A Message in a Bottle
Bearing Witness as a Mode of Transnational Practice

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Abstract

In response to distant suffering, global civil society is being consumed by a generalized witnessing fever that converts public spaces into veritable machines for the production of testimonial discourses and evidence. However, bearing witness itself has tended to be treated as an exercise in truth-telling, a juridical outcome, a psychic phenomenon or a moral prescription. By contrast, this article conceives of bearing witness as a transnational mode of ethico-political labour, an arduous working-through produced out of the struggles of groups and persons who engage in testimonial tasks in order to confront corresponding perils produced by instances of situational or structural violence; it is the work of witnessing, the normative and political substance generated through the performance of patterns of social action, which matters. Using Celan's allegory of the poem as a message in a bottle, I consider bearing witness as a web of cosmopolitan testimonial practices structured around five dialectically related tasks and perils: giving voice to mass suffering against silence (what if the message is never sent or does not reach land?); interpretation against incomprehension (what if it is written in a language that is undecipherable?); the cultivation of empathy against indifference (what if, after being read, it is discarded?); remembrance against forgetting (what if it is distorted or erased over time?); and prevention against repetition (what if it does not help to avert other forms of suffering?).

Key words

disaster ■ genocide ■ global civil society ■ human rights theory ■ memorialization ■ recognition ■ transnational

> The paradox here is that if the only one bearing witness to the human is the one whose humanity has been wholly destroyed, this means that the identity between human and inhuman is never perfect and that it is not truly possible to destroy the human, that something always *remains*. *The witness is that remnant*. (Agamben, 1999: 34, italics in original)

BEHOLD THE transnational 'era of the witness' (Wieviorka, 1998) and 'the age of testimony' (Felman and Laub, 1992: 206) that we inhabit today. Testimonial narratives of massive human suffering and injustice have frequently contained a global dimension: from colonialism and slavery to the Holocaust and the Gulags, from the Armenian to the Cambodian genocides, from the Chinese Cultural Revolution to South African apartheid, from Hiroshima to South American dictatorships, witnessing has been a transnational practice. Nonetheless, an intensification of such globalizing dimensions has taken place in the recent past and the present, given that eyewitnesses and communicative actors are orienting their messages to groups and institutions spread across the planet (the Ethiopian famine, Tiananmen Square, the ex-Yugoslavia, Rwanda, East Timor, Chechnya, Iraq, Darfur, etc.).[1] What becomes clear, then, is that beyond an 'archive fever' (Derrida, 1996), many parts of the world are consumed by a more generalized witnessing fever whereby public spaces have been transformed into veritable machines for the production of testimonial discourses and evidence (of a visual, oral or textual variety).

Accordingly, the transnationalization of bearing witness is becoming constitutive of the practice itself rather than merely supplementing it, since it increasingly involves and draws upon institutions and political networks that exist beyond the borders of the territory where mass suffering is taking place. While they necessarily remain grounded in local and national settings, testimonial appeals are also increasingly being addressed to a global imagined community composed of diasporic cultural groups, overseas governments, NGOs, social movements, multilateral organizations, media outlets and concerned citizens around the planet. In turn, these actors frequently play determining roles in acknowledging and publicizing atrocities, as well as initiating judicial procedures on behalf of victims and survivors who are geographically distant. First visible in the globalization of Holocaust remembrance that began in the late 1960s (Huyssen, 2000; Levy and Sznaider, 2002), transnational testimonial practices come into play because national governments or civil societies are either unable or unwilling to publicly acknowledge the existence of situational or structural violence, take steps to rectify past injustices or hold perpetrators accountable (e.g. in the ex-Yugoslavia after ethnic cleansing, post-genocidal Rwanda, Pinochet-ruled Chile, South Africa under apartheid). In such cases, 'outside' forces can pressure, assist or even intervene in the domestic affairs of a nation-state to try to ensure that the plight of targeted populations is not ignored. In fact, the reception and circulation of testimonials among certain segments of global civil society (notably media outlets,

non-governmental organizations [NGOs] and social movements) is becoming a precondition for the realization of a similar process at the level of the nation-state. Transnational publicity grounds the labour of bearing witness, which is greatly enhanced by the formation of global public spaces in which audiences respond to distant suffering, while itself expanding the number and kinds of such spaces.

Since the 1980s, the conjunction of several developments has further contributed to the globalization of bearing witness. Among these is the well-documented explosion of mass communication flows linking different regions of the globe, since the transnational reach and coverage of media industries, coupled to the instantaneity of their reporting and in spite of their high levels of corporate concentration, potentially swells the number of public stages for various forms of testimony (the ubiquity of 24-hour television news channels being the most obvious indication of this trend). The spread of visual recording technologies – chiefly those of the photographic and video camera – and of the internet is popularizing the documenting of human rights violations, which becomes accessible not only to victims themselves, but also to journalists, NGOs, social movements and even ordinary citizens.

Additionally, the consolidation of human rights as a moral horizon in many national and transnational settings has characterized the post-Cold War era, thereby facilitating the creation of socio-political spaces hospitable to the production, circulation and reception of testimonies about global injustices. Not to be overlooked in this respect is the multiplication of international criminal tribunals and truth commissions, which are sanctioning the institutionalization of bearing witness as a way of moving forward after mass trauma. Moreover, several humanitarian NGOs (e.g. Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Oxfam) are implementing awareness and fundraising campaigns in which eyewitness accounts of atrocities, famines and extreme poverty feature prominently, thus dramatically raising the visibility of testimonies in civil society and governmental sectors.

Consequently, witnessing fever has taken hold in a variety of fields of intellectual endeavour. It is a key preoccupation in what could be termed the realist arts – that is to say, those explicitly concerned with factual depictions of reality (documentary film-making, journalism, autobiographical writing, etc.). Moreover, the theme of bearing witness has sprung forth as a key source of inspiration for creators in the fictionalizing arts, which attempt either to transfigure reality or break with it (e.g. literature, theatre, cinema, painting).[2] Within academic circles, an already imposing body of work on the topics of collective memory and testimony has appeared over the past two or so decades.[3] Because its various strands focus on bearing witness as an exercise in truth-telling (its historical accuracy), a juridical outcome (its legal and institutional pre-conditions), a psychic phenomenon (a subjective response to trauma) or a moral prescription (the communicative responsibility of eyewitnesses), the socio-cultural practices that are constitutive of it remain under-theorized. Hence, this article contends that we should

conceive of bearing witness as a globalizing mode of ethico-political labour, an arduous working-through produced out of the struggles of groups and persons who engage in testimonial tasks in order to confront corresponding perils across various situations in global civil society. Put succinctly, it is the transnational work of bearing witness, the normative and political substance generated through the performance of patterns of social action, which matters.

To illustrate this argument, I want to summon a celebrated prose passage from the Jewish-Eastern European poet Paul Celan:

> A poem, as a manifestation of language and thus essentially dialogue, can be a message in a bottle, sent out in the – not always greatly hopeful – belief that somewhere and sometime it could wash up on land, on heartland perhaps. Poems in this sense too are underway: they are making toward something. Toward what? Toward something standing open, occupiable, perhaps toward an addressable Thou, toward an addressable reality. (2001: 396)

Using Celan's allegory of the poem as a message in a bottle, we can come to understand bearing witness as a web of transnational testimonial practices structured around five dialectically related tasks and perils: giving voice to mass suffering against silence (what if the message is never sent or does not reach land?); interpretation against incomprehension (what if it is written in a language that is undecipherable?); the cultivation of empathy against indifference (what if, after being read, it is discarded?); remembrance against forgetting (what if it is distorted or erased over time?); and prevention against repetition (what if it does not help to avert other forms of suffering?). These testimonial practices are Sisyphean in character, for actors perpetually encounter such perils without transcending them; fragile and unfinished, the work of bearing witness merely parries threats and difficulties integral to the expression and communication of limit-experiences (see Figure 1). In other words, drawing on Ricoeur's (2000) argument about the work of memory and Derrida's (2001) use of Freud's notion of the work of mourning, I am contending that the labour of witnessing such experiential crises is aporetic, for it simultaneously confronts their pure alterity and their normalization, while putting into play – rather than resolving – the tension between these two tendencies.

Treating bearing witness as a transnational form of ethico-political labour enables us to come to terms with its constitutive paradox. On the one hand, eyewitness accounts of limit-experiences have more often than not fallen on deaf ears, whether those of the Western public, states, or international organizations. As a number of important studies demonstrate, denial, bystander apathy, *Realpolitik* calculus, lack of political will, bureaucratic 'deresponsibilization', and even 'compassion fatigue' are the common reactions to testimonial pleas regarding mass suffering (Barnett, 2002; Cohen, 2001; Moeller, 1999; Power, 2002). On the other hand, such testimonies continue to multiply and to gain visibility around the world as

Perils		*Tasks*
• silence • incomprehensibility • indifference • forgetting • repetition	**vs.**	• voice • interpretation • empathy • remembrance • prevention

Figure 1   The work of bearing witness

bearing witness becomes one of the primary mechanisms through which progressive forces are attempting to combat global injustices.

Before proceeding to a closer examination of the five tasks out of which the labour of bearing witness is made possible, its theoretical conception should be fleshed out.

The Labour of Bearing Witness

To underscore the analytical specificity of the conception of bearing witness employed here, I want to denote two of its defining features: intersubjectivity and publicity. First, witnessing is an intrinsically dialogical process of recognition involving two parties, namely, eyewitnesses and their audiences, who are engaged in processes of address and response through which they establish and negotiate each other's roles.[4] Both primary eyewitnesses (victims and survivors who experienced atrocities) and their secondary counterparts (who witnessed such atrocities first-hand but did not directly experience them, such as journalists and international observers) pursue the representational task of attempting to reconstitute and transmit their first-hand experiences of catastrophe in order to initiate struggles against silence, incomprehension, indifference, forgetting and return; they write messages, place them in bottles and send them out to sea. However, *contra* monological or monistic paradigms that present testimony as merely an act of personal conscience or of a solitary, heroic individual, we should insist on the inter-subjective character of the transnational labour of bearing witness. Integral to testimonial performances is an appeal to audiences that must in turn respond to it, for both the positions of addressee and addressed are constructed through mutual recognition of each by the other. Those having lived through a particular situation or event only become eyewitnesses to it if and when institutional sanctioning or popular acknowledgement of their status occurs; the bottle must reach land, and others must both read and understand the message it contains. At the same time, testimonial practices vitally depend upon the constitution of audiences, who become such by accepting the moral asymmetry and political responsibility that binds them to those who directly witnessed a limit-experience. Social actors become

testimonial audiences by heeding eyewitnesses' narrative appeals, and responding to their calls for reflection and action about a particular instance of situational or structural violence. Bearing witness requires that addressees pick up the bottles washed up on land, decipher the enclosed messages, ponder them and intervene accordingly with the aim of alerting the world, making sense of what has taken place, cultivating empathy, remembering and preventing the reoccurrence of the immediate or structural circumstances that are at the root of mass suffering.

Second, rather than framing the labour of bearing witness through a psychologizing or radically subjectivist lens, I want to stress its ineffably public character – its existence as patterned sets of social action performed in national and transnational public spaces (Boltanski, 1993). Arendtian and Habermasian in spirit,[5] this strong conception of publicity leads to an interpretation of dialogical cycles of address and answer, and of recognition, between the two testimonial parties as publicly oriented relations that citizens and states undertake in a multiplicity of sites and through diverse means of communication (ranging from museums and courts to books, photography, films and television, electronic and print media).

In order to underscore witnessing's dialogical and public facets, I want to put forth a multidimensional model of testimonial processes between eyewitnesses and audiences – processes that operate at, and move between, three levels of proximity in relation to specific limit-experiences or circumstances: experiential, communicative and institutional (see Figure 2).

Of course, the processes outlined in Figure 2 are structured by asymmetries of power, which enframe the socio-political production and reception of testimonial practices. Accordingly, formal and informal responses to eyewitness appeals are inconsistent and selective; if some
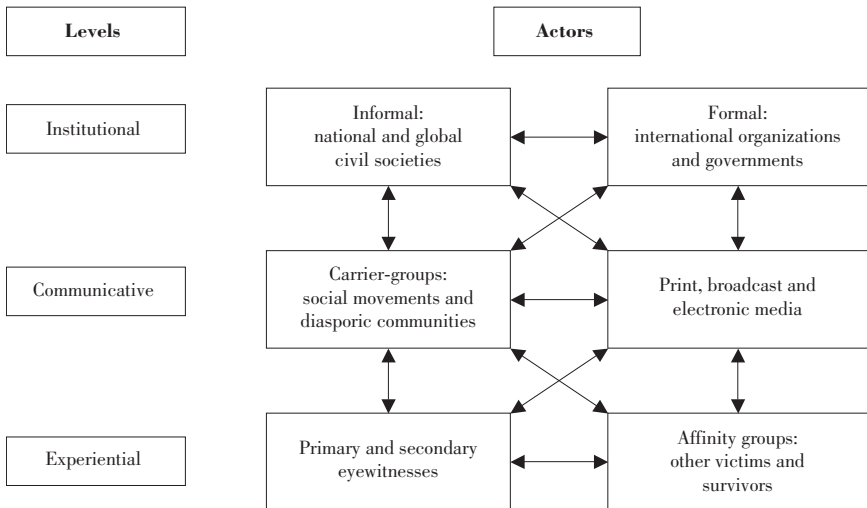

Figure 2   Eyewitnesses and audiences

messages in bottles are read and prompt action taken, many others are ignored or generate little more than generalized indifference. Since formalist perspectives built around abstract principles or criteria of testimonial veracity only provide limited explanations at this level, we need to put into play a notion of socio-political struggle between groups and persons bearing witness. Material and symbolic hierarchies along lines of gender, race and ethnicity, class, nationality and religion are inscribed in and deployed by eyewitnesses and their carrier-groups, whose capacity to exercise power and mobilize resources differs widely – as does their gaining and retaining access to, support from, and influence over other communicative or institutional actors. Relations of inequality and domination delimit testimonial strategies that carrier-groups employ to transmit messages to national and global audiences, as well as the retributive and restitutive demands presented to them; eyewitnesses demanding public recognition of specific events or situations have differentiated capacities to meet and comply with official institutions' procedural requirements and expectations, such as the satisfaction of minimal evidentiary thresholds to launch prosecutorial or compensatory mechanisms in national and international judicial systems. Moreover, the extent and kind of formal institutionalization of mnemonic sites and commemorative rituals for a particular limit-experience are similarly impacted by struggles between testimonial actors. Conversely, the hierarchical structuring of audiences bearing witness heavily shapes how states and components of civil societies respond to accounts of mass suffering, for addressees actively participate in the construction of what becomes considered a 'worthy' or 'compelling' message through a variety of means: expansion of established public spaces receiving testimonial appeals or creation of new ones; narrative structuring through approval or denial of specific interpretations of events; assistance in the collection, validation and presentation of evidence, etc.[6] Endorsement or collaboration by prominent institutional actors (such as Euro-American governments or the United Nations) greatly facilitates practices of bearing witness, whereas their hostility, obstruction or indifference – or, yet again, the support of exclusively weak institutions – can render it virtually ineffective.

Having established certain theoretical parameters, let us return to unpacking the transnational labour that defines bearing witness and the tasks whose unending performance is essential if testimonial perils in the face of limit-experiences are to be kept at bay.

Speaking Out: Confronting the Abyss of Silence

The initial and most elementary aspect of the labour of witnessing consists of defying the lack of public knowledge about specific instances of mass suffering as well as various techniques of denial that frequently accompany its perpetration, whether 'at home' or abroad. In the face of these perils, testimonial parties attempt to name and publicize such instances transnationally, by informing the world at large as well as establishing and officially recording basic facts about the circumstances surrounding limit-experiences – or,

indeed, correcting established narratives about them (via truth commissions and trials whose proceedings are globalized via media exposure, for instance) (Cohen, 2001: 227–8). Eyewitnesses of catastrophe are often driven by the prospect of communicating what they saw or lived through to proximate and distant others, thereby taking on the burden of representing mass suffering. For their part, when they respond, audiences in national and global civil societies are doing so in a variety of ways: publicly denouncing what has occurred or is occurring, urging political action to put an end to a particular situation, assisting survivors to escape to safe locations, smuggling out evidence of mass crimes overseas, and amassing and ensuring the archival preservation of this evidence wherever it is most propitious.

These fact-finding and record-setting activities are merely a point of departure for the practice of bearing witness, for, as mentioned above, transnational audiences can grant or deny recognition to testimonials. Indeed, both the symbolic and material power of targeted groups and of their addressees (affinity groups, and communicative and institutional actors) can create or enlarge public spaces for bearing witness, enable or obstruct access to such public arenas by assessing the comparative 'value' of testimonial demands and selecting the ones to which to respond. If witnessing is to be possible, carrier-groups must assume the task of broadcasting eyewitness accounts to decision-makers and ordinary citizens, or, to put it differently, to read the message in a bottle and be radically open to heed its call. At the very least, the development of a fledgling global civil society widens the range of potential testimonial carrier-groups, albeit without necessarily increasing the probability of action on the part of political leaders or concern on the part of civic actors.

Furthermore, the arduous nature of the task of testimonial listening stems from the fact that various segments of audiences must be willing to learn from eyewitnesses, and that they try to reflect on the modes of representation of events and explanations of structural factors; they must strive to decentre their own lifeworlds and expand their experiential horizons to come to terms with first-hand accounts of catastrophe which, even then, may well lie beyond their cognitive or imaginary capacities (Young, 1997). Yet when they accept to carry this burden, those bearing witness refuse to concede to ignorance and take refuge in the falsely comforting belief that 'We did not and could not know'. Assuming a testimonial duty of speaking out on behalf of victims and survivors who may not directly be able to do so themselves, or simply denouncing the existence of mass suffering, continuously narrows the circles of those who can legitimately or plausibly claim to be unaware.

Incomprehension and the Work of Interpretation

The transnational writing and sending of a testimonial message does not make it inherently decipherable by others, given the communicative and phenomenological limits of words and images striving to capture mass suffering. Adorno's dictum (1981: 34) about the barbarism of writing poetry

after Auschwitz pointed in this direction, that of a generalized crisis of representation in the face of limit-experiences.[7] What sorts of oral, visual or textual devices can adequately and justly render the intensity and scale of catastrophe and transmit it to distant audiences? And how can Euro-American audiences comprehend extreme situations, which exist completely outside of the bounds of the habitually conceivable?[8]

Acknowledging representational aporias is essential, yet such acknowledgement need not slip into resignation or despair regarding the supposed utter unintelligibility of catastrophic events. On the contrary, the transnational work of bearing witness consists of the sort of interpretive practices that struggle to represent and make sense of that which exists at the threshold and in the recesses of language, speech, writing and image. Indeed, wrestling with the difficulties of portraying and grasping extremity marks testimonies' ethico-political stakes, for '[w]hat happened cannot be represented and has nevertheless to be addressed/written-towards and be made present' (Friese, 2000: 174). The dialogism of bearing witness is visible in such a making present, as eyewitnesses and audiences jointly create liminal spaces and moments in which and during which sense-making is produced, if only partially and temporarily. These encounters can and should encapsulate the radical alterity of a limit-experience in a manner that neither trivializes nor domesticates it, yet without segregating it to the realm of the inhuman and the incomprehensible – which would effectively shield it from public engagement and critical examination (Alexander, 2002; Felman and Laub, 1992: 232). The task of meaning-making cannot fully capture mass suffering, but, conversely, the latter does not exist in a zone of pure hermeneutical otherness.

The interpretive process, then, attempts simultaneously to evoke the distance and proximity that exist between the two parties bearing witness. On the one hand, testimonies endeavour to convey the exorbitant singularity and acuteness of instances of structural or situational violence, their rupture from what is ordinary and familiar for most citizens in the Western world. Densely phenomenological narrative reconstructions and images of mass suffering can affect Euro-American audiences profoundly, while also averting the 'banalization' of extremity by underscoring its difficult translation and the hermeneutical gaps remaining between eyewitnesses and audience members. The latter's engagement with limit-experiences relentlessly confronts them with the dehumanization of victims, given form in Levi's qualified and ambiguous formulation, 'If this is a man' (Levi, 1996).[9] On the other hand, the work of interpretation aims to establish certain points of intersection between vast experiential, historical and socio-cultural divides. Although they must eschew the dilution or trivialization of mass suffering evoked above, eyewitnesses nevertheless try to produce communicative intelligibility for global civil society participants and future generations, by reconstructing the circumstances that nurtured catastrophe, producing thick descriptions of what life is or was like, or yet again offering glimpses into the lifeworlds of those who are or were directly affected; in

some instances, they do so by drawing parallels with emblematic cataclysms (the Shoah serving as a template through which to sound the alarm about genocidal practices in our age, for example). Hence, the publicization of and response to testimonial appeals depend upon their capacity to describe the socio-historical uniqueness of a limit-experience, while gesturing to its universal significance and impact.

Carrier-groups and global civil society actors share in this interpretive labour, being vital players in the creation of spaces of 'in-betweenness', where they displace their own worldviews in order to confront the experiential alterity expressed in testimonies; to decipher the message in a bottle, they must study and reflect on what it is communicating. Accordingly, audiences can support public education campaigns and organizations devoted to the analysis and intercultural explanation of mass suffering for the world at large. However, hermeneutical practices of this sort should also guard against the temptation of believing in a perfect reversibility of positions between parties, according to which audiences can easily and completely transpose themselves in the place of victims and survivors of catastrophe. Conversely, the dehumanization of these groups ought not to project them into the realm of an inhuman and inconceivable alterity, for their ambiguous standing as both similar to and different from those to whom they appeal should be sustained (Todorov, 1996: 277; Yavenditti, 1974: 37). Again, Levi's exhortation is evocative: '[m]editate that this came about./ I commend these words to you' (Levi, 1996: 11).

Indifference and the Cultivation of Empathy

Clearly, one of the most daunting facets of transnational witnessing is the persistence of collective indifference and inaction on the part of Western states and populations, which only selectively and inconsistently respond to testimonial appeals from afar. Thus, the emotional and implicatory facets of denial (Cohen, 2001) – that is to say, lacking a sense of care about the plight of others and ignoring the moral implications of acknowledging their suffering, respectively – are formidable forces today. Yet this reality should not obscure a parallel development, the forging of transnational bonds of empathy with, and responsibility towards, geographically and culturally distant groups and persons existing outside the conventionally defined boundaries of moral communities. Among sectors of global civil society, the initiatives of certain diasporic ethno-cultural networks, NGOs and social movements are bringing attention to instances of situational and structural violence, as well as helping to cultivate a sense of universal responsibility. Testimonial practices can 'bring a tragedy home' and 'put a human face' on global injustices, to the point of mobilizing Euro-American public opinion if their carrier-groups possess sufficient levels of material and symbolic capital (albeit rarely to an extent that compels states and international organizations to prevent or stop an unfolding disaster). Such selective empathy beyond borders is particularly striking when contrasting the belated and flawed yet eventually sustained Western efforts to lend

humanitarian assistance during the 1984 Ethiopian famine and to intervene militarily in Kosovo in 1999 to the inaction that characterized responses to the 1994 Rwandan genocide and the continuing situation in Tibet.

This is to say that first-person accounts of catastrophe are more likely to foster empathetic responses beyond national borders when inserted into existing institutional mechanisms, such as those produced by public sites of commemoration of past disasters and political or juridical performances (museums, formal apologies to victims, trials, truth commissions, etc.). In addition to describing limit-experiences and fostering discussion of them within civil societies, sites and performances of this kind serve to enact and publicize principles of cosmopolitan responsibility toward distant others; every time a state or international organization recognizes past wrongdoings toward given populations while taking restitutive measures, the norm of universal moral equality can be advanced.

But how does the work of bearing witness cultivate empathy, so that testimonial masterworks – *Shoah* (Lanzmann, 1985), *Hiroshima* (Hersey, 1985), and *I, Rigoberta Menchú* (Menchú and Burgos-Debray, 1984), among others – can invoke different audiences' sense that a particular situation or event is intolerable? Certainly, basic communicative factors are at play, since these works are written, filmed, edited and designed to challenge their addressees' common position as bystanders in the face of mass suffering by plunging them into the unfolding narratives they convey. Moreover, they impact national and global public opinion to the extent that they initially gain approval from gate-keeping opinion-makers (reviewers, public intellectuals, political figures, etc.) and are distributed through media channels with a broad reach. However, we need to understand how cosmopolitan modes of empathy are created by fostering the moral imagination of different audiences, and simultaneously constructing the latter via 'symbolic extension' and partial 'psychological identification' with the plight of victims and survivors (Alexander, 2002). In their distinctive ways, both expressivism and rationalism offer us explanatory frameworks to grasp the emergence of a cosmopolitan moral imagination in response to testimony.

From an expressivist vantage-point, human nature – or more specifically, engrained moral sentiments triggered by the self's conscience and inner voice – is the most reliable source of empathy toward others. We feel compassion toward them because of our intrinsic ability to recognize human beings' common capacity to experience suffering, and because we possess, in Rousseau's words, 'an innate repugnance at seeing a fellow-creature suffer' (1973 [1755]: 73). Although we should be wary of sentimentalizing limit-experiences, the phenomenologically thick descriptions of mass suffering contained in testimonial accounts expose audiences to the plight of distant strangers and can thereby awaken a sense of compassion (Alexander, 2002: 34–7; Rorty, 1989: 94).[10] By reconstructing the socio-historical setting of a given catastrophe and the lifeworld of affected persons and groups, these accounts aim to draw audiences in, to provisionally dwell in the emotional, mental, physical and spiritual universes of survivors and

victims; the aforementioned works of Hersey, Lanzmann and Menchú are effective precisely because they transmit to audiences the subjective experience of being present in the then and there – the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, feelings, and thoughts that accompany horror and systemic violence, the daily struggles to survive, resist, help others and make sense of extremity. As such, it becomes possible for viewers and readers to connect to the vulnerability and pain of their fellow human beings who, beyond their historical and socio-cultural specificities, remain persons of flesh and blood, of heart and soul, of despair and hope – human, all-too-human. This is the normatively thorny message that Levi's poem carries: if we recognize the outlines of a man (or indeed, a woman) in his account of the lives of victims and survivors of Auschwitz, then we are morally bound to respond to it; otherwise, our capacity to feel compassion for others has been lost, and with it, our very humanity.[11]

Though compelling, expressivism tends to underplay the role of public dialogue and reflection in the formation of transnational empathy. Thus the fruitful corrective that rationalism provides, which – whether in the guise of the notion of enlarged mentality (Kant), of fusion of horizons (Gadamer) or of discourse-ethical reciprocity (Habermas) – situates the moral imagination's anchors in the dialogical capacity to listen to others and carefully consider their positions by putting ourselves in their place and striving to bridge socio-cultural and normative distances between the two parties. If rationalism must be tempered by a recognition that this bridging is always incomplete, the bounds of moral communities can nevertheless be extended beyond how they are traditionally defined by a communicative working-through that remains open to and engaged with the circumstances of distant strangers.

Hence, the intersubjectivity that informs the creation of empathy has rationalist foundations, as components of different audiences need to draw upon officially sanctioned principles of human dignity (or human rights) in order for them to be willing to seriously consider testimonial appeals. A subject's ethical horizons can expand if he or she is aware that the events or systems described by eyewitness accounts violate such norms. Furthermore, formal institutions and laws can serve as the rational grounds upon which empathetic responses to distant suffering can be nurtured.[12] Articulating a notion of equal moral worth of all persons, for instance, the discourse of universal human rights entrenched in official circles since the middle of the last century has, among other things, assisted progressive global civil society actors in promoting a cosmopolitan sense of responsibility. Granted, states have often manipulated or instrumentalized this ideal to legitimate geopolitical and socio-economic projects, and international organizations have often ignored it in practice. And it remains an unrealized project, given how the term 'humankind' remains a stubbornly abstract signifier compared to ties of nationality, ethnicity or religion. Nonetheless, the institutional entrenchment of egalitarian universalism in juridical categories such as 'crimes against humanity' and in treaties such as the

United Nations-sponsored Millennium Development Compact are making it easier to condemn global injustices and appeal to international organizations, governments and civic actors to respond to them.

Forgetting and the Duty of Memory

Aside from giving voice, creating understanding and cultivating empathy, the labour of bearing witness confronts the prospect of collective amnesia regarding past catastrophes. But because the 'work of memory' (Ricoeur, 2000) has been discussed extensively in academic circles over the past decade, we need only briefly mention its testimonial facets here.[13] While the commemorative function of witnessing is vital, so too is the honouring of victims and survivors of mass suffering. Following Duras (1960), the task pursued by actors in global and national civil societies could be described as the acquisition of an 'unconsolable memory', mnemonic practices that refuse to capitulate to time by abandoning the possibility of remembrance. Since collective memory is a dynamic and shifting socio-political construct that eyewitnesses and audiences produce and maintain dialogically, the two parties must perpetually rekindle it for each generation, whereas its transnationalization offers new possibilities; following a dynamic of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, diasporic communities and social movements can enact rituals of commemoration in locations that are remote from where a cataclysm occurred – in fact, this restaging may be essential to counter state-sanctioned strategies of denial and social forgetting implemented at the original site of disaster.

Therefore, testimonially based mnemonic labour is structured by symbolic and material struggles, in order to determine who and what is institutionally remembered (and, conversely, stricken from the official record). To counter historical revisionism, those bearing witness pursue strategies of textual or audio-visual recording of eyewitness accounts,[14] safeguarding of physical and documentary evidence (in archives, court documents, museums, etc.), discovery of new evidence, and public education to reacquaint later generations with what took place in the then and there. Accordingly, witnessing actors can establish sites of collective memory and support the communication of past events and situations. Key to these processes is the ritualization of commemoration, the creation and regular performance of public ceremonies of collective remembrance (memorial days or events, circulation of eyewitness accounts in the media, marches, art exhibits, etc.).[15] Such ritual performances challenge temporal and spatial distancing from an instance of mass suffering by restaging traces of it for contemporary audiences and helping the latter make sense of its root causes and consequences. The plunging back into history fosters a mnemonic sensibility, resulting not in a single, unified and comprehensive whole, but a patchwork of overlapping commemorative acts.

Never Again: Parrying the Return of Evil

Transnational witnessing culminates in struggles to avert situations of mass suffering for strangers living in other times and places. Thus, to the perils mentioned above should be added that of political complacency stemming from a refusal to heed the warnings about the future contained in testimonial messages and faith in the supposedly teleologically inscribed moral progress of humankind. Witnessing practices aim to disrupt or puncture self-delusions about the eventual disappearance of structural and situational violence, as well as to interpellate ordinary citizens and civil society groups to remain vigilant regarding its reoccurrence; as such, the oft-heard expression 'never again' is directed less at what was than what is and what ought to be, thereby inextricably entwining the three dimensions of temporality. Remembering victims and survivors serves as a reminder of the need to prevent mass suffering to others who live in our midst and will come in our wake. 'It happened, therefore it can happen again: this is the core of what we have to say' (Levi, 1988: 199).

To accomplish its preventive task, bearing witness is geared toward eliciting structural transformations of the circumstances that produced limit-experiences. Cumulatively, eyewitness accounts and responses by certain audience segments can create political pressure to prosecute persons responsible for instances of mass suffering, notably in light of ongoing experiments with extra-territorial jurisdiction in international law and national courts. Legal measures can neutralize the capacity of particular figures to inflict further harm (e.g. through imprisonment or bans on running for public office), but, just as importantly, they also operate as deterrents against those who believe that they can perpetrate grave injustices with impunity. Moreover, criminal trials and truth commissions are noteworthy as globalized rituals of collective condemnation of past regimes or events, simultaneously publicizing them for newer generations, reaffirming the adherence to basic human rights principles, and even resulting in the invention of novel preventive legal mechanisms and normative discourses.

Testimonial practices also aim to dismantle the socio-political and economic systems that contributed to mass suffering, the entire 'machinery of evil' at the root of the latter: coercive instruments (the military, police, etc.), ideological environment (media, formal education and other socializing bodies), and global policies (structural adjustment programs, nuclear deterrence and so on). While this process of structural reform can only be completed by states or international organizations, it is often thrust forward by civil society actors such as the peace movement during the Cold War, the Chilean diaspora during and after the Pinochet regime, or progressive NGOs opposing neoliberal privatization schemes in sub-Saharan Africa. Additionally, testimony can support the development of new formal organizations that can potentially initiate important changes in the current world order (the International Criminal Court and Millennium Development Compact being two of the most obvious examples). For their part, national truth commissions perform several preventive functions, from inviting

collective rituals of catharsis within publicly sanctioned spaces (expression of remorse on the part of perpetrators, descriptions of victims' experiences, healing between groups, etc.) to laying the foundations for societal reconstruction, often with outside assistance.

The last and most elusive cautionary testimonial gesture is the appeal for widespread civic engagement and a generalization of the responsibility to avert future catastrophes – a sensibility that audiences can best achieve by performing the tasks of listening, interpretation, cultivating empathy and commemoration described above. Global civil society participants frequently publicize eyewitness accounts to try to prick the conscience of populations, to convert a stance of bystanding into one of political action in the face of mass suffering around the world.[16] Conversely, as certain humanitarian organizations and emergency relief campaigns imply, the unwillingness to involve ourselves and assist those in need may make us 'metaphysically guilty' (Jaspers, 1947). Bearing witness reminds us, then, that to prevent structural and situational violence wherever it may occur is not merely a juridical or institutionally sanctioned problem, but an existential obligation that may salvage Euro-American audiences from the judgement of future generations when the latter examine what was done with messages in bottles received today.

Conclusion

There is little doubt that witnessing is one of the defining socio-cultural practices of our epoch, an increasingly favoured mode of response to massive and extreme abuses of civil-political and socio-economic rights in different parts of the world that is being bolstered by a gradual communicative and institutional build-up. None of this, however, should obscure the transnational labour that eyewitnesses and audiences undertake which, as I have argued throughout this article, is constitutive of the normative and social terrain upon which testimony unfolds. The performance of dialogical and public tasks cannot rectify historical disasters, nor does it stand as an iron-clad set of procedures to avoid future ones; it merely indicates paths of resistance.

Having said this, it would be gravely mistaken to minimize the lack of effectiveness of bearing witness in a world where mass suffering is one of the defining conditions of the 21st century. Numerous eyewitnesses continue to be silenced or ignored, indicating that the circulation and reception of testimonies is as selective as ever. To speak of the unspeakable and represent the unrepresentable remains daunting, and so too does the task of making sense of experiences whose scale and intensity shatter ordinary paradigms of understanding. Compassion fatigue via media over-saturation and generalized indifference to the plight of distant strangers persists, for even the advent of a discourse of cosmopolitanism and of an increasingly active global civil society have yet to cement a widespread sense of concern for and responsibility toward all human beings. Reactionary attempts to rewrite history or to forget it lurk everywhere. Even public recognition of

the horrors of the past has not been enough to halt crimes against humanity or rectify situations of severe material deprivation, putting in doubt the 'enforceability' of the laudable declaration of 'never again'. Most damaging of all, perhaps, is the fact that witnessing fever regularly fails to overcome implicatory denial, for ordinary citizens, national governments and international organizations still generally refuse to take serious action to curb global injustices.

At the same time, I want to insist upon the fact that we should not conflate this facing up to what may well be the persistent aporias of bearing witness with a sense of political futility. As messages in bottles multiply and spread across the face of the earth, some segments of the world's population are answering back by pursuing the tasks of listening and reading, deciphering and reflecting, empathizing with eyewitnesses, remembering their suffering, and trying to prevent further harm to distant strangers. Current testimonial work consists, in part, of struggles to broaden the participation of citizens across territorial borders by establishing public spaces where eyewitness accounts can be widely broadcast and audiences can more readily engage with them. To this extent, global civil society is becoming a key arena through which to denounce structural and situational sources of violence, as well as to mobilize against them. What remains to be accomplished, then, is the invention of an effective politics of witnessing, whereby testimonial actors are able to awaken Euro-American public opinion via carrier-groups and the media, and thereby leverage recognition of global injustices into demands for a new world order.

In the pall of Auschwitz, Adorno declared that '[t]he abundance of real suffering tolerates no forgetting' (1982: 312). And, I would add, as long as human beings are subjected to unjust and life-threatening conditions, it should tolerate no end or limit to the labour of bearing witness.

Notes

1. Obviously, this is not to suggest a facile moral equivalence between these different events.

2. In the field of cinema alone, three exceptional works can be mentioned: Alain Resnais and Marguerite Duras's *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959), Jean-Luc Godard's *Eloge de l'amour* (2001), and Atom Egoyan's *Ararat* (2002). Of course, as these films imply and find troubling, the line between the realist and fictionalizing arts is sometimes blurred (Kurasawa, 2004).

3. Aside from Maurice Halbwachs' pioneering studies in the field of collective memory (Halbwachs, 1994 [1925], 1997 [1950]), Pierre Nora's (1984–92) multi-volume *Les Lieux de mémoire* project, and the journal *History & Memory*, many other contributions are particularly notable (Agamben, 1999; Coq and Bacot, 1999; Felman and Laub, 1992; Hartman, 1996; LaCapra, 1994; Le Goff, 1992; Oliver, 2001; Ricoeur, 2000; Yoneyama, 1999; Young, 1993).

4. On the paradigm of recognition, see Honneth (1995). Though I do not explicitly elaborate or fully subscribe to it, the Habermasian concept of discourse ethics (Habermas, 1990) has sustained the most theoretically and normatively sophisticated analysis of the dialogical character of social life. To this extent, my argument runs counter to Oliver's (2001) claim that witnessing is 'beyond recognition'.

5. Despite the divergences between Arendt's emphasis upon agonistic pluralism in the public domain (Arendt, 1998 [1958]) and Habermas's consensual vision of publicity as a regulative principle (Habermas, 1989b, 1996: 329–87), both are significant to the labour of bearing witness.

6. Of course, this is complicated by the fact that public arenas may contain widely differing, even seemingly incommensurable, testimonial claims about particular events (as in the case of the Armenian genocide or the Israeli–Palestinian conflict).

7. Adorno elaborated upon this declaration elsewhere (1982: 312–13), while subsequently qualifying it in *Negative Dialectics* (Adorno, 1973: 362–3). To my mind, it is not intended as a prohibition against representation of the Holocaust, but a warning against its aestheticization (and that of horror more generally).

8. In addition to being covered in much of the aforementioned literature on witnessing and collective memory, the representational aporias of extremity are analysed in many other works (Friedländer, 1992; Langer, 1991; Lyotard, 1988; Maclear, 1999).

9. See Agamben's (1999: 58–60) similar reflection on this passage. For doubts about the 'humanness' of victims of Hiroshima along the same lines, see Hersey (1985: 60–1).

10. Nevertheless, Rorty's position is problematic in two ways: first, it overstates the role of the emotions in achieving solidarity (and therefore excludes the rationalist route explained below); second, the evocation of an emotional response includes, in his words, 'the manipulation of sentiments' (1998: 176), without reference to overseeing criteria of normative judgment – therefore failing to rule out dubious or illegitimate kinds of sentimentalism and demagogy. I would like to thank Amy Bartholomew and Maria Pia Lara for drawing my attention to these points.

11. To reiterate what was stated earlier, this form of partial identification with another's plight should be distinguished from a misplaced belief in perfect moral and social symmetry between the two parties, according to which their roles can be perfectly reversed ('I feel your pain because I can place myself in your shoes').

12. This is not to say that we should solely rely on institutionally created normative guidelines, to the extent that society is turned into a 'factory of morality' (Bauman, 1989: 175). If they can help to broaden the moral imagination, socio-political institutions can conversely narrow it down by blunting sentiments and legitimizing prejudices that reinforce social distancing. Neither one of these facets is intrinsic to institutions, whose orientation and effects are subject to socio-political struggles.

13. On the socio-political and aesthetic issues surrounding the memorialization of Hiroshima, see Hogan (1996), Lifton and Mitchell (1995), Maclear (1999) and Yoneyama (1999); for the Holocaust, see Alexander (2002: 52–5), Habermas (1989a), Hartman (1996), Langer (1991), Vidal-Naquet (1992), Young (1993); for 11 September 2001, see Engle (2007), Sturken (2002).

14. An outstanding example is Yale University's Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, which was established in 1981 and now includes more than 4200 interviews (http://www.library.yale.edu/testimonies; accessed 10 December 2006).

15. A well-known instance of ritualization is the two-decade long silent vigil and walk by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires, which is directed toward public acknowledgement and remembrance of the thousands of Argentinian 'disappeared persons'.

16. On how Amnesty International integrates these existential appeals in its human rights campaigns, see Cohen (2001: 196–221), Geras (1998: 19–23).

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