

ROUTLEDGE INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES ON  
LITERATURE

# The Future of Testimony

Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Witnessing

Edited by  
Jane Kilby and Antony Rowland



# The Future of Testimony

In recognition of the ground-breaking *Testimony*, this collection brings together the leading academics from a range of scholarly fields to explore the ongoing meaning, use, and value of testimony in law, politics and society, and of its still developing relationship to other forms of writing like literature and poetry. It visits testimony in relation to a range of critical developments, including the rise of Truth Commissions and the explosion and radical extension of human rights discourse; renewed cultural interest in perpetrators of violence alongside the phenomenal commercial success of victim testimony (in the form of misery memoirs); and the emergence of disciplinary interest in genocide, terror, and other violent atrocities. These issues are necessarily inflected by the question of witnessing violence, pain, and suffering at both the local and global level, across cultures, and in postcolonial contexts. At the volume's core is an interdisciplinary concern over the current and future nature of witnessing as it plays out through a 'new' Europe, post-9/11 US, war-torn Africa, and in countless refugee and detention centers, and as it is worked out by lawyers, journalists, medics, and novelists. The collection draws together an international range of case-studies, including discussion of the former Yugoslavia, Gaza, and Rwanda, and encompasses a cross-disciplinary set of texts, novels, plays, testimonial writing, and hybrid testimonies. The volume situates itself at the cutting-edge of debate and as such brings together the leading thinkers in the field, requiring that each address the future, anticipating and setting the future terms of debate on the importance of testimony.

**Jane Kilby** is Senior Lecturer in English and Cultural Studies at University of Salford, Manchester, UK.

**Antony Rowland** is Professor of Modern and Contemporary Poetry at Manchester Metropolitan University, UK.

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*Edited by Susana Onega and Jean-Michel Ganteau*
- 28 The Future of Testimony**  
 Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Witnessing  
*Edited by Jane Kilby and Antony Rowland*

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# **The Future of Testimony**

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# Contents

*Acknowledgments* ix

**Introduction** 1

JANE KILBY AND ANTONY ROWLAND

## PART I

### Witnessing in Psychoanalysis and History

**1 History, Memory, Testimony** 17

DAN STONE

**2 After the End: Psychoanalysis in the Ashes of History** 31

CATHY CARUTH

**3 Fire in the Archive: The Alignment of Witnesses** 48

SHOSHANA FELMAN

**4 The Public Secret** 69

ROBERT EAGLESTONE

**5 Testimonial Modes: Witnessing, Evidence and Testimony Before  
the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia** 83

KIRSTEN CAMPBELL

## PART II

### Beyond Western Testimony

**6 Hannah Arendt's Message of Ill-Tidings: Statelessness, Rights  
and Speech** 113

LYNDSEY STONEBRIDGE



- 7 Professional Witnessing in Rwanda: Human Rights and Creative Responses to Genocide 129  
ZOE NORRIDGE
- 8 Beyond Autobiography: Hybrid Testimony and the Art of Witness 144  
MATTHEW BOSWELL
- 9 A Natural History of Testimony? 160  
RICK CROWNSHAW

### PART III

#### The Enduring Aesthetic: Literature and Testimony

- 10 Holocaust Memory and the Critique of Violence in Caryl Churchill's *Seven Jewish Children: A Play for Gaza* 179  
STEF CRAPS
- 11 Living Among the Ruins of Memory and Language: Jorge Semprún and Testimony 193  
URSULA TIDD
- 12 Impossible Histories: Adorno and the Question of Lyric 208  
DAVID MILLER
- 13 'The Writer Begins in the Towers': Don DeLillo, 9/11 and the Ethics of Testimony 216  
PAULA MARTÍN SALVÁN

*List of Contributors* 227

*Bibliography* 231

*Index* 241

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'In the Ruins of the Future' by Don DeLillo, Copyright (c) 2001 by Don DeLillo. First published in *Harper's Magazine*, December 2001. Used by permission of the Wallace Literary Agency, Inc.

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# Introduction

*Jane Kilby and Antony Rowland*

As a meeting point between violence and culture, the future of testimony is guaranteed.<sup>1</sup> Less predictable is how we will understand its ongoing importance, especially given how swiftly, and how many times, our understanding has been challenged since the publication in 1992 of Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's groundbreaking *Testimony: Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. For as quickly as it was announced that testimony constituted a new genre, and hence proof of a unique era of witnessing atrocity and violent injustice, it was claimed that we were living in a therapy-driven culture of confession, evidenced by both the writing of 'false testimonies' and by the mass consumption of 'misery memoirs'. At the same time, as quickly as the importance of reading, listening and watching testimony was established, it was declared impossible to read, listen and watch survivor testimony without doing (more) violence. These problems have been appended to the simultaneous proliferation of testimony: no sooner had we mapped the challenges of Holocaust testimony, than it became necessary to address the urgent issues posed by testimony issuing from multiple scenes of horror and suffering, both past and present. Add to this a range of critical developments, including the rise of Truth Commissions and advent of transitional justice; the explosion, and radical extension, of human rights discourse; the birth of new media; and renewed cultural interest in perpetrators of violence, and our understanding of the future of testimony (and we are nearly always talking about the future of victim testimony) is a challenging one.

The contributors to this collection seek, then, to map the future of testimony amid ongoing, swiftly coursing debate over its meaning, use and value; and in a world now also recognized as greater than Europe, the 'West' and the 'North'. Importantly, this includes recognition of the fact that violence and suffering have both changed and remained the same, thus requiring a continual engagement with history alongside exploration of the contemporary world. For Dan Stone, writing as a historian in relation to the Holocaust, this requires a focus on perpetrator testimony; whereas for Rick Crownshaw, writing as a literary critic with respect to Hurricane Katrina, it demands an understanding of ecological testimony; and

finally for Kirsten Campbell, writing as a qualified barrister in regard of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, this necessitates a working knowledge of testimony as legal practice. It requires, in other words, an interdisciplinary effort. Indeed, it could not be otherwise if accepting that the meeting place of violence and culture is multifaceted and overdetermined, if not at times mutually constitutive. To witness from this place is to testify in multiple languages, via complex media and in respect of conflicting imperatives.

That said, the question of the future of testimony returns us repeatedly to the question of literature. The literary bias of this collection proves the enduring importance of the question of the aesthetic to our understanding of testimony. The possibility of witnessing and change is always that of language. Photojournalism, forensic pathology and neuroscience require the supplement of language to do the work of testimony, no matter how inadequate language is understood, ultimately, to be on this count. For Stef Craps, Churchill's play *Seven Jewish Children: A Play for Gaza* offers a balanced yet controversial response to 'Operation Cast Lead', the three-week Israeli military offensive in the Gaza Strip launched on December 27, 2008, and the ensuing humanitarian crisis.<sup>2</sup> David Miller then explores Adorno's enduring fascination with the lyric, despite the philosopher's sense of the contamination of testimony due to the initial moments of violence. For Ursula Tidd, Jorge Semprún's multilingual testimonies provide an exemplar of how complex literary testimony can engage with atrocity without reducing the dialogue to a form of approximation,<sup>3</sup> whereas Paula Martín Salván demonstrates in her chapter on 9/11 how the peculiar and particular efficacy of literary testimony still appertains at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Rather than signalling a return to the aesthetic, these chapters attest to the enduring potency of witness literature; even if—as we argue later in this introduction—such texts are now found on supermarket shelves as well as in the 'high' literary canon discussed in Felman's work.

Writing in 1992, Felman and Laub understood the relationship between literature and testimony to mean that:

The listener [/reader] can no longer ignore the question of facing death; of facing time and its passage; of the meaning and purpose of living; of the limits of one's omnipotence; of losing the ones that are close to us; the great question of our ultimate aloneness; our otherness from any other; our responsibility to and for our destiny; the question of loving and its limits; of parents and children; and so on. (p. 72)

Testimony, for Felman and Laub, requires us to ask questions of ourselves, as Robert Eaglestone urges also in his chapter. Yet, despite the hope and possibility held by Felman and Laub's questions, critics have chosen a distinctly cynical form of questioning. Thus our desire to read testimony, for example, has been rendered a morally murky enterprise, with literary critics

figuring as ‘shoppers for shocks to our systems and values’, who ‘look to meet if not match the wounds of others’: as readers, that is, our desire is to be ‘bruised, to have our indifference challenged’.<sup>4</sup> Hence, not surprisingly, Nancy Miller and Jason Tougaw conclude that we ‘need to worry more about why we like to buy and read narratives of life in extreme conditions that serve as a scary mirror in which we contemplate not ours but another’s face’.<sup>5</sup> It is a worry, it seems, shared by many.

Yet there is little evidence to suggest that we read for distinctly problematic reasons and hence less need to worry, we are arguing, than Miller and Tougaw and others suppose. There are, in other words, different ways of answering the question of why we read and who we are when doing so. Indeed, surely we read (also) because we are feminists and Marxists; and because we may be politicized as African-Americans, Jews, Latinos, queers, post-colonial and subaltern subjects. This is not to deny the complexity of political identity: we are prone to shop, and there is no doubt that the academy is infused with market values, so that we trade our reading skills for tenure and promotion. But biography and political identification cannot also be denied and must be acknowledged in future scholarship. This point is made in part by Robert Eaglestone,<sup>6</sup> who takes inspiration from the historian E. H. Carr to argue that works of history buzz with the biography of the historian (and reader-critic). Thus Eaglestone insists that:

Listening for the ‘buzzing’ is not to depreciate the work, clearly, but to better understand it. Among historians of the Holocaust and other atrocities, there is of course a great deal of ‘buzzing’: much of this is, quite rightly, ‘metahistorical’ in the Hayden White sense. But some ‘buzzing’ is more personal and harder to quantify or qualify: Browning’s work, for example, as he admits, is in part his early response to Vietnam, and Saul Friedlander’s ‘turn’ from a more traditional empiricist historian to later work can be seen to occur around the time of his self-exposing memoir. However, in relation to historical work and in relation, perhaps, to other work in the human and social sciences [ . . . ], trauma theory alerts us to more than just buzzing. It alerts us vividly to other forces—fears, hopes, experiences—at play in historical work, other forces which are quite as revealing in bearing witness to the Holocaust, or to any traumata, as ‘the facts’.<sup>7</sup>

Importantly, as Eaglestone makes clear, it is time to map the affective, biographical, experiential and psychic forces at work when witnessing, which is a way also of engaging the questions posed by Felman and Laub. This is to acknowledge, then, that we are involved in complex ways in the study of history and testimony, as the contributions offered in this collection by Shoshana Felman, Cathy Caruth and Lyndsey Stonebridge make clear. Denial and narcissism are part of what makes us human; likewise avowal and solidarity. Love also, to which we will return.

Put differently, the question of the future of testimony raises a political one, and as such forces us to grapple with the question of which testimony, whose lives and what suffering should command our attention. This, however, is a fraught decision-making process. Take, for example, Michael Rothberg's recent attempt to direct our attention to the status of labour under globalization and thereby remind memory, testimony and trauma studies scholars of the need to 'address the mutations of power and the conditions of life'.<sup>8</sup> To illustrate the urgency of his demands, Rothberg refers us to 'two factory fires in South Asia [which] killed hundreds of garment workers who were making clothes for subcontractors of European and American companies such as H&M, Walmart, and Gap'.<sup>9</sup> More precisely, he numerates the loss as 'at least 262 workers' in one fire, and 112 in the other. To these deaths he adds those of the 'more than 500 Bangladeshi workers [who] had already died in fires in the last six years'.<sup>10</sup> Written as a critique of trauma theory, and by implication, we would add, testimony studies, Rothberg's intervention is a salutary reminder that violence and injustice are rarely surprising and as such what is required is the 'sort of clarity that a Marxist critique of political economy can provide'.<sup>11</sup> Importantly, here and elsewhere, Rothberg is setting our future agenda, determining which lives we are to account for, and which testimony we read.

Trauma and testimony studies, however, have taught us also to be sensitive to the significance and power of numeration, the nature of which is understood to afford Marxism its definition. This is the lesson imparted by Laub's debate with historians over the validity of the testimony of the Holocaust survivor who 'recalled' the blowing up of four chimneys, when in 'reality' it was only one. For Laub, attuned both as a survivor and practicing psychoanalyst, her 'inaccurate' testimony yields an alternative, possibly greater truth: 'The woman was testifying [ . . . ] not to the number of the chimneys blown up, but to something else, more radical, more crucial: the reality of an unimaginable occurrence. One chimney blown up in Auschwitz was as incredible as four. The number mattered less than the fact of the occurrence'.<sup>12</sup> At issue, for Laub, is the inability of the historians to listen without prejudice. The historians *knew* that it was only one chimney and *knew* the uprising had failed, and hence they could hear nothing of value in the woman's testimony. Laub knew also that the uprising had failed when listening to her, but as a trained psychoanalyst he is disciplined not to seek confirmation of what he imagines himself to know. Thus he maintains 'it might be useful, sometimes, not to know too much'.<sup>13</sup>

Marxists *know* also which histories, realities and testimonies to chronicle, but, then, only for feminists to point out that the majority of the workers killed in the South Asian fires would have been young women, and how statistically speaking it is women who suffer the greater hardship under the conditions of global capitalism. Feminists and Marxists (and post-colonialists) must learn to read with less assurance and in the hope of producing knowledge none of us have. Why read otherwise? The 'actual' numbers, as

more or less objective measure, matter for all concerned. They are part of the context of reading testimony, part of how we do politics. But numbers are not all and like language are not adequate to the task. Yet testimony—its future politics—is the possibility and power of establishing a singular life, a particular reality. Testimony is the texture, the surprise, the thought, the insight, the poetics of politics. Indeed, as Laub makes clear, the woman is at her most alive when getting the facts wrong.

Reading testimony/politics has to be disciplined in this respect. It has also to be hubris, for as politicized readers, we read in—and with—hope. The question of vanity is twofold in other words. There is the risk of narcissism (although as already noted this is less a risk than some have suggested) but equally we read in the vain, impossibly stupid hope that reading will spark a revolution, if not in us then in those in whom we invest our reading and politics: our students. As is generally the case in the academy, we constantly run the risk of overinflating the political effect of texts chosen for study, mixing idealism with justification for our unit of resource. Thus we cannot simply hope to imagine ourselves or our students at our or their very best when reading, but reading is a fevered, blind activity, and for this reason we cannot rule it out. Felman does not and this is surely her abiding lesson.

It can be said, in other words, that we are sentimental. We are moved by what we read and would move heaven and earth for the stories of death and suffering to have been different. We are, indeed, power-crazed in this sense. Few thinkers grasp this: Walter Benjamin of course; and Marx before him. We would fan life into the dead, give substance to the ghosts, voice to the silenced, and an audience to the unheard. But before we worry about the problems of doing so, as Patricia Yaeger does so well in ‘Consuming Trauma; or the Pleasures of Merely Circulating’,<sup>14</sup> let us return to Jay Cantor’s brilliant but quite different essay ‘Death and Image’.<sup>15</sup>

Key to Cantor’s complex analysis of Alain Resnais’ *Night and Fog* (1955), Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* (1985) and Marcel Ophul’s *Hotel Terminus* (1987) is the question of how we are to cope with the horror of violence and trauma, embodied without presence in both the dead and living, without denial, repression, nostalgia, melancholy, a too persistent piety, soothing representation; and without, above all, endless, life-defeating neurosis. In answer, Cantor turns not to Freud but to D.W. Winnicott. Cantor writes:

In describing the cure of neurosis, D.W. Winnicott speaks of the neurotic’s first step towards cure coming when she reincludes her history, even its traumas, in the domain of infantile omnipotence. For the neurotic either represses the offending event, making the world and her personality unreal; or the trauma is experienced as an utterly external event that has crushed her. She, like us, must regain that sense the healthy infant has that her cry helps make the breast, that her desire collaborates in the creation of the world. Without this sense, half-illusory though it may be, our imagination is stunned by the inert



mechanical mass of the world, incapable of creating the new dispensation we require and we ourselves become machine-like in our pleasures and our destruction.<sup>16</sup>

The point for Cantor is that if we do not imagine that we can collaborate in the creation of the world, if we do not reconnect with our instinct for survival, for life, for politics (as opposed to ethics), then there is no way to equal, as he puts it 'the magnified means of annihilation that we have put at the service of the death instinct'.<sup>17</sup> There is no way, in other words, to remember the dead and suffering, to read their testimony.

What this means in practice and for us is twofold. For Cantor, the triumph of Resnais, Lanzmann and Ophuls is that they help us take the Holocaust back into the realm of infantile omnipotence. They enter and collaborate in making the Holocaust present to us, subject then to vision and agency. Resnais, Lanzmann and Ophuls are all neurotic in their own ways; Cantor, likewise, but they are not hopelessly neurotic. They employ their imagination in order that we do not become 'machine like in our pleasures and our destruction': we are required to 'play every role in [each] film: executioner, spectator, victim and the artist whose violence forms the image of this kingdom of death'. This in practice is to acknowledge our implication in the Holocaust and structures of violence more generally (as Rothberg argues also); although importantly, as Cantor makes clear, this does not render us responsible for the Holocaust. It is more simply a warning that if we do not 'enter imaginatively into history—even this history—then our world will be a delusion, and our history a spectacle, and eventually, as the drugs wear off, an intolerable weight'.<sup>18</sup> Imagination in an absolute sense makes the world real, and real with endless possibilities; without it, there is no possibility of change.

Second, it is to have us admit that we can be fools and at times foolishly sentimental. Of all the filmmakers, Cantor sees himself in Ophuls, who reminds him of Lear's fool, a character who may possess great integrity, but lacks dignity (as any good analyst should be, Cantor argues). This recognition leads Cantor to confess that he found the ending of *Hotel Terminus* almost 'unbearably moving'. Needless to say, the final scene brings the Holocaust to us through the face, voice and eyes of children, and in doing so Cantor argues, Ophuls dares us to feel sentimental about the past: dares us, he argues in accordance with J. D. Salinger's definition of sentimentality, 'to love the world more than God does'. 'The foolish truth of [Cantor's] response' is that of a ridiculous, impossible love for the world. Reading and watching testimony is—and if not, should be—the practice of such love.

All this said, why testimony can make for compelling reading (and watching) is not entirely answered. Testimony is not only a function of our desire. Thus the question of formalism and the power of genre, which relates also to the question of gender, remain for future scholarship. (It is noteworthy that it is a woman's testimony that sparks the debate between

Laub and the historians.) So whereas it appears that we are less addicted to consuming testimony as presumed by Young and Tougaw, the question of the pleasure and thrill of reading testimony remains with us and is central, for example, to reading Jan Demczur's account of his escape from the North Tower in *Tower Stories: An Oral History of 9/11*.<sup>19</sup> Demczur, a window cleaner, is trapped in a lift after the impact of the first plane. His testimony recounts how, with the aid of a wooden stick and a squeegee, he breaks through the drywall, sheetrock and metal outside the lift. With six other employees, he makes it down 50 floors, and leaves the tower minutes before it collapses. The reversal of the hierarchy of everyday work is striking: he refers to the other employees before the plane hits Tower One as 'gentlemen', and Demczur does not push the button for his floor when he enters the lift 'because someone was standing in front of me'. These 'gentlemen', however, are rendered powerless by the emergency: as the elevator starts to freefall, he screams 'to the guy on my right side, "Push the red button!"', but the 'guy' 'just stared at me'.<sup>20</sup> Striking as such narrative ironies are, they are commonplace in other forms of literature, and so cannot account for the testimony's distinctive power. Demczur's brief story does not compare with the 'singular' testimonies of writers such as Primo Levi, Jorge Semprún or Charlotte Delbo, and yet, on a first reading, it is utterly gripping. What is it within the genre of testimony that can account for such forceful narratives?

The answer is tricky. On one hand, the grip of testimony—that Levi memorably compares to the power of the Ancient Mariner—is, if not inexplicable, then potentially prone to mysticism. Felman's sense that we do not know exactly what testimony is yet pertains also in its effects and affects: we know that some testimonies are gripping, but the explication of this fact may defeat critical vocabulary. We must come, however, as Derek Attridge would have it, to an approximation.<sup>21</sup> One answer to the force of Demczur's testimony is the frisson of the metanarrative: Demczur often refers to events which he could not understand at the time; this places the 'survivor' narrator, and the reader, in a privileged position. Readers anticipate the ending of the testimony (that Demczur must survive). They also have some knowledge of the metatextual details of 9/11, and can thus await the narrative's interaction with events such as the collapsing towers. Hence both the survivor-narrator and reader understand the irony when Demczur pours water from his bucket into plants on the 44th floor and comments 'Let them grow'.<sup>22</sup> The power here is not unlike that belonging to archive images of the New York skyline.

The particularity of the testimony is also striking: the reader of *Tower Stories* comes across a multitude of accounts of survivors going down the staircases, which is—dare we say it (critics do generally not dare state it, for fear of being thought heartless)—potentially boring in its accumulative effect. Instead, Demczur's transcribed interview recounts events at the heart of the towers: he is originally trapped, along with his companions,

in the centre of the smouldering building. They are abandoned by the emergency service in charge of the lift: after yelling 'Are you going to send somebody to help us?', the intercom stops working, and they are 'on [their] own'.<sup>23</sup> After calmly stopping the elevator's freefall, Demczur begins to pick his way through layers of walls that seem to increase in complexity as the digging progresses. If testimony is a form that allows us mediated access to the 'inside' of an event, then we may respond to this testimony by feeling that we are reading the 'inside' of the tower's (and towers') destruction, peeling through the layers of walls with Demczur as his testimony moves towards us.

The latter reading would, however, be an example of mystification, as well as a powerful symptom of what makes testimony so gripping. In an attempt at critical reasoning, but not to capture the story's overall power, we can state that the pleasures of popular literature provide another answer. These are an effect of style: the short paragraphs drive the linear narrative forward in an antithetical way to the distancing techniques of the more famous, and self-consciously literary, Holocaust narratives of, for example, Semprún and Delbo. Indeed, the 'power' of the testimony sometimes seems to work here despite (and possibly because of) the lack of literary sophistication: the dialogue is often slightly stilted, and clearly tidied up during the transcription of the interview. So when smoke begins to enter the lift, Demczur states, 'Look, we have to open the doors because in 15 minutes we might pass out here on the floor'.<sup>24</sup> Such aesthetic effects as short paragraphs link the tower stories with the recent popularity of flash fiction and the short memoir, and will require us to rethink the influence of Modernist aesthetics of writers and filmmakers on Felman, which has her stress the existential crisis engendered by testimony. The 'radical inarticulateness of contemporary history'<sup>25</sup> has taken a turn from the Modernist sublime to the supermarket shelf, and now increasingly cyberspace; as such, it will require us to read less earnestly, if not less attentively.

Shelves of popular non-fiction have also recently attested to the advent of 'hybrid' testimony, in which professional authors or journalists inscribe the voice of traumatized subjects.<sup>26</sup> Yet this phenomenon is anticipated in *Testimony*, and in earlier testamentary works of art, such as Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*. The clinical encounter already suggests the importance of interdependence in the transmission of testimony, and Felman describes the interviewer and translator in *Shoah* as 'second-degree witnesses'.<sup>27</sup> These 'witnesses of witnesses, witnesses of the testimonies' assist in the 'process of *reception* and assist us both in the effort toward comprehension'; they process 'not merely (as does the professional interpreter) the literal meaning of the testimonies, but also, (some perspectives on) their philosophical and historical significance'.<sup>28</sup> The future of hybrid testimony is thus foreshadowed in Felman's engagement with the alignment of witnesses in *Shoah*, and, elsewhere in *Testimony*, Elias Canetti's reading of Kafka's encounter with the letters of Kleist, Hebbel and Flaubert, which 'adds its testimony—adds

as yet another witness—to Kafka’s *Trial*.<sup>29</sup> Rather than speaking implicitly from ‘within the legal pledge and the juridical imperative of the witness’s oath’,<sup>30</sup> however, hybrid testimonies can include fictional episodes which contradict Lanzmann’s typically epigrammatic statement (quoted by Felman), that ‘The truth kills the possibility of fiction’.<sup>31</sup> They are also—unlike Felman’s chosen authors—unashamedly popular in form, drawing on the nineteenth-century tradition of the realist novel, as opposed to Felman and Laub’s preference for Modernist aesthetics.

The subject of hybrid testimony deserves further explication because these post-colonial versions of the testamentary form seem likely to continue in the future, due—as Matthew Boswell argues in his chapter—to the residual guilt of colonial nations and their readerships, and also the link between such testimonies, human rights organizations and charitable foundations.<sup>32</sup> The politics of post-colonial testimony include recompense through direct action in a way that Rothberg would approve, with his call for the interventions of testimony in the public sphere. In *What is the What*, Dave Eggers notes before the story of a Sudanese refugee begins that ‘All of the author’s proceeds from this book will go to the Valentino Achak Deng Foundation, which distributes funds to Sudanese refugees in America; to rebuilding southern Sudan, beginning with Marial Bai; to organizations working for peace and humanitarian relief in Dafur; and to the college education of Valentino Achak Deng’ (n.p.n.).<sup>33</sup> As Deng then reminds us in the preface, testimony inherently contains the possibility of redress, even if (and especially if) ‘gross human rights violations still continue today in the Darfur region of the country’.<sup>34</sup> Peace does not reign in the ‘centre’ of the post-colonial world, however, with a binary relationship to the ‘margins’: hybridity plays out in a disturbing way in the testimony, because the book is framed with an attack on Achak by African-Americans in Atlanta. That city’s fraught history of slavery, segregation, and the growth of the civil rights movement, is counterpointed with this allegorical account of plundering imperialism to underline the fact that the advent of violence is not only limited to faraway Sudan.

The structural unfolding of the narrative in Egger’s hybrid testimony is strikingly similar to *Shoah* in that ‘We [Eggers and Achak] even went to Sudan together in December 2003, and I was able to revisit the town I left when I was seven years old. I told Dave what I knew and what I could remember, and from that material he created this work of art’.<sup>35</sup> Felman and Laub focus on the importance of the interlocutor to testimony in *Shoah*: the post-colonial equivalent of Lanzmann’s ‘work of art’ would have been filmed in Marial Bai; instead, Eggers conveys the testimony through the traditional novel form. Felman’s concept of the chain of witnesses—which she discusses later in this collection—extends from the encounter in Sudan to the novelistic element of the implied interlocutors, and reader. The testimony self-consciously stages its desperation for an interlocutor: the narrator Achak constantly addresses his words to the characters in the ‘novel’,

from the attackers in Atlanta and staff at a hospital to members of the gym where he works as a receptionist. The difference between the ‘chains’ in *Testimony*—and Lanzmann’s film—and hybrid testimony is that the subject’s voice, even when it is influenced by Lanzmann’s mode of questioning, remains separate from the interlocutor, whereas in *What is the What* it is sometimes impossible to tell—in the diction rather than the overall structure—where Achak ends and Eggers begins. Felman’s testimonial chain is central to her conception of the future of testimony, as Paul de Man’s autobiographical ‘figure of reading’ draws future readers into thinking through the textual and ethical ramifications of historical testimonies. Whereas Felman and Laub assemble their ‘chains’ in relation, primarily, to the classical tradition of Western literature, hybrid testimony offers an alternative line of witnesses in the context of the legacies of colonial history.<sup>36</sup>

Eggers emphasises the fraught clash of genres in relation to truth and fiction as soon as the title page of *What Is the What*: the book is the ‘autobiography’ of Valentino Achak Deng as well as, directly underneath, a ‘novel’ by Eggers. The author’s intricate interweaving of different time frames is the most obvious novelistic element: he encompasses the narrative with the account of an attack on Achak; these events of a single day are interspaced throughout the entire testimony, and produce a testamentary narrative themselves. In the preface, Deng accounts for the moniker of ‘novel’ in a different way: he was ‘very young’ when some of the action took place, and ‘[he] could not, for example, recount some conversations that took place seventeen years ago’.<sup>37</sup> As Boswell notes, however, readers accept such necessary inaccuracies in dialogue without rejecting the autobiographical framework in testimonies such as Primo Levi’s *If This is a Man*. And when Charlotte Delbo fictionalizes sections of *Auschwitz and After*, critics accept this novelistic strategy because—as Delbo explains—she knows she must have experienced such episodes, but cannot remember due to a failure of memory or traumatic disassociation. The metatextual conflicts on Eggers’s title page could have been depicted more simply if he had described the book as testimony, which now (after the work of pioneering critics such as Felman and James Young), would be accepted as encompassing a description of an autobiographical narrative with novelistic elements: one thinks, for example, of Levi’s *If This is a Man*, which includes a fictional section, and novelistic techniques—such as the epiphany of the Piccolo chapter—without these artistic interventions detracting from the autobiographical. On the other hand, outcries at false testimony indicate a public unwilling to sanction—to turn Lanzmann’s epigram on its head—the ‘truth’ of the fictional: hence the outrage directed at James Frey’s *A Million Little Pieces*. Yet to term Levi’s testimony a novel would appear odd, as it does with Egger’s description of Achak’s story, even despite Achak admitting early on that his story includes ‘small embellishments’, and ‘Survivors tell the stories the sympathetic want’.<sup>38</sup> At what point does a testimony become a novel? Such

generic instabilities will be central to thinking through future conceptions of testimony, and the challenge to genre (and form) that is central to the devious capacities of literature, and its strength as a necessarily fraught conveyance of autobiography.

Reflections on forensic witnessing also form a version of hybrid testimony. In Clea Koff's *The Bone Woman*—which Zoe Norridge discusses in her chapter in this collection—forensic teams are engaged in uncovering traumatic narratives: when Clyde Snow investigates the ‘disappeared’ in Argentina, the skull of a young woman ‘tells’ the court ‘that she had been shot in the back of the head not long after giving birth to the baby she was carrying’.<sup>39</sup> Pathologists and anthropologists at work in Rwanda, Bosnia and Kosovo ‘unlock [the] testimonies of human remains’<sup>40</sup>; like Dave Eggers, these ‘witnesses of witnesses, witnesses of the testimonies’ assist in the ‘process of *reception* and assist us both in the effort toward comprehension’; they process ‘not merely (as does the professional interpreter) the literal meaning of the testimonies, but also, (some perspectives on) their philosophical and historical significance’.<sup>41</sup> By restoring (‘birthing’), if possible, the remains’ anatomical position,<sup>42</sup> Koff restores, in Rwanda, ‘an aspect of their “humanness”, and enables them ‘to speak in the collective voice of the victims of the Kibuye church massacre’.<sup>43</sup> The memoir of *The Bone Woman*—rather than the professional investigator—is then able to elaborate on this imagined ‘collective voice’: Koff ponders, for example, why there is hardly any trauma to the radius, ulna and hands, indicating that many victims did not attempt to defend themselves.<sup>44</sup> The switch between the original work and the aesthetics of testimony is far from smooth, however: clashes between the professional interpreter and the author of *The Bone Woman* are enacted many times in the book. At one point, other members of the team mock Koff when she ‘unprofessionally’ begins to treat the corpses as human<sup>45</sup>; she is ‘capable both of scientific detachment and human empathy, but when I revealed the latter, I was made to feel I had revealed too much’.<sup>46</sup> *The Bone Woman* thus forms a testimonial redress to clinical (in both senses of the word) encounters with the dead. As with Demczur’s testimony, the book draws on the techniques of popular fiction: demotic diction (‘You won’t get much joy there, mate’) sometimes fuses with that of the detective novel (‘Was this our man?’).<sup>47</sup> Koff also demonstrates that the clinical encounter itself is not free from the aesthetic: she often notes and savours the language of the pleasurable effects of, for example, examining the ‘sternal epiphysis of the clavicle’, and ‘distal femur’.<sup>48</sup> Ultimately, Koff senses what Felman terms the ‘weak messianic power’ of testimony in her chapter in this collection. The task of testimony is again to ‘rescue the dead [ . . . ] with all the enigmatic weight that this carries’: Koff imagines ‘long silvery strands between me and my teammates and lots of points in Rwanda, Bosnia, Croatia and Kosovo’,<sup>49</sup> but in less redemptive moments such closure is ‘unpicked, unravelled into a shapeless, unfinished difficulty’.<sup>50</sup>

As we have argued throughout this introduction, however, critics must ‘rescue the dead’ and attend to the testimony of those who suffer while simultaneously being conscious—and seeking a better understanding—of the ‘buzz’ that informs their writing, the politics of reading testimony that are inseparable from wider issues of why we read. And certainly the concept of ‘buzz’ is older than E. H. Carr’s influential study of the historian in *What is History?*: Felman quotes Benjamin (approvingly) when he argues, in *Illuminations*, that ‘the traces of the storyteller cling to the story, the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel’.<sup>51</sup> For Felman in her chapter in this collection, the linked witnesses—from Jensen to Freud and then Derrida to Caruth—who engage with ‘writing from ashes’ always reveal the inscription of a voluntary or involuntary autobiographical moment. These moments have to be exploited not privileged; likewise our capacity for love and imagination. Thus we hope that these chapters, as they engage with testimony’s ‘weak messianic power’, will in turn lead to their own future chains of witnesses, that will have their own understandings of the testimonial figures ‘of reading or understanding’ in this edited collection.<sup>52</sup>

## NOTES

1. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York/London: Routledge, 1992), p.xiii.
2. Caryl Churchill, *Seven Jewish Children: A Play for Gaza* (London: Nick Hern, 2009). Further references to this play are given after quotations in the text.
3. For a fuller discussion of Semprún’s work, see Ursula Tidd, *Jorge Semprún: Writing the European Other* (Oxford: Legenda, 2014).
4. Nancy Miller and Jason Tougaw (eds.), *Extremities: Trauma, Testimony and Community* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 2002), p.18.
5. Ibid.
6. Gert Buelens, Sam Durrant and Robert Eaglestone (eds.), *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literary and Cultural Criticism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014).
7. Ibid.
8. Michael Rothberg, ‘Preface: Beyond Tancred and Clorinda—trauma studies for implicated subjects’, in Gert Buelens, Sam Durrant and Robert Eaglestone (eds.), *The Future of Trauma Theory* (New York/Abingdon, 2014), pp.xi–xviii, p.xiv.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Rothberg, p.xiv.
12. Felman and Laub, p.60
13. Ibid.
14. Patricia Yaeger, ‘Consuming Trauma; or the Pleasures of Merely Circulating’ in Nancy Miller and Jason Tougaw (eds.), *Extremities: Trauma, Testimony and Community* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 2002).
15. Jay Cantor, ‘Death and Image’ in C. Warren (ed.), *Beyond Document: Essays on Nonfiction Film* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1996).
16. Cantor, p.25.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Damon DiMarco, *Tower Stories: An Oral History of 9/11* (Santa Monica, CA: Santa Monica Press, 2007), pp.76–92.



20. Ibid., p.77.
21. I am referring here to Attridge's self-conscious grappling with critical vocabulary to describe a phenomenon that he cannot yet quite account for in *The Singularity of Literature*.
22. Dimarco, p.82.
23. Ibid., p.78.
24. Ibid.
25. Felman, p.160.
26. This process does not describe an educated Western author inscribing the words of an illiterate African, with all the Eurocentric implications that that would entail. As soon as page 13, Deng notes the discrepancies between himself and his non-Christian father. Deng's parents cannot read, whereas he attends, as his father calls it, the 'Church of Books' (p.13). The narrator also describes how he had to provide written testimony about his traumatic experiences in Sudan before being allowed to emigrate to the US. Rather, 'hybrid' testimony describes the ways in which professional authors and journalists give novelistic shape to (sometimes pre-existing) testamentary narratives.
27. Felman, p.213.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid, p.2.
30. Ibid., p.204.
31. Ibid., p.206.
32. Eggers and Deng argue that 'the British sowed the seeds for disaster' in Sudan because they 'unified' the country, while allowing the Egyptians to control the northern part of the nation (pp.192–193). The split between the British-controlled south Sudan—with the Dinka and other people—and the north ultimately resulted in civil war.
33. This is a reference to Michael Rothberg's keynote lecture at The Future of Testimony conference (University of Salford, August 2011).
34. Dave Eggers, *What is the What* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2006) p.xiv.
35. Ibid.
36. The novel presents Phil Mays as the ideal interlocutor (and sponsor): a well-off, white Atlantian, Phil listens to Deng's story and then gets into his car 'and cried. [Deng] watched his shoulders shake, watched him bring his hands to his face' (p.173).
37. Deng, p.xiv.
38. Eggers, Ibid. p.21.
39. Clea Koff, *The Bone Woman* (London: Atlantic Books, 2004), p.7.
40. Felman, p.208.
41. Felman, p.213.
42. Koff, p.56.
43. Ibid., p.33.
44. Ibid., p.87.
45. Ibid., pp.48–49.
46. Ibid., p.49.
47. Ibid., pp.2–3.
48. Ibid., p.108.
49. Ibid., p.81.
50. Ibid., p.116.
51. Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller' in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p.91.
52. 'Autobiography as De-Facement', *MLN (Modern Language Notes)*, 94.5 (December 1979), 919–930, p.921.



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Part I

# Witnessing in Psychoanalysis and History