self of the survivor, who,
applauded as hero or martyr, morphed in the process of testimony into
the unsettling ethical figure of a 'divided', 'besieged', and 'diminished' self
(Langer, 1991). A rather poor source of ethical precepts, testimony's
crude presentation of the survivors' 'choiceless choice[s]' and haunted
selves was for that very reason, so Langer believed, especially conducive
to the pedagogical creation of morally engaged and discerning viewers
(Langer, 1991: 26; 'Facing History and Ourselves', 1989: 310–16).

   As Langer has argued in a series of short articles published as part of
the teachers' manual of 'Facing History and Ourselves', for the viewing

of Holocaust testimonies to produce an 'unreconciled understanding' of Holocaust experiences, viewers had to 'surrender to the content of the testimonies with minds cleared of the accumulated myths resulting from years of exposure to Holocaust studies' (Langer, 1991: 198; 'Facing History and Ourselves', 1989: 293). To be able to truly witness the Holocaust, viewers had to be prepared in advance to practise self-restraint and 'tune [their] ears to the dissonant voices of the witnesses, not to the harmonies of [their] own expectations' ('Facing History and Ourselves', 1989: 293). However, this self-diminution of the spectator was merely a precondition for the ethical empowerment that the encounter with the testimonies was supposed to yield. Faced with an oral testimony that was always much cruder and messier than a written narrative, the viewer, claimed Langer, was called upon 'to become an active participant in the narrative process' ('Facing History and Ourselves', 1989: 311). Testimonies mobilized the viewers' moral agency by appealing directly to their faculty of judgement; indeed, 'the need as well as the responsibility' ('Facing History and Ourselves', 1989: 311) to make sense of the conflicting moral demands that Holocaust testimonies so excruciatingly posed made them not only a powerful trigger for soliciting the moral competences of the viewers but also a particularly effective means for bolstering them. The Fortunoff Archive's collaboration with 'Facing History and Ourselves', whose educational programmes on the Holocaust were inspired by Hannah Arendt's positions on the political importance of thought and were specifically geared toward the cultivation among students of the 'art' of judgement (Stern Strom, 2003: 77; see also 'Facing History and Ourselves', 1989: xvii), created a pedagogical setting that favoured the use of Holocaust testimonies for such an ethical training.

For Langer, Holocaust testimonies offered a compelling alternative to appalling images of suffering and atrocities insofar as they possessed the ability to 'shock the imagination into an alarmed vision' in a way that created engaged spectators of catastrophes to come (Langer, 1996: 54). In this respect, the pedagogy of testimony that he helped develop put forward a concrete action plan for expanding the ethical legacy of Holocaust testimonies beyond the realm of Holocaust commemoration and endowing them with universal reach. In fact, both the alarmed spectator and the empathic listener, the two main figures of elaborate witnesses that emerged in and around the Yale project, were potentially transposable to instances of humanitarian witnessing that were more global and universal in scope. Yet, by and large, humanitarian witnessing to Third World emergencies, which took shape in around the same period as the witnessing boom in Holocaust memory, followed its own distinct trajectories and drew its coherence from other concerns.

The endorsement of the obligation to bear witness by aid workers in emergency zones has often been presented as a belated reaction to the failure of the International Committee of the Red Cross to publicly

condemn the Holocaust. Yet, originally, humanitarian witnessing was not associated with defiant truth-telling but, rather, with the relatively low-profile choice and passion of Western experts to be physically present in far-fledged theatres of war and disaster. In the early days of the humanitarian organization Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), founded in 1971 and widely regarded as the most prominent advocate of humanitarian witnessing (Fassin, 2008; Redfield, 2006), witnessing was translated into a multilayered set of practices designed to create a sense of proximity with otherwise distant suffering, such as providing effective assistance on the spot, observing the plight of the victims firsthand, getting to know their culture and their cause, and conveying one's personal impressions upon one's return ('Les Médecins Sans Frontières', 1974; Soussan, 2008: 13; Barnett, 2011: 146). Witnessing in its sense as being present 'where the others don't go', to quote one of MSF's most familiar slogans during the 1970s, was framed as a privileged experience that possessed the power to expand not just the physician's relations to the other but also his relations to himself. 'Physicians returning from such missions', stated one of MSF's founding members, 'will no longer be entirely the same' (Emmanuelli, 1975; see also Givoni, 2011). This yearning for direct contact with global miseries was closely related, in MSF's rhetoric, both to the underlying responsibility and to the prevailing malaises of medical practice (Bernier, 1972; Vallaeys, 2004: 107–26). Witnessing in this straightforward and politically unassuming version functioned as an antidote to the mounting legitimacy crisis of the medical profession and provided a conduit for the re-enchantment of physicians (cf. Osborne, 1994). It offered a replicable trajectory of self-making that could, to quote a declaration by MSF's founders, 'put in practice this idealism that lies dormant deep inside every physician, and without which a physician risks being nothing but a merchant' (Pradier, 1971).

The alignment of humanitarian witnessing with aid workers' reconstruction of self was subsequently preserved, albeit under a different guise, in humanitarian acts of testimony that took the more familiar form of speaking truth to power. Although MSF engaged in public witnessing already at a much earlier stage, such acts became prominent during the 1990s, in response to the political instrumentalization of humanitarian aid by Western governments and local militia forces in Somalia, Bosnia, Zaire, and other 'complex emergencies' (Bryans et al., 1999). They were epitomized by MSF-France's controversial announcement of its decision to withdraw its teams from the Hutu refugee camps in Zaire and Tanzania in the aftermath of the genocide in Rwanda, following on the observation that the relief effort in the camps had benefited from and was effectively controlled by the génocidaires (MSF-France, 1994; Terry, 2002: ch. 5). Testimony, as MSF-France now understood it, was principally a 'denunciation in which our own action is brought into play' (MSF-France, 1995). As the organization's legal advisor made clear,

testimony was not to be equated with human rights advocacy but, rather, ought to be construed as an expression of the more circumscribed 'responsibility of the humanitarian actor vis-à-vis criminal acts that concern him as a direct or indirect victim or as a passive accomplice' (Bouchet-Saulnier, 2005). According to MSF-France, testimony was to be deployed primarily as a means of restoring the operational capacities of humanitarian rescuers and the autonomy of humanitarian witnesses. Impelled by the impression of aid workers that 'to keep silent [. . .] means to make oneself complicit in a system of manipulation and control' (Binet, 2003: 84), testimony has taken the form of a public confession that by its very making disentangles humanitarian witnesses from webs of political violence in which they had become enmeshed.

As MSF's activists realized, this performance of witnessing could not be carried out without a considerable degree of organizational preparation, but neither could it follow a ready-made pattern. Based on the observation that '[t]émoignage [sic] cannot be reduced to a mechanical application of rules and procedures', and that it involved 'an understanding of the dilemmas inherent in every humanitarian action', they chose to use a series of case studies of contentious statements that the organization has made in the past in order to 'help volunteers understand and adopt [MSF's] culture of speaking out' (Binet, 2003: introduction). 'MSF Speaking Out', as this ethical device was entitled, deliberately shunned any definitive recipe for witnessing, opting instead to lay out the broad spectrum of the conflicting interpretations of witnessing and to reconstruct the controversies that it has spawned. A patchwork of raw materials from interviews, news reports, meeting notes, internal correspondences, and reports, the project's seemingly bewildering cacophony emerged as MSF's procedure of choice for nurturing self-doubt and self-questioning. As 'MSF Speaking Out' made clear, proximity to victims and occasional reports on their predicaments were hardly sufficient to form an engaged and independent humanitarian witness. Becoming a witness involved placing checks on aid workers' passion for the cause and looking beyond their immediate surroundings; it called on prior knowledge on the political economy and geopolitics of zones of emergency but also on a familiarity with the potential pitfalls of humanitarian action; finally, it required personal training as well as forums of debate that would provide would-be witnesses with the variety of perspectives they could never entertain individually.

Where Ethics and Politics Meet

'MSF Speaking Out' is the most elaborate manifestation yet of the self-making and self-labour with which witnessing has been infused so as to enable it to delimit and occupy a position that transcends politics within the political field. Indeed, the preceding snapshots of the makings of

contemporary witnessing show that, with the exception of its therapeutic modality, the ethics of witnessing has largely functioned as a way to create more productive and long-lasting links between testimony and the political sphere while preserving the distinct rationality of each. In their attempt to maximize the public relevance of testimonies, specify and enhance the singular commitment of witnesses, and lay down models of effective performances of witnessing, schemes for the self-regulation of witnessing promoted it as an ever more viable alternative to traditional modes of political action and participation. They configured the relations between testimony and political life in shifting and varied ways while seeking to exploit new opportunities for meaningful action in its midst. As both Cru's and MSF's critiques of witnessing illustrate clearly, it was when witnessing was diagnosed as too enmeshed with political power or political ideology to live up to its promise of reviving the domain of civic engagement that the distinction of witnessing from politics was most emphatically asserted.

In demonstrating the extent to which the ethics and the politics of witnessing have been mutually entangled, these intricate links between the self-crafting of witnesses and their struggle to occupy a distinct and influential position in public life run against the prevailing portrayal of ethical witnessing in both Agamben's theory of testimony and in other poststructuralist elaborations. For what Agamben's work on testimony shared with the otherwise distinct endeavours of Lyotard (1988) and Felman (Felman and Laub, 1992) was a persistent image of witnessing as an ethical gesture that was bound up with the political but transpired outside and beyond the sphere of politics. Such was the result of those thinkers' striving to turn the epistemic notion of testimony on its head and reframe it as a performative act that was not just set apart from the ethos of scientific objectivity but could effectively serve to debunk it. Agamben, Lyotard, and Felman have similarly claimed that, in the wake of the Holocaust, testimony could no longer be expected to reconstruct historical occurrences in verifiable details and was instead called upon to reenact their moral, existential, and psychic repercussions. In their view, testimony was to succeed where eyewitnessing had failed; whether it took the form of a juridical attestation or of an artistic performance, its primary aim was to index the enormity of political violence, the silencing of its victims, and their ineffable trauma, while laying bare the inherent limitations that empirical representation and normative ethics betrayed once they were expected to convey and make sense of the catastrophic event.

This notion of indirect witnessing to disaster cast it as an expandable act that agents other than actual eyewitnesses could effectively perform, and transformed it into a critical endeavour whose ethical operation – conjuring silenced victims and exposing the inherent exclusions of liberal justice – was already also a political response to violence. Yet at

the same time, by portraying the victim as the paradigm of the ethical witness and the Holocaust survivor as the paradigm of the victim, Agamben, Lyotard, and Felman have centred the case for ethical witnessing around a group whose need for a voice and recognition was far removed from any concrete and pressing political demands. The exemplary witness figures that featured in their works – Primo Levi confessing his inability to bear witness to the full scale of the horrors in the case of Agamben, the survivors and the film-maker in Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah* in Felman's (Felman and Laub, 1992: ch. 7), and the anonymous survivor rendered speechless when confronted with Holocaust deniers in the case of Lyotard (1988: 3–31) – came only after the fact, and their forward-looking task consisted in putting a halt to the symbolic extension of a violent campaign whose physically destructive force was already extinguished (cf. Cubilié, 2005: 3–4). Rather than targeting concrete evils or specified political adversaries, in the accounts put together by Agamben, Felman, and Lyotard those witnesses confronted impersonal and transhistorical forces that affected political life insofar as they sowed a more pervasive existential devastation. This was the case with the biopolitical separation of the inhuman and the human that survivors' testimony was charged with undoing according to Agamben, as with the unassumable burden of trauma in Felman. For Lyotard (1988: 9) it was what he called 'the differend', an irreconcilable conflict between discursive genres in which a hegemonic discourse usually ended up setting the rules that similarly performed as testimony's raison-d'être and as its formative condition.

The scene of witnessing that emerged from these theoretical elaborations was ultimately composed of a pair of opposites that could never be brought into peaceful reconciliation. In Lyotard's, Felman's, and Agamben's models, bearing witness was cast as a permanent antidote to political violence, which in turn was redefined in testimony's terms. In the narratives of witnessing that testimony theory has forged, this dyadic structure (Rothberg, 2006: 174) was expressed in the equation of bearing witness with the weaving of an otherwise impossible relation between a direct or indirect witness and a limit-experience that could only be communicated and apprehended in a visceral way. Witnessing was conceived as a gesture that engages individuals in their private capacity while latching onto their shared – but mutually isolated – responsiveness to 'feelings' (Lyotard, 1988: 13), to inarticulate calls (Agamben, 1999: 37–9*)*, or to the 'tongue of the other' (Felman and Laub, 1992: 231). Being a witness entailed being overtaken by a performance of trauma and loss whose impact was both miraculous and completely anticipated. In this scheme, whatever surrounded the intimate relationship between the witness and the real was eliminated from the scene of witnessing. In effect, the latter was withdrawn from the political sphere and artificially exempted from its plurality of views, agonistic relations, and

conflicting solicitations (Arendt, 1998 [1958]; see also Rothberg, 2006). To fulfill the ethical mission of bearing witness as testimony theory conceived of it, the public arena in which testimonies have inevitably circulated and ethical witnessing was variously formed, with its own dynamics of action, debate, and cross-interpretation, had to be abandoned.

As a rejoinder to testimony theory and to the wedge it has created between ethical witnessing and the political sphere, this article has sought to linger on the contemporary operation of witnessing as a point of relay that redefines what it takes to engage in politics, to act morally, to live ethically, and to establish the truth about public matters as it more firmly connects these distinct endeavours. When the black-box of witnessing was pried open and its various trajectories juxtaposed, witnessing and testimony turned out to be powerful mediators that, to borrow a definition provided by Bruno Latour, 'transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry' (2005: 39). As I sought to show, the contemporary prominence of witnessing and testimony hinges on the new arenas of action they have fostered by allowing for the relations between truth and politics to be treated as a matter of personal responsibility, and by mobilizing truth in order to bring the care of the self and the commitment to others more closely together.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. Throughout this text, and in line with their OED definitions, the terms 'witnessing' and 'bearing witness' will be employed interchangeably. By contrast, since this paper sets out to historicize the intertwining of witnessing and testimony (the act and its discursive product, the 'saying' and the 'said'), I have generally preferred to preserve the distinction between these two terms and sometimes use them together ('witnessing and testimony').
2. In the field of human rights practice, witnessing is sometimes referred to as the synonym of human rights work. This is borne out, for example, in the name of and the rhetoric employed by the organization *Witness*, which provides local activists with equipment, training, and platforms for documenting and distributing video images of human rights violations (www.witness.org). Eyewitnessing now often constitutes the primary, if not the sole, form of action that certain activist groups engage in, as in the case of veteran soldiers

who testify on abuses (see, for example, www.breakingthesilence.org.il). In more openly political campaigns of solidarity or protest, witnessing is rarely presented as an overarching framework for action and usually features as a tactic that is designed to enhance the effectiveness of other forms of activism (see, for example, Bonds, 2009).

3. In this respect, witnessing should not generally be regarded as a kind of confession, which, as Foucault (1990a: Part 3) argued, operates primarily as a technique of individualization at the service of power. Acts of witnessing, as I understand them, are not concerned with the exposure and reaffirmation of a preexisting identity but rather with the creation of ethical and political subjectivities that did not exist prior to them.

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