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Geoffrey Hartman, who pioneered the collection and analysis of Holocaust videotestimonies, observes:

Testimony, today, has become a major non-fiction genre beyond the specific instance of the Holocaust. It may have reinforced parallel forms in other cultures, such as the Latin American testimonio. Vernacular, especially when orally transmitted, and with the semiarticulate eloquence of unrehearsed speech, the witness accounts coming out of the Shoah have raised public consciousness toward other genocidal acts, both earlier and later. They may even have encouraged the explosion of confessional and autobiographical narratives generally.²

Hartman makes an almost throwaway reference to "testimonio" – the predominantly Latin American genre in which the narrator

¹ This chapter is an extensively revised version of a paper originally presented at the Poetics of Exile Conference, The University of Auckland, New Zealand, 17-19 July 2003. Dr Amelia Klein made valuable comments, as did research assistants, Dr Donna-Lee Frieze and Janette Sato.

recounts personally witnessed atrocities on behalf of an oppressed group with the hope of inspiring the oppressed to take action against the oppressor. Hartman implies that these two forms of testimonial discourse are related and that Holocaust testimony has in some way contributed to the success of “testimonio” literature. Neither assumption is self-evident.

Despite the existence of extensive research agendas into both Holocaust testimony and “testimonio,” no one has systematically compared the two.\(^3\) On the one hand, apart from Hartman’s comment above, scholars of Holocaust testimony display little interest in non-Holocaust literature and they do not engage with the theoretical debates arising out of the study of “testimonio.”\(^4\) On the other hand, “testimonio” theorists openly acknowledge the influence of Holocaust scholars, most notably Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub’s groundbreaking study, Testimony, that focuses primarily on the Holocaust and has introduced a wide academic readership to the problems associated with witnessing in extreme situations.\(^5\) John

\(^3\) See Fuyuki Kurasawa, A Message in a Bottle: Bearing Witness as a Mode of Ethico-Political Practice (Working Papers. The Center for Cultural Sociology, Yale University, 2003 [cited 5 March 2004]); available from http://research.yale.edu/ccs/papers.html. Kurasawa’s paper gives a sophisticated overview of “witnessing” literature in general but does not develop a specific comparison of Holocaust testimony and “testimonio.” My thanks to Dr Donna-Lee Frieze for drawing my attention to this reference.

\(^4\) Parallels have been drawn between the dispute concerning Guatemalan Nobel prize winner Rigoberta Menchú’s honesty and the situation of Binjamin Wilkomirski who claimed to be a child Holocaust survivor and published an account of his alleged experiences. Wilkomirski was revealed to be a fraud. Harvey Peskin, “Memory and Media: ‘Cases’ of Rigoberta Menchú and Binjamin Wilkomirski,” Society (2000). Peskin’s article is the one comparative study of a Holocaust testimony with a “testimonio,” but it is concerned with media coverage of the controversy rather than issues to do with the nature of testimony per se. See further discussion on Menchú below.

Beverley, the pre-eminent theorist of "testimonio," refers to Felman and Laub when addressing the problematic question of the accuracy of eyewitness accounts of atrocity, particularly in relation to the authority of the testimonial narrator.\(^6\)

Theorists of both Holocaust testimony and "testimonio" are concerned with issues of first-person memory and the witnessing of traumatic events. As suggested above, such testimonial literature raises issues about the authenticity and historicity of witness accounts — about the relationship between what is told and what actually happened. The context, purpose, methods and effects of telling and the intended audience are critical analytical issues, as are the implications for such testimony of mediation by editors, interviewers, oral historians, video camera operators, etc. Also of relevance is a consideration of the effects of the medium of transmission, whether written text, audio/video or digitally via a computer. Despite these commonalities, there are significant differences between the historical, cultural and rhetorical traditions that have shaped the production and reception of Holocaust testimony and "testimonio." At the most profound level the testimonial purpose of these discourses has been understood quite differently, with their relationship to "the real" lying at the heart of this difference.

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Holocaust testimony, so often fragmentary in nature, has been presented as barely able to capture an unspeakable, incomprehensible and unbelievable reality. Theorists have thus emphasised the therapeutic role played by Holocaust testimony in healing the psychological trauma suffered by individual survivors, rather than its function in attesting to “real” historical events. Much analysis of Holocaust witnessing has focused on an individual’s “unique” but reluctant act of remembrance, undertaken out of a sense of duty, often by someone who may question the reality of what they experienced, let alone draw political lessons from what occurred. Even where scholars acknowledge the value of Holocaust testimony as a historical source, with the exception of analysis of how Holocaust witnessing has been harnessed to serve a Zionist political agenda, Holocaust testimony has generally been understood as operating outside of the political sphere. By contrast, “testimonio” has been celebrated precisely because its subjects and/or audience assume that the recounting of “real” experiences of oppression can inspire marginalised groups to engage in political action, although increasingly theorists have developed critiques of notions of naïve realism inherent in early “testimonio” analysis. In addition, as traumatic witnessing has emerged as a key feature of initiatives to protect Human Rights (for instance, within the framework of Truth and Reconciliation Commissions) Holocaust testimonies have been reconceptualised within the broader political framework of “human rights” discourse.

8 Ibid., 155.
HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

Holocaust testimony can take many forms. Contemporary writing, usually diaries, survivor memoirs, oral history, whether transcribed or presented in electronic form, and “fictional” accounts can all perform a testimonial function so long as they are produced by someone who has directly experienced the Holocaust. Testimony counters Nazi attempts to obliterate not only all Jews, but also all evidence of the crime.\(^{12}\) In biblical Hebrew the word “testimony” is synonymous with the word for evidence and witness, and this underlines its privileged status in conveying an “authentic” account of events.\(^ {13}\) Of course, the “authenticity” of the testifier does not guarantee the “truth” of their story, however, without an “attested, immediate presence to the events” testimony is not possible.\(^ {14}\)

Jewish diarists who were secretly recording events did so because they recognised the urgency of preserving knowledge of what occurred for subsequent generations. Preservation of evidence became a reason diarists gave for surviving for as long as they did.\(^ {15}\) Memoirists and survivor writers also attribute their “will to live” to a burning desire to transmit knowledge of their experiences to others, although the alternative possibility is illustrated by the suicide of well-known Holocaust writers Paul Celan and (possibly) Primo Levi. Survivors may feel they have to tell in order to live and when they believe they have told all they can, or nobody cares to listen, life becomes untenable.\(^ {16}\) More recently the trend towards soliciting oral and videotestimonies has created a new class of testimony where the sense of urgency to tell may not lie so much


\(^ {14}\) Hartman, “Testimony and Authenticity,” 92.


\(^ {16}\) Nanette C. Auerhahn and Dori Laub, “Holocaust Testimony,” in *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* (1990), 455-7.
with the survivor witness as with the convenor of the oral testimony project who realises that opportunities to capture individual accounts are rapidly diminishing. Such testimony will be shaped by the broader project’s goals of interpreting life stories as they relate to the Holocaust narrative\(^{17}\) (although it is fascinating to observe individuals attempting to subvert pre-scripted interview protocols).\(^{18}\)

Many writers of diaries and memoirs, as well as contributors to oral testimony collections, assume, indeed desire, their testimonies to be made available to a wide audience, usually with the hope that they will serve an educative role in the fight against intolerance and help to prevent future genocides. Rarely, however, is their purpose presented as politically and socially transformative and many remain intensely personal in style. Here the testimony provided by Zivia Lubetkin, a leader of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and founder of a kibbutz in the newly established state of Israel, is a notable exception. Throughout her life, Lubetkin testified in public about the lessons to be drawn from her Holocaust experience, promoting Zionism and the need to create a “New Jew” to preserve Jewish life in the future.\(^{19}\) Critically, Orly Lubin observes how, in an address to an expectant kibbutz leadership, Lubetkin, by “[r]elinquishing the first-person grammatical ... translated her personal experience into a collective narrative,” employed a rhetorical strategy that subsumed the individual to the requirements of the collective.\(^{20}\) Lubetkin’s testimonial strategy seems virtually interchangeable with that of “testimonio.”

By contrast, a dominant trope of survivor testimony, that of the therapeutic interview designed to help the victim deal with trauma, focuses primarily on the personal. Laub, child survivor, psycho-

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19 Lubin, “Holocaust Testimony, National Memory.”
20 Ibid., 133.
therapist, and cofounder of the Fortunoff Video Archives for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale, discusses the disjunction between information he has gathered in a therapeutic conversation and information made "publicly" available in videotestimony collections. He acknowledges that his approach conflates the historical with the psychoanalytic because from his "perspective the Holocaust is an event witnessed primarily 'from the inside' and ... [his] pursuit is not so much literal historical accuracy as it is virtual internal truth." Functionally Laub does not distinguish between private and public telling because he assumes that both are concerned with the "private witnessing" of survivors as they try to reconstruct shattered identities by re-establishing empathetic relationships. In essence such testimony is imagined to be both dialogical and therapeutic. Its objective is the integration of the traumatised self with a "post-traumatic self." Michael Nutkiewicz on the other hand contends that the public and private spheres remain quite distinct. He differentiates between memories that survivors make available for a publicly accessible videotestimony collection and those unconsciously suppressed because they are regarded as too "shameful" for public consumption. The result of this fracturing of the private and public is to call into question the relationship between the respondent and their community, to reinforce their social isolation. Nutkiewicz thus contends that: "Privatizing the survivor's experience divorces it from its

21 Auerhahn and Laub, "Holocaust Testimony."
22 Dori Laub, "Testimonies in the Treatment of Genocidal Trauma," Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies 4, no. 1 (2002). Wieviorka acknowledges that the use of Holocaust "knowledge" revealed in videotestimony remains problematic and unresolved when she observes, "What is there to testify about then? What knowledge do the survivors possess – because they must certainly possess some knowledge?" Wieviorka, The Era, 138.
23 For the therapeutic function of testimony see Malpede, "Chilean Testimonies," 539, Deborah Schiffrin, "We Know That's It: Retelling the Turning Point of a Narrative," Discourse Studies 5, no. 4 (2003) and also Lawrence L. Langer, Holocaust Testimonies. The Ruins of Memory (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991). Langer describes the profound disjunction between the "Holocaust self" and pre- and post-Holocaust selves.
communal, didactic, and therapeutic properties.”\textsuperscript{25} The extent to which Holocaust testimony is, or indeed can be, a mechanism for social connectedness, thus remains highly contested. Annette Wieviorka’s contention that in “the era of the witness” the medium of videotestimony creates an illusory sense of intimacy between witness and viewer reinforces the idea that connectedness has little basis in reality.\textsuperscript{26}

Holocaust survivor testimony is often perceived as an act of remembering not just for oneself but also on behalf of the dead whose memory may constitute a vicarious form of resurrection. Tragically, survivor witnessing is by its nature incomplete because the “true” witnesses have perished.\textsuperscript{27} It is left to survivor witnesses “to speak in their stead by proxy, as pseudo-witnesses; they bear witness to a missing testimony.”\textsuperscript{28} Theirs is the most extreme form of what Elena de Costa terms “substitutionary narration.”\textsuperscript{29} This act of substitution creates the impression that witnesses are, in Naomi Mandel’s words, “speaking corpses” whose testimony uncomfortably bridges the world of the dead and the living. The persistence of survivor guilt among witnesses further underlines the problematic situation of substitute witnesses who may feel that their witnessing is, at best, incomplete and, at worst, fraudulent.\textsuperscript{30} At no point could an individual Holocaust witness claim to be completely representative of Holocaust victims as a group. Thus, while agreeing that Holocaust testimony may perform a metonymic function, Oren Baruch Stier stresses its fragmentary nature – Holocaust witnesses form merely a remnant of the pre-Holocaust community.\textsuperscript{31}

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.: 17.
\textsuperscript{26} Wieviorka, The Era, 142. See also Waxman, Writing the Holocaust, 163-5.
\textsuperscript{29} De Costa, “Voices of Conscience,” 48.
\textsuperscript{31} Oren Baruch Stier, Committed to Memory. Cultural Mediations of the Holocaust (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 3.
One practical way of honouring the memory of the dead has been by acting as a witness in legal proceedings, although, according to Lawrence Douglas, it was not until the Eichmann trial in 1961 that survivors became an integral feature of the judicial process by testifying to the facts of the Holocaust in trials against Nazi Holocaust perpetrators. By contrast, the immediate postwar trials at Nuremberg called few witnesses, preferring to rely on documentary evidence instead. Nor did the trials differentiate between the specific fate of Jews and that of other victims of Nazi crimes.32 Within the context of the Eichmann trial, the prosecutor transformed the act of witnessing into a “heroic” act of resistance against Nazi annihilation. The survivor witnesses themselves, however, were reluctant to allow their testimonies to be manipulated into positive, uplifting narratives. Instead they dwelt on the unresolved horror of their experiences, unable to find consolation in artificial attempts to create heroic myths out of their testimony.33 The court was not an arena in which survivors could find understanding for their situation, let alone some form of redemption. This is not surprising since the purpose of the law is to determine who committed an act – who was responsible – not to make ethical judgments.34 All that survivor witnesses may hope for is that by testifying they have fulfilled their obligation to the dead and their testimony may prevent similar events occurring in the future.35


34 Agamben, Remnants of Auschwitz, 18-24. Whether the alternative notion of restorative justice, as practised in the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission in an attempt to provide a greater sense of justice for victims of Human Rights abuses, has been successful is open to question, Schaffer and Smith, Human Rights and Narrated Lives, 44.

In terms of their level of cultural specificity Holocaust testimony can be discursively located between two polar extremes along an analytic spectrum. At one extreme, Holocaust testimony is characterised as a particularist discourse, embedded within specific social and cultural contexts – hence, in response to both the diversity of origin of Holocaust survivors and the diversity of their experience, Zoë Waxman’s observation that “(t)here is no universal survivor experience.” At the other extreme Holocaust testimonial discourse is said to lie beyond culture. Addressing this dichotomy, Alan Mintz distinguishes between what he terms the “constructivist” model of Holocaust representation that “stresses the cultural lens through which the Holocaust is perceived” and the “exceptionalist” model that depicts Holocaust experience as existing so far outside history that it is unrepresentable.

The “constructivist” model focuses on the socio-cultural dimensions of Holocaust testimony and highlights a number of testimonial features that overlap with those of “testimonio,” including an attempt to rescue threatened cultures, the influence of religious traditions in shaping testimonial forms and its understanding of Jewish history. European Jewish communal life before the second world war embraced a plethora of competing ideas and influences. Mintz observes that adherence to the competing “cultural codes” of biblical Judaism, Zionism, Jewish socialism, Yiddishism, Hasidism, far from disintegrating under Nazi oppression, not only “intensified” in response to the threat of annihilation, but also provided meaningful frameworks within which fear and suffering were expressed. In the midst of

36 Waxman, Writing the Holocaust, 89.
38 Mintz, “Two Models,” 68.
destruction Jews in the ghettos gathered together key cultural texts, burying them within the ghetto or smuggling them to sympathetic gentiles. The few who survived felt obliged to preserve the lost culture and prevent its obliteration. In the postwar era survivors produced memorial (yizkor) books that not only commemorated and documented the history of their now vanished communities, but also gave a name to the dead in accordance with Jewish tradition. It is not surprising that, in comparison with indigenous, non-literate people, Jews (as “people of the book” from predominantly urban backgrounds) turned to written texts to preserve their cultural traditions.

Nonetheless, oral media have also constituted a central component in Holocaust testimonial discourse. For instance, Wieviorka draws a parallel between the role played by yizkor books and videotestimonies, arguing that they both constitute “a constant throughout the Jewish memory of the Holocaust: to return a name, a face, a history to each of the victims of mass murder.” The remarkable power of Ada Lichtmann’s Yiddish testimony at the Eichmann trial further illustrated the profound impact of Jewish oral testimony. Yiddish was the language spoken by millions of Eastern European Jews before the Holocaust. Its use is now restricted to a relative handful of Holocaust survivors. Even at the time of the trial Yiddish was a language under threat and this partly accounts for the response to Lichtmann’s testimony, which held listeners transfixed during its broadcast throughout Israel. Delivered in Yiddish in contrast to the dominant Hebrew of the trial, Lichtmann’s testimony appeared to emanate from the dead themselves as she described Nazi violation of religious Jews in Poland.

The cultural impulse to testify is deeply embedded within Jewish religious practice and is intrinsic to the Old Testament. Paul Ricoeur identifies four different ways in which testimony is understood in the Old Testament:

At first the witness is not just anyone who comes forward and gives testimony, but one who is sent in order to testify.

40 Wieviorka, The Era, 26ff.
41 Ibid., 141.
Originally, testimony comes from somewhere else. Next, the witness does not testify about isolated and contingent fact but about the radical, global meaning of human experience. It is Yahweh himself who is witnessed to in the testimony. Moreover, the testimony is oriented toward proclamation, divulging, propagation: it is for all peoples that one people is witness. Finally, this profession implies a total engagement not only of words but also of acts and, in the extreme, in the sacrifice of a life.  

The role of the witness is to confirm the existence of God and the special relationship between God and the Jewish people.

Of particular relevance to the Holocaust is the idea that witnessing involves testifying in extremis and post-biblical Jewish history is replete with examples of catastrophic events – expulsions, pogroms and finally extermination. To make sense of suffering rabbis developed liturgical practices invoking Jews to turn back to the bible as a means of interpreting their circumstances. The paradigmatic biblical story of exile and return places Jewish suffering within a mythological framework. Thus Judaism interprets the present through the filter of the bible in order, according to Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, to “seek not the historicity of the past, but its eternal contemporaneity.” The Jewish community’s memory of its biblical past is reinforced through ritual practice such as the telling each year of the story of the Jews’ liberation from Egypt at a Passover meal. Specific foods are eaten such as bitter herbs in memory of enslavement. The ritual enjoins participants to ensure that: “In every generation each Jew is obliged to regard himself as though he personally had gone forth to Egypt.” Participation in such rituals is itself an act of testimony that dissolves distinctions

between biblical and historical time and conflates individual and collective suffering.

Nonetheless, Jewish traditions of testimony, which imply that the Holocaust should be interpreted as a catastrophe designed to test Jewish faith, may appear inappropriate to Holocaust survivors. Auerhahn and Laub comment that survivors feel totally abandoned by God with the effect that: "The witnessing that in Judaism is to allow knowing and believing in the Holocaust leads to its opposite, to an undermining of knowledge and belief." Paradoxically, testimony whose purpose is to enable connection through communication reinforces isolation and calls into question the possibility of witnessing.

In an observation that echoes Mintz's account of the "exceptionalist" perspective, Laub links the impossibility of witnessing to the peculiar nature of the Holocaust itself:

What precisely made a Holocaust out of the event is the unique way in which, during its historical occurrence the event produced no witnesses. Not only, in effect, did the Nazis try to exterminate the physical witnesses of their crime; but the inherently incomprehensible and deceptive psychological structure of the event precluded its own witnessing, even by its very victims.

The scope and nature of the event was so incomprehensible that it remains beyond the imagination of those who had direct contact with it. Nazi tactics deliberately to disguise their intentions so disoriented their victims that it became impossible for them to disentangle "fact" from "fiction." However, according to Ernst van Alphen it is not so much the extremity of events that interferes with the ability to tell; the problem lies in "the split between the living of the event and the available forms of representation with/in which

48 Mintz, "Two Models," 41.
50 Agamben, Remnants of Auschwitz, 33-9.
the event can be experienced." 51 There are no appropriate tools available in the symbolic toolkit to transform the experience of the Holocaust into discourse. 52

Mintz comments that because the "exceptionalist" characterization of Holocaust experience as inexpressible has dominated academic analysis, most notably in the United States, little effort has been made to reconcile "exceptionalist" and "constructivist" approaches. 53 Recent studies by Michael Bernard-Donals and Richard Glejzer 54 and Michael Rothberg 55 are beginning, however, to explore possible syntheses. Rothberg, in particular, is anxious to reengage with the historicity of Holocaust experience. His term "traumatic realism," while acknowledging the problematic nature of representation, contends "it [traumatic realism] nevertheless cannot free itself from the claims of mimesis, and it remains committed to a project of historical cognition through the mediation of culture." 56 Applied to Holocaust testimony, Rothberg's theory re-examines the relationship between discourses of extremity and historical events located within a public epistemological space. While mindful that


52 In an earlier publication van Alphen argues that the origin of unrepresentability lay in the disjunction experienced by victims during the Holocaust between ordinary language and what they were actually experiencing, Ernst van Alphen, "Testimonies and the Limits of Representation," in Caught by History. Holocaust Effects in Contemporary Art, Literature and Theatre (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 44-5.


56 Ibid., 140. Like Mintz, Rothberg is critical of Langer's approach because it does not deal with the multiplicity and diversity of Holocaust experience.
recent "testimonio" analysis explicitly challenges the "fetishization of the real, the authentic, or the spoken,"\textsuperscript{57} the following discussion explores how the literature on "testimonio" may suggest strategies for engaging with the historicity of Holocaust experience.

**HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY / "TESTIMONIO:" THE SAME GENRE?**

The primacy of "the real" when defining "testimonio" is evident in Beverley’s description of the constitutive elements of "testimonio":

> By testimonio I mean ... a narrative ... told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts. ... The word testimonio translates literally as testimony as in the act of testifying or bearing witness in a legal or religious sense. ... The situation of narration in testimonio has to involve an urgency to communicate, a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, imprisonment, struggle for survival, and so on, implicated in the act of narration itself. The position of the reader of testimonio is akin to that of a jury member in the courtroom. Unlike the novel, testimonio promises by definition to be primarily concerned with sincerity rather than literariness.\textsuperscript{58}

Importantly, the "testimonio" speaks on behalf of a politically or socially marginalised group, such that "the individual first-person singular subject (‘I’) is replaced by the representative agent of a collective identity (‘we’)."\textsuperscript{59}

Nobel Peace Prize winner, Rigoberta Menchú’s account of her family’s political persecution, *I Rigoberta Menchú. An Indian Woman in Guatemala,* published in 1983, is regarded as the quintessential

\textsuperscript{57} Nance, *Can Literature*, 124.


example of the "testimonio" genre. The reason for this is evident in Lance Grahn’s pithy summary of the impact of her book:

It was a forceful declaration of personal dignity, class-consciousness, and ethnic solidarity. It was, and remains, a moving and paradigmatic portrayal of the life and death struggles in Guatemala that arose out of the articulation of poverty, institutionalised racism and violence, militarised authoritarianism, and hope.

According to Grahn, Menchú’s writing realises the "potential of the subaltern" that had previously manifested itself in both earlier Latin American liberation movements and cultural responses to terror by the oppressed.

Menchú’s "testimonio," like "testimonios" in general, share many features of Holocaust testimony. "Testimonios" privilege the eyewitness who can testify to what they directly experienced in an "authentic" manner. In addition such witnessing performs a judicial function with the reader asked to identify with the victims of crime and pass judgment on the guilty. "Testimonios" also draw on religious understandings, in this case within a Christian or indigenous, rather than a Jewish framework. "Testimonio" is imbued with a sense of the urgency of telling, but in contrast to Holocaust testimony, action is oriented towards political change not communication.

A characteristic, but problematic, feature of "testimonio" is the role played by the interlocutor-editor in assembling the narrative elements of the story into a coherent account. Because (unlike European Jews) informants are often illiterate and/or speak a native language understood by few, their stories are entrusted to an educated, middle-class writer who writes on their behalf. What

62 Ibid., 63.
63 For a discussion of the limitations of "testimonio" as judicial testimony see Nance, Can Literature, 25ff.
emerges is a first-person text, which creates the "literary illusion" that the "testimonio" author is the marginalised, "subaltern" figure. The identity of the actual author is not considered important because the individual experiences described are "metonymic" of experiences of the oppressed group. This further example of "substitutionary narration" differs significantly from Holocaust testimony given by a survivor on behalf of the dead or a "remnant" of the community. Not only does the literate author who is not a witness to the events being described adopt the persona of a living individual, but actively collaborates with them. While arguably the text is open to manipulation because the ghost-writer is not the actual witness, the partnership between witness and writer is a model for the cooperation between the intelligentsia and the lower classes.

Clearly, there are parallels between the role of the interlocutor in the "testimonio" and the oral historian interviewing Holocaust survivors. For example, Hartman comments that in his experience the most successful testimonies are solicited when a "testimonial

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66 See previous reference to De Costa, "Voices of Conscience," 48.

67 Nance argues that such writers remain conscious of the limitations of their role and this affects their ability to "realize" the "full possibility" of effective writing, Nance, *Can Literature*, 120-1.


alliance” is formed between interviewer and Holocaust survivor. In the case of the “testimonio,” Grahn also emphasizes the significance of the “testimonial alliance.” He counters criticism of the problematic role played by the non-witness author of “testimonio” by contending that, without the assistance of a mediator, the subaltern voice cannot otherwise find expression. The effect is, in de Costa’s words, “that these witnesses take control of their authentic voice and use language to create a real, immediate, relivable environment of memorable events.” Nonetheless, wherever and however “testimonio” is mediated, the writer inevitably imposes an external structure on the narrative that may pre-empt what is said and how.

While similarities exist between Holocaust testimony and “testimonio,” they are also fundamentally different in their religious and political orientation.

Several theorists comment on the interchangeability of Christian and Marxist discourse and its manifestation in liberationist theology (with its social justice agenda of promoting radical change.) “Testimonio” is seen to have a redemptive, as well as witnessing function. For instance, Menchu’s “testimonio,” according to Doris

71 Grahn, “Bearing Subaltern Witness,” 44.
72 De Costa, “Voices of Conscience,” 44.
73 Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, the editor of Rigoberta Menchu’s “testimonio” describes in the introduction how she arranged tape-recorded interviews chronologically and thematically, Burgos-Debray, ed., I, Rigoberta Menchú, xix-xxi. Joanna Bartow argues that, despite trying to play down her role, the book’s prologue “indicates how the book was as much a process of representing her [Burgos] own self, for herself, as of representing Menchú’s experience,” Joanna R. Bartow, “Essential Subversions. Reading Theory with Latin American Women’s Testimonial Discourse,” in Woman as Witness. Essays on Testimonial Literature by Latin American Women, ed. Linda S. Maier and Isabel Dulfano (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 50. Emphasis in the original.
Sommer, fulfils a “Christian obligation” to witness through a “juridically oriented narrative.”  

Significantly, in the light of criticisms of Menchú’s veracity and, in contrast to Old Testament conventions, Christian testimony de-emphasises the importance of the direct eyewitness, privileging faith instead. Belief in Christ’s redemptive function replaces the necessity to witness personally.  

A final element linking “testimonio” to Christianity is the redemptive power of sacrifice – the idea that, as with Christ’s crucifixion, political salvation is achieved through the deaths of individual martyrs.  

Whether Holocaust deaths could ever be considered redemptive is, of course, highly problematic.  

In any case, Jewish testimony’s primary purpose (as indicated above) is to promote memory by reaffirming the place of catastrophe within a Jewish tradition of suffering. Its function is not transcendent.  

Because radical political action is so central to its rationale, “testimonio’s” agenda is also fundamentally different from that of Holocaust testimony. Arguably, Holocaust testimony is apolitical because for survivors political action, possibly with the exception of changed or challenged, is possibly reflective of their pseudo-religious dimensions, Nance, *Can Literature*, 124.


Ricoeur, “The Hermeneutics of Testimony.”  


David Roskies concludes his study of Jewish reactions to catastrophe by referring to the painting Pole Sitters by the Israeli artist Yosl Bergner. The painting of three wooden poles wrapped in cheese graters mocks the idea of redemption in a post-Holocaust era, Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse*, 307-10.
mobilisation to promote Zionism, may be pointless.\(^{80}\) Georg Gugelberger puts his finger on this when he argues that “testimonio” presupposes a receptive audience that can be mobilised to action, unlike Holocaust testimony most of whose putative audience was annihilated.\(^{81}\) In “testimonio” the urgency to tell, rather than being related to a fear that there will be no one left to witness, is motivated by the desire to mobilise an oppressed class and its sympathisers to change the political order as soon as possible. Provocatively, Kimberly Nance questions how realistic such expectations of a receptive readership may be, commenting on “reader resistance” to act upon the revolutionary message of the “testimonio” text.\(^{82}\) For Jews persecuted because of their “race,” nothing can now be changed (although alleged Jewish passivity in the face of annihilation remains a contentious issue).

The central purpose of “testimonio” is, thus, to provoke the victimised to political action\(^ {83}\) and traditionally “testimonio” has conceptualised colonial oppression, whose source is social and economic marginality and the concomitant political powerlessness of the subaltern,\(^ {84}\) within a Marxist framework of class conflict. Even where, as in the case of Rigoberta Menchú, indigeneity is associated with oppression, it becomes subsumed into a wider class struggle.\(^ {85}\) The call to action in “testimonio” presupposes that a display of

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\(^{80}\) Hence the comments that “most of the Holocaust documentaries differ by not emphasizing the learning process and the politicization ... which makes Latin American so significant and so different,” Georg M. Gugelberger and Michael Kearney, “Voices for the Voiceless: Testimonial Literature in Latin America,” *Latin American Perspectives, Voices of the Voiceless in Testimonial Literature, Part 1* 18, no. 3 (Summer 1991): 9.


\(^{82}\) Nance, *Can Literature*, 50-6.

\(^{83}\) Indeed, de Costa points out that “repossessing one’s life story through giving testimony is a form of action” that overcomes the initial trauma, described in De Costa, “Voices of Conscience,” 45.

\(^{84}\) Beverley, “The Margin at the Center,” 24-6.

\(^{85}\) Brabeck argues, however, that Menchú’s indigenous background accounts for her sense of solidarity and the subsuming of her identity within a web of social relationships. See Brabeck, “Testimoio: A Strategy,” 254.
solidarity can enact change – a premise that is both optimistic and idealistic.

Furthermore, “testimonio’s” request for solidarity is restricted to the oppressed. Indeed, “testimonios” actively enlist readers to identify with the cause. Far from being “passive” recipients of ideas, readers are seen as potential “allies,”86 complicit in future actions.87 The proselytising dimension also reflects the influence of liberationist theological traditions.88

Mobilisation is premised on the assumption that dialogue can be established between the marginalised group and the broader community.89 As Elzbieta Sklodowska observes, the “testimonio” genre focuses on “communal experience” rather than the “inner self.”90 This emphasis on the communal contrasts to Auerhahn and Laub’s previously discussed interpretation of Holocaust testimony as a means of reconstructing an individual identity shattered by the Holocaust experience – to “re-constitute the self as one who is heard, is explored.”91 Holocaust testimony asks the listener to validate the teller’s experience, but without the listener being provoked to further action.92 Attempts to construct Holocaust testimony as a universalistic discourse whose goal is the prevention of future genocides by warning against the dangers of intolerance, can make some survivors feel that the uniqueness of their experience is under threat, while others welcome a broader human rights agenda.93

86 Referring to Menchú, Brabeck notes that the creation of alliance does not, however, imply that distinctions between the indigenous and non-indigenous disappear, ibid. 256.
87 De Costa, “Voices of Conscience,” 43.
89 Craft, Novels of Testimony, 16-23. See also Kurasawa, A Message in a Bottle (cited) who observes the increasing tendency of testimonial literature to seek global solidarity and dialogue.
92 See Ch. 8 for further observations about the reception of videotestimonies and its effects.
93 Waxman, Writing the Holocaust, 182.
If the communal focus of "testimonio" is more closely interrogated, however, the relationship between the communal and the individual appears less straightforward. William Tierney observes that "(n)o other literary form assumes that the voice of one individual is representative of a group or that the voice of a speaker should be believed when he or she speaks about the constructed realities of his or her experiences," a view which assumes that "testimonio" narrators bear a unique obligation in relation to their communities. So dominant is this assumption, that "testimonio" narrators (and theorists) have rarely challenged the status of "testimonio" authors' claim to act as "agent(s) ... of a collective memory and identity." Questions such as whether an activist's self-conscious identification with a group by itself makes him or her representative, or whether it is too easy to romanticise and idealise a heroic, communal struggle at the expense of less easily grasped oppression, are seldom asked. Recently, however, anthropologist David Stoll's investigations into the factual accuracy of Rigoberta Menchú's story has forced the issue and triggered heated debate about who can speak authentically for a group. Stoll challenges Menchú's claims to have been an eyewitness to traumatic events (including her brother's murder), although she did not actually observe them.

Yvonna Lincoln's response to the controversy underlines the centrality of authentic witnessing to the authority of testimonial discourse. Lincoln is a sympathetic and methodologically sophisticated reader, who by no stretch of the imagination can be characterised as a mindless empiricist. After considering various arguments that sought to downplay the relevance of literal "truth"

95 Yúdice, "Testimonio and Postmodernism," 44.
96 Eva Paulino Bueno ponders this issue when she asks why the published diary describing the extreme poverty of the black Brazilian, Carolina Maria de Jesus, has not enjoyed the same acceptance into the academic canon as "testimonios." Bueno concludes that de Jesus has been neglected because she does not claim that her life story is "paradigmatic" of the condition of all Brazilian women, Eva Paolino Bueno, "Carolina Maria De Jesus in the Context of the 'Testimonio': Race, Sexuality, and Exclusion," Criticism 41, no. 2 (1999).
to establishing Menchú’s legitimacy, Lincoln somewhat reluctantly concludes that Menchú’s writing represents “perjured testimony,” which fundamentally compromises its effectiveness.97 Tierney observes that minor factual discrepancies were not at the heart of Stoll’s criticisms, but rather the question of authenticity.98

Despite such concerns, Menchú’s academic supporters are legion and they have mounted a vigorous case in her defence, accusing Stoll of ignoring the broader contextual framework within which her work should be understood. Criticism of Menchú is dismissed as the product of “the unwillingness of hegemonic intellectuals to listen to subaltern ones.”99 Her advocates emphasise the irrelevance of minor errors in judging the overall “truth” of her work. They comment that her book should be judged by indigenous rather than western, “colonialist” cultural standards and, as indicated earlier, assert that her commitment to the political struggle as an authentic “agent” of subaltern “collective memory,”100 is beyond dispute.101

Arguably, in the context of the emergence in the last decade of “mainstream” liberal democracy in Latin America, “testimonio’s” radical rhetoric has gone out of academic and political fashion.102 The arguments mobilised on Menchú’s behalf are no longer underpinned by the Marxist materialist perspectives that were so influential in the initial phases of “testimonio” theorisation. For example, Gugelberger criticises the anthropologist, Stoll, for his apparent ignorance of recent literary theory as it had been applied to

97 Yvonna S. Lincoln, “Narrative Authority vs Perjured Testimony: Courage, Vulnerability and Truth,” Qualitative Studies in Education 15, no. 2 (2000). Lincoln is a pre-eminent scholar in the area of qualitative research methods.
100 Yúdice uses the term “agent” to distinguish it from the less proactive notion of “representivity.”
"testimonio," writing "(t)estimonio is a hybrid and complex genre closer to literature than to documentary."\textsuperscript{103} Similarly, Susan Sánchez Casal comments:

To consider truth and authenticity as effects and conditions of these texts is to acknowledge within them the presence of artifice, of fiction, and therefore to reject the static notion of the testimonial as a waiting vehicle for the overwhelming truth of the referent and to reject at the same time the possibility that the text can deliver the "simple," "true" voice of the indigenous testimonial informant.\textsuperscript{104}

Theoretical attention has shifted from the historicity of "testimonio" experience to the relativisation of historical truth and a post-modern awareness of multiple interpretive possibilities.\textsuperscript{105} Nance goes one step further by suggesting that some "testimonios" deliberately encourage "skepticism" among readers towards truth claims in order to foster a critical posture towards authority.\textsuperscript{106}

Alberto Moreiras exemplifies the trend towards a more sophisticated approach to both the literary and the material in "testimonio" – an approach that converges with recent theory on Holocaust representation. For Moreiras "testimonio" occupies a liminal space that "incorporates an abandonment of the literary, [which] provides the reader with the possibility of entering what we might call a subdued sublime: the twilight region where the literary breaks off into something else, which is not so much the real as is its

\textsuperscript{103} Georg M. Gugelberger, "Stollwerk or Bulwark?: David Meets Goliath and the Continuation of the Testimonio Debate," \textit{Latin American Perspectives} 26, no. 6 (1999): 48.


\textsuperscript{105} Typical of such relativisation is Tierney's conclusion that "(r)ather than assume that one reality exists that is determined by pieces of data, we might think of a text as a site of a political struggle over the real and its meanings," Tierney, "Beyond Translation," 111.

\textsuperscript{106} Nance uses the term "deliberative" to describe such "testimonios," Nance, \textit{Can Literature}, 34-8.
unguarded possibility.” Bernard-Donals and Glejzer similarly use the idea of the sublime in their exploration of whether Holocaust representation is possible. For them Holocaust witnessing in extremis “exhibited in a simultaneity of pain and pleasure” generates “the effect of the sublime,” presaging the possibility that an actual Holocaust experience could be captured.

Not only does recent “testimonio” analysis draw on post-modern literary theory, but it also turns to psychoanalytic theory (with its focus on the individual) to investigate the nature of testimonial “truth.” For example, pre-eminent “testimonio” theorist Beverley refers to Laub’s psychologically framed explanation for apparent errors in an Auschwitz survivor’s account of the blowing up of the crematoria during the ill-fated uprising, when discussing Menchú’s supposed “falsifications.” In response to a respondent’s claim to have witnessed the demolition of four chimneys, while the historical record documents only one, Laub comments that the number of chimneys is irrelevant to understanding the respondent’s personal reality. In his vigorous attack on Stoll’s alleged methodological naivety, not only does Gugelberger agree that Laub’s analysis is pertinent to Menchú’s situation, but he also cites Arias’ account of the “psychological situation” of the then 20-year old as she dictated her story in Paris: “It must, he [Arias] suggests, have been a manuscript full of fantasies, fantasmas, in a psychological sense, and confusion.” In so far as its turn to psychoanalysis, like its turn to the literary, minimises the necessity, indeed, the possibility of, communicating “the real,” theories of “testimonio” and of Holocaust testimony appear to be converging.

108 Bernard-Donals and Glejzer, Between Witness and Testimony, 22.
110 Gugelberger, “Stollwerk or Bulwark?,” 49. Gugelberger also cites Beverly’s reference to the Auschwitz chimney’s example.
NEW DIRECTIONS

If traumatic experience as recounted in both Holocaust testimony and “testimonio” is amenable to psychoanalytic interpretation, is it not possible to engage with “the real” in both forms of testimony? While concentration on the existential plight of Holocaust survivors has immensely enhanced an understanding of their state of mind, such analysis tends to dissociate victims from their specific historical context. Wieviorka highlights the dangers of focusing on individual testimonies in isolation from their broader historical context when she observes, “affirmation of identity through witnessing, however, produces a problem when the testimony concerns not only an individual trauma (a rape, for example) but also suffering born of an historical event. The historical event becomes fragmented into a series of individual stories.”112 Although survivors seldom understand themselves as speaking from a socio-cultural position, this should not exclude the possibility of investigating such relationships.

The individualistic orientation of analysis of Holocaust testimony, with its lack of focus on the respondent’s social reality, is understandable given the sense that the Holocaust effectively destroyed the world of the survivor and substituted a world without logic or meaning. The vastness and complexity of the event meant that no single person could claim to represent the whole. And yet Judaism is culturally oriented towards the confirmation and reconfirmation of group membership and membership is rarely a matter of choice through conversion but a matter of birth. The Holocaust occurred when Jews as a group were singled out for extermination and, as indicated earlier, Jews, even in the midst of the Holocaust, sought to preserve cultural and religious treasures. Conversely Christianity emphasises individual conversion and, unlike Judaism, offers the possibility of redemption by embracing Christianity. Jews believe that redemption is not contingent on individual actions and can only occur at the end of time with the coming of the messiah.113

112 Wieviorka, The Era, 143.
113 Ricoeur, “The Hermeneutics of Testimony,” 134-42.
My particular interest in the “real” lives of Holocaust respondents comes from the perspective of a historian thinking about how to approach a large body of Holocaust videotestimonies held by the JHMRC. The videotestimonies, collected over the last decade, are only now being systematically researched and this publication is, as indicated in the previous chapter, in part a product of this interest.\textsuperscript{114} Respondents are drawn from throughout Europe, including significant numbers from Eastern Europe. They come from diverse social, religious, political, educational and cultural backgrounds, all of which interpenetrate their understanding and representation of the Holocaust. Holocaust experience thus should not, as Waxman observes, be homogenised into a single collective memory, it is “contingent upon and mediated by this history.”\textsuperscript{115} Gender is also of relevance here. Critics such as Lawrence Langer have greeted arguments concerning the relevance of social categories for interpreting Holocaust testimony with scepticism. For Langer, Holocaust chaos is so impenetrable that to engage in a social and culturally informed analysis is both presumptuous and futile. Writing in the context of discussion of the appropriateness of gender analysis of testimony, Langer comments: “Holocaust testimony is not a series of links in a chain whose pattern of connections can be easily traced, but a cycle of sparks erupting unpredictably from a darkened landscape, teasing the imagination towards


\textsuperscript{115} Waxman, Writing the Holocaust, 2.
illumination." But Langer comes from a literary background and is inclined to read Holocaust testimony as disembodied text – to view the Holocaust in metaphorical, rather than historical terms. By comparison Judith Tydor Baumel, a leading scholar of women’s oral history of the Holocaust, is interested in Holocaust survivor witnesses as social beings, hence her observation that: “Jewish victims are gendered subjects with class, local, cultural, and national identities that matter and complicate their Jewish identity.” She argues that an awareness of the complexity of Holocaust victim identity contributes to a nuanced analysis, which does not involve making value judgments about relative suffering. For Baumel “illumination” is possible and is achieved through taking seriously the materiality of Holocaust experience.

“Testimonio’s” approach may help to reorient the study of Holocaust testimony because, despite significant shifts in “testimonio” theory, it has never lost sight of the relationship between the testimonial subject and the “real” – a concern that can make a fundamental contribution to the interpretation of Holocaust testimony.

W.G. Sebald’s discussion of the suicide of writer and Auschwitz survivor, Jean Améry, highlights the significance of social identity for Holocaust survivors:

When he crossed the border into exile in Belgium, and had to take on himself the Jewish quality of homelessness, of being elsewhere ... he did not yet know how hard it would be to endure the tension between the native land as it became ever more foreign and the land of his foreign exile as it became ever more familiar. 118

Placed in perpetual exile from his Austrian homeland by the Nazis, Améry’s homesickness only resolved itself when he returned to Salzburg to commit suicide.

To borrow from Wieviorka, the impenetrability of the Holocaust should not “exonerate” the historian from using testimony as a historical source.\(^{119}\) Despite its differences in orientation “testimony” suggests a direction for future analysis of Holocaust testimony by highlighting the social embeddedness of the testimonial subject.