

Decolonising testimony: on the possibilities and limits of witnessing¹

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When Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub published their foundational text, *Testimony: Crises of witnessing in literature, psychoanalysis and history*, in 1992, they claimed that the twentieth century was ‘the era of the witness’.² They focused specifically on the Holocaust and the ‘crises in witnessing’ to emerge in its aftermath. In the past 20 years, witnessing has achieved broad international relevance for truth and reconciliation commissions and national inquiries—notably in contexts in which nations are reckoning with the legacies of a divided past. The late twentieth century and the early twenty-first century have therefore been marked by an unprecedented rise in the production and circulation of and demand for testimony. In contexts such as truth commissions, testimony functions to authenticate claims of historical injustice, it enables survivors to tell their stories, and it potentially engages the public as a collective witness to histories of violence. In 1996, for instance, personal testimonies of traumatic experiences played a formative role in the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, in the Australian National Inquiry into the Separation of Indigenous Children from their Families and Communities and in the Canadian Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. While personal testimony has brought hidden histories of violence and abuse into the public domain, in recent years, commissioners, participants, commentators, psychologists and cultural critics have become concerned with the limits as well as the possibilities of testimony. What are the effects of giving testimony on those who have suffered personally from traumatic events? Does giving testimony, as Rebecca Devitt and

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2 Felman, Shoshana and Laub, Dori 1992, *Testimony: Crises of witnessing in literature, psychoanalysis and history*, Routledge, London and New York.

Adrian Stimson discuss in this issue, re-traumatise already vulnerable individuals, without necessarily providing justice? Under what conditions can the process of bearing witness contribute to a sense of relief and assist in a healing process, a moving on from the traumatic past?

The aim of this issue is to explore the possibilities and limits of testimony and witness in contexts of old and new imperialisms. This issue of *Humanities Research*, which explores a range of sites in which testimony is produced and consumed, joins other recent initiatives to move the field of trauma studies beyond its European origins.³ A particular feature of this issue is the gathering together of several essays that explore the forms and multiple dimensions of testimony and witness in the settler-colonial nations of Australia and Canada. Much of the recent work aimed at decolonising trauma studies is described as an initiative to bring post-colonial sites and texts into the field. We hesitate to use the term 'post-colonial' to describe nations such as Australia or Canada because these nations have not yet 'decolonised' their institutions and knowledge practices, although we recognize that the term can also connote an important shift in how the oppressive conditions of colonial relations are reconfigured by subsequent nation-building. Several of the essays in this issue, read together, illuminate the specific conditions under which testimony is gathered, framed and presented for witnessing publics in Australia and Canada—nations in which the national memory of settlement/dispossession is still in dispute. The essays reveal the subversive ways in which testimony can be used not only to document harms, but as a powerful strategy for decolonising national histories. They suggest that the testimonial arts promote an Indigenous cultural memory that is simultaneously a challenge to the nation to decolonise national memory. Another aim of this issue is to explore the role of literary and artistic practices in documenting and responding to the challenges posed by the call for testimony. As the following essays demonstrate, the field of testimonial studies is expanding to include artistic and literary practices and visual and textual modes of production in an effort to bear witness to violence. Importantly, these essays are also concerned with acknowledging, locating and finding positive ways to heal from such violence. Working across a range of testimonial sites and from a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches, these essays contribute to widening debates in trauma and testimony studies to include a consideration of the history of colonial violence and the meaning of decolonisation in diverse geopolitical, national and transnational arenas of contestation and reconciliation.

3 See, for instance, 'Postcolonial trauma novels', *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 40, nos 1–2 (Spring and Summer 2008); 'Trauma texts', *Life Writing*, vols 1–2(2008); Douglass, Ana and Vogler, Thomas A. (eds) 2003, *Witness and Memory: The discourse of trauma*, Routledge, New York and London; Bennett, J. and Kennedy, R. (eds) 2003, *World Memory: Personal trajectories in global time*, Palgrave Macmillan, London.

Testimony, witnessing and the institution

In *The Era of the Witness*, historian Annette Wieviorka charts the conditions under which testimony, and the social figure of the witness, have emerged from the shadows of the Holocaust to become a significant force in contemporary culture.⁴ She analyses the changing conditions under which testimony has been produced and received, and how these conditions have legitimated the position of the witness and authorised the survivor's testimony. She usefully answers some pressing questions about how Holocaust survivors, in the past five decades, have risen to a position of considerable authority to become the bearers of 'the truth of history'. Her analysis poses a range of questions regarding the uses and effects of testimony in contemporary contexts such as trials, human rights and truth commissions, in collections of video testimonies, in documentary and memoir. She discusses the institutions, such as courts, that authorise the witness's testimony. For instance, in war-crimes trials, the survivor's testimony is authorised by the institutions of law, which are backed by the symbolism and power of the State.

In his essay, 'Can the institution speak?', Len Findlay grapples with the problem of the academic institution and its relationship to testimonial discourses. As a discourse, testimony is based on a representational politics that subjects the witness to an identity—for instance, as 'subaltern', 'victim' or 'survivor'. For testimony to function as representation, it has to be 'recognised' and legitimated by the appropriate state institutions. How do we read testimony that seeks to elude the field of representation—for instance, the testimony of silence? The testimony of embodied acts that do not speak directly but bear witness to what is unspeakable, and must remain unspoken, in a given context? Findlay explores the possibilities and limits of academic institutional sites when they knowingly take up the role of arbitrator in political contestations. Specifically, he examines how a proposal to boycott Israeli universities was received among Canadian universities in order to illustrate the contradictory position of the ostensibly 'unified' university space and the realities of difference and subalternity that disrupt any such claims to intellectual universality. Findlay argues for the promotion of universities as meaningful sites in which to empower diversity, rather than to celebrate or pay lip-service to the representational politics of difference. He charts a course for institutional questioning that demonstrates the possibility of testimonial discourse as a register of diverse voices and as an exemplary site for registering diversity within the limits of the university. Findlay's essay serves as a cautionary reminder that critics should be aware of and interrogate the institutions that enable, legitimate and authorise testimony

⁴ Wieviorka, Annette 2006, *The Era of the Witness*, Translated by Jared Stark, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY.

and the political interests they serve. In the essays that follow in this section, Roxanna Waterson and Rebecca Devitt consider the institutions and discourses that authorise reconciliation processes in various national contexts.

As Waterson points out in 'Reconciliation as ritual', there are two dimensions to truth and reconciliation processes (TRCs): finding 'truth', often through testimony, and bringing about reconciliation between estranged parties. She asks, from an anthropological perspective, what symbolic or ritual practices can aid the reconciliation dimensions of TRC processes? She argues that TRCs must function on two levels simultaneously: legal and ritual. Legal authority is essential for a commission to do its work of getting at the truth. The work towards reconciliation, however, requires the creation of an appropriate ritual setting. Waterson draws on the insights of anthropology to consider the innovative and performative dimensions of TRCs, particularly the workings of ritual (1). To demonstrate the culturally variable but specific range of rituals that may be drawn on in a given national context, she takes a comparative approach, exploring TRCs in South Africa, Indonesia and Timor-Leste. She contends that reconciliation processes differ from legal processes in drawing on symbolic and ritual practices that are culturally familiar to the parties involved in the reconciliation process. These ritual and symbolic dimensions can infuse the TRC with gravity and respect, smooth over tense moments between perpetrators and victims, encourage the parties to reach agreement on reparations and otherwise aid the healing process. Ritual aspects of TRCs can therefore aid the moral work of reconciliation. As Waterson reminds us, there is no guarantee that TRCs will produce reconciliation, nor is it appropriate to expect those who have suffered violence and other harms to forgive perpetrators. In contexts in which TRCs have been carried out, such as South Africa and Timor-Leste, reconciliation is a continuing process rather than a state that has been achieved.

In "'Healing the heartbreak'?: the role of testimony in the Australian inquiry into the separation of Indigenous children from their families', Devitt draws on a range of archival sources to show that the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC), from the outset, has conceived of testimony as 'a personal and political tool' for healing individuals and the nation. The HREOC, she demonstrates, has been influenced by popular psychotherapeutic notions of storytelling as a means for individuals to recover from the trauma of past experiences of abuse, and is committed to giving individuals the opportunity to tell their stories. At the same time, personal testimonies enable the nation to confront the effects of its past racist policies, and if publicly embraced, to move towards reconciliation. As Devitt points out, however, the claims made for testimony were overly simplistic: while some individuals welcomed the opportunity to tell their stories, and felt enormous relief in the aftermath, for others, reliving the trauma of the past had negative consequences. Perhaps the

most serious limitation of the inquiry's focus on personal testimony was that it placed witnesses in the position of 'victims'. As Devitt suggests, the inquiry's focus on testimony was most successful in soliciting an empathic response from the public, but least successful in securing other forms of reparation such as monetary compensation.

The testimonial arts: challenging national memory

In their psychoanalytical reframing of testimony, Felman and Laub showed that psychological blockages often prevented individuals from giving 'direct' testimony of their experiences during the Holocaust. The psychotherapeutic encounter, however, allowed for and gave rise to a rich body of testimonial literary narratives that critics had to learn to read as such. Felman and Laub proposed that testimony should not be thought of as knowledge that was transparently accessible to ourselves, but as the process of coming to knowledge that we did not consciously possess. Their approach to testimony was valuable for addressing an event as unprecedented and inassimilable to Western frames of cognition as the Holocaust. Literary and filmic materials and psychoanalytical methods provided alternative avenues of access to that of 'direct witnessing'. Rather, they made room for indirect testimony—testimony that could not be stated directly because the witness could not come face to face with the truth of that past. Thus, the testimony of literature, of film, of art, of the psychoanalytical encounter, of the interview—all of these, whether taking aesthetic or non-aesthetic forms, were available to be read as testimony. In recent years, art critics such as Jill Bennett and Kyo Maclear have developed frameworks for analysing the ways in which artworks bear witness to historical traumas.⁵ The essays in this section, including two essays by Canadian artists, extend that work to settler-colonial contexts. In particular, these essays explore the ways in which artworks bear witness to traumatic events, produce challenging cultural memories of events that have been 'forgotten'—such as the extermination of the bison and the impact of that event on First Nations peoples—promote healing and engage audiences actively as witnesses. The artwork's ability to engage non-Indigenous audiences is crucial as a strategy to promote reconciliation since non-Indigenous people often respond to claims of Indigenous suffering with denial and a shrugging off of responsibility.

5 Maclear, Kyo 1999, *Beclouded Visions: Hiroshima–Nagasaki and the art of witness*, State University of New York Press, Albany; Bennett, Jill 2005, *Empathic Vision: Affect, trauma, and contemporary art*, Stanford University Press, California.

Adrian Stimson is an artist from the Siksika Nation in Alberta. In his essay, 'Used and abused', he discusses his own and his father's responses to the request that they give testimony to support their applications for redress through the Common Experience Program, which is administered by the Indian Residential Schools Resolution Canada. Stimson regards the demand for personal testimony to substantiate the individual's claim as intrusive and perhaps 'another layer of ethnocide within the colonial project—a layer more insidious as it provokes individuals to relive painful experiences...in the name of "healing"'. Stimson discusses several of his art-events (including an installation and a performance), which reframe artefacts and archival photographs from Old Sun Residential School, which both he and his father attended. He also incorporates the site of Old Sun, and the buildings themselves, into his works of cultural memory. Through this reframing, he seeks to mediate his experiences and engage audiences in decolonising acts of cultural memory. He regards his art practice, in contrast with the re-traumatising effects of testifying in a juridical context, as 'a way to exorcise and transcend the colonial project, a way to forgiveness, healing and obtaining a state of grace'. His essay is an act of personal testimony and an explanation of art as both testimony and healing practice.

Lynne Bell's essay, 'Buffalo Boy testifies: decolonising visual testimony in a colonial-settler society', reads two visual projects by Adrian Stimson as sites for considering the possibilities and limits of the testimonial arts in bearing witness to the toxic legacies of colonial violence in a post-apology—yet far from post-colonial—Canada. In her essay, Bell explores how Stimson's two art-events—*Old Sun* and *Buffalo Boy's Confessional: Indulgence*—work with the elliptical, affective and interrogative possibilities of the visual language to testify to the national crime of the residential school and Canada's apartheid histories of education. Her essay considers the questions: how can the immersive and multi-sensory environments of installation and performance art illuminate and interrogate the multifaceted ways in which settler-colonialism inflicts trauma—in the past and the present? What is the affective and critical force of Stimson's visual acts of witnessing and how do they engage the spectator? What decolonising testimonies and pedagogies can his visual projects perform in the 'now' of the art-event (and beyond)? In considering these questions, Bell argues that Stimson's visual testimony on the residential school system achieves historical and contextual agency in Canada within the wider framework of meaning provided by the *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (1996), the court-ordered *Settlement Agreement* (2006), the five-year Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2008–), the Day of Apology in the House of Commons (2008) and the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (2007). The convergence of these (and other) events in the past few years,

she notes, has enabled new speaking positions and new public frameworks of visibility within which survivor testimony across a range of genres and media can be witnessed by the wider Canadian public.

In her essay, entitled 'Ancestors rising: Aboriginal art as historical testimonials', Mary Longman notes that acts of testimony—legal and personal—have been a critical tool for Aboriginal peoples in the pursuit of land claims and the reclamation of history, identity and personal experience.⁶ Aboriginal art, in the past and the present, has served as valuable testimony to major historical events, territorial maps, cultural customs and values, treaty signings and personal and mythological stories located in a particular territory and time. For thousands of years, she notes, Aboriginal people have told their stories orally and visually to document their history and teach the values, beliefs and traditions of their cultures. She points out that contemporary Aboriginal artists continue to produce work documenting recent history, important historical and political events and the social realities and experience of coexistence in a colonised country. In the past 40 years, she argues, most contemporary Aboriginal art has served two primary purposes: first, to deconstruct the colonial narrative and its stereotypical representations of Aboriginal peoples; and second, to rebuild and reclaim the Aboriginal narrative. As an Aboriginal artist, Longman has created a significant body of work that seeks to raise awareness of past and present Aboriginal issues. In this essay, she focuses on her sculptural work *Ancestors Rising* (2006), located on the edge of Wascana Park in the centre of Regina. In this site-specific work, Longman creates a testimonial to the submerged and interlinked histories of the bison, the local Cree and Saulteaux people and the earliest colonists in the Wascana area. In this living memorial, Longman honours the history and territory of her people and the silenced spirits of the wild bison that lived on this land only 200 years ago—before their extermination. She also bears witness to a new vision of Aboriginal renewal.

The first three essays in this section consider the direct and indirect ways in which First Nations art in Canada bears witness to continuing personal and collective legacies of colonial violence. These essays demonstrate and explore how Indigenous cultural memories challenge national narratives of colonisation. While sharing a framework that regards art as a powerful form of witness, Rosanne Kennedy's essay shifts the focus from Canada to Australia, and from Indigenous cultural memory to the issue of denial of colonial trauma among white Australians. In her essay, 'In an era of stalled reconciliation: the uncanny witness of Ray Lawrence's *Jindabyne*', Kennedy reads the film

6 Artworks have also played a fundamental role as 'evidence' of continuous connection with the land in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island native title cases in Australia. See, for instance, Bradley, L. with Mellor, D and Rose, D.B. (eds) 1999, *Claiming title: Australian Aboriginal artists and the land*, Carleton College Art Gallery, Northfield, Minn.

as a national allegory of a traumatic colonial past that continues to haunt the present. Lawrence's film (2006) was produced 10 years after the national inquiry of 1996, and two years before Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's historic apology to the Stolen Generations. Reading the film in the context of what she calls 'stalled reconciliation', Kennedy argues that it dramatises 'white' responses to the violence and dispossession of colonialism, and more particularly, to the *Bringing Them Home* report. By dramatising 'white' denial and liberal guilt, the film acts out the psychological blockages to reconciliation and provides insight into psychological dimensions of stalled reconciliation. At the same time, she argues that the film invites a psychoanalytical reading that goes beyond the socio-political context of current race relations to explore themes of denial and trauma in relation to subjectivity and personal history. She introduces the concept of 'uncanny witness' to read the film's indirect testimony to the unspeakable traumas of the past. 'Uncanny witness' brings together analytical insights regarding the value of the Freudian concept of the uncanny in a settler-colonial context, with Felman and Laub's psychoanalytical framework for reading aesthetic texts for their indirect testimony.⁷ Kennedy explores the ways the film brings to the surface what cannot be spoken directly about relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in the political arena in Australia. She draws on a range of critical frameworks on forgiveness, mourning and reconciliation to consider possible readings of the film's dramatisation of a scene of rejected apology between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, and what the scene suggests about the possibilities and limits of reconciliation in the present.

Testimony and cultural memory: from the national to the transnational

Jamelie Hassan's and Julia Emberley's essays investigate the political consequences of transnational testimonial sites that 'speak' within and beyond the nation's boundaries. Linking testimonial and aesthetic practices, their essays attend to a diversity of witnessing positions between Canada and the Middle East. In 'Other echoes in the garden', Hassan explores the confluence of environmental problems in Saskatchewan, Canada, with those in the southern marshlands of Iraq. Hassan uses visual materials to tell stories of place and land. In her billboard project *Linkage*, which was originally produced for the *Post-Colonial Landscape* exhibit held by the Mendel ArtGallery in Saskatoon, Canada, in July 1993, Hassan drew these seemingly disparate sites into a transnational dialogue over

7 For an insightful discussion of the concept of the Freudian uncanny in the context of a post-colonial Australia, see Gelder, Ken and Jacobs, Jane 1998, *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and identity in a postcolonial nation*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne.

the ways and means that uranium toxicities travelled across the globe. *Linkage* reminds its viewers of the disastrous environmental effects to Iraq's gulf region of 1991's 'Operation Desert Storm', caused by the use of radioactive bullets and shells recycled from nuclear waste. The presentation of the billboard in Saskatoon prompted anti-nuclear community activists to support the artwork. Hassan's work became a catalyst for *linking* the transnational complicities of environmental violence between Saskatchewan's uranium industry and its effects on indigenous lands and the nuclear waste left in Iraq after the Gulf War.

Emberley's essay, 'This is not a game: testimony and the making and unmaking of the child as a political subject', begins with a discussion of Deborah Ellis's book, *Three Wishes: Palestinian and Israeli children speak*, which, in May 2006, became an object of controversy when the Canadian Jewish Congress protested its availability to junior elementary students in the Canadian school system in Toronto. Ellis's book belongs to an increasing number of published books in the field of testimonial studies charged with endowing the child with the role of bearing witness to traumatic events. In considering what enables this newly authorised voice, Emberley proposes a number of questions that might be addressed, such as: in what institutions and forms do children's testimonies appear and how are they circulated? Who authorises these 'minor' voices to appear in the public domain? And who listens, reads and responds to them? With regards to the child, there is also a specific theoretical problem to address, which is that of distinguishing between whether a child is testifying to a real event or just playing, in the sense of investing people, places and things with fears, fantasies and desires. In examining *Three Wishes*, therefore, the question of how the child is made a political figure in a transnational framework of testimonial production must also be open to the question of how the child has already been 'unmade', in the sense that the political subject positions opened up for children are already circumscribed and over-determined by specific cultural, institutional and discursive constructions of childhood. The essay examines further two texts that support and resist such constructions. The first is Freud's study "'A child is being beaten": a contribution to the study of the origins of sexual perversion' (1919). In this work, Freud contributes to a modern conception of childhood as a site of psychoanalytical knowledge that privileges fantasies of violence over their physical realities—and not just their physiological effects. The second text discussed is the comic-strip novel by Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis: The story of a childhood*. In this semi-autobiographical account of the Iranian religious coup in 1979, Satrapi constructs the child as the narrator of her experience of repression and its effects on her, her family and her family's friends. By positioning, ironically, the child as narrator and by using the graphic, black-and-white comic-strip form, Satrapi redraws the lines between childhood innocence and the problem of ignorance and global responsibility in addressing violence towards children and youth.

With a special emphasis on artistic and literary materials, and institutional sites of learning and unlearning, this collection of essays contributes to furthering interdisciplinary debates in trauma, testimony and witnessing studies. The editors are particularly concerned to highlight colonial and postcolonial geopolitical contexts, with the hope that while the geopolitics are specific the questions are relevant to the broader field of studies, especially in non-European contexts.