

Introduction

In the summer of 2004, the humanitarian organization Doctors Without Borders, better known by its French name Médecins Sans Frontières, or MSF, began distributing among its members and volunteers an original series of studies in which the organization looked back on its short but turbulent history. The first five volumes, released almost simultaneously, dealt with particularly daunting episodes of rescue and advocacy in which MSF faced challenges that were neither logistic nor purely operational. Four volumes out of these early five dwelled on MSF's aid missions during the genocide in Rwanda and its aftermath, addressing some of the most resounding failures of humanitarian action in the post-Cold War period. At the heart of these volumes stood MSF's relief operations in the refugee camps that hosted the Hutu génocidaires in Tanzania and Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo) following the genocide, and the painful but not unforeseeable repercussions of these operations. Called upon to aid a population of two million that had fled abruptly from Rwanda to the neighboring countries as the Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front made its way to Kigali, MSF and other humanitarian organizations soon discovered that the humanitarian assistance distributed in the camps was fueling the armed resistance of the deposed Hutu regime. For MSF, and especially for the French section of this now multinational movement, this episode quickly became a symbol of all that was rotten in humanitarian action. Reflecting this widespread feeling, the case studies dealing with this and related episodes – in which, as MSF members observed, humanitarian assistance had been cynically instrumentalized to further political aims – gave center stage to the misgivings of these humanitarian practitioners about depoliticized acts of care and compassion. Although the MSF series

formed part of a sprouting corpus of case-based humanitarian reflection engaged with lesson-learning from previous emergencies, it was also unique in turning attention inward to focus specifically on humanitarian judgment and its upheavals. In this reflexive exercise, the description of political crises and relief operations was cast as a backdrop to the deliberations of humanitarian activists and aid workers, whose debates were the main drama on display.

While “MSF Speaking Out,” as this series was titled, constituted a belated reaction to the crisis that had swept across humanitarian organizations in the 1990s following their bitter experience in responding to emergencies in Somalia, Bosnia, and Rwanda, among other places, it was also the offshoot of a conceptual bewilderment that has loomed over MSF’s humanitarian ethics ever since the organization’s founding in 1971. The series was commissioned by MSF’s International Council from the Center for Reflection on Humanitarian Action and Knowledges, a think tank affiliated with MSF-France, in order to settle disagreements over MSF’s legacy of humanitarian witnessing, or as it is called in French, *témoignage*.¹ Witnessing has long been regarded as one of MSF’s flagship principles and as the practice that sharply distinguishes this most famous representative of the second generation of nongovernmental humanitarian actors from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the respectable founder of modern humanitarianism in war, known for its adherence to neutrality and strict discretion. It might therefore come as a surprise to discover, in both the debates that led up to the drafting of the series and in the case studies themselves, that MSF members considered witnessing a daunting and deeply controversial task. Indeed, the series’ editors claimed to have followed the premise that “*témoignage* [sic] cannot be reduced to a mechanical application of rules and procedures” but “involves an understanding of the dilemmas inherent in every humanitarian action.” Accordingly, they chose to focus their study of witnessing on “cases in which speaking out posed a dilemma for MSF and, thus, meant taking a risk.”² What seemed to unite the cases

¹ Throughout the book and in line with their OED definitions, the terms “witnessing” and “bearing witness” will be employed interchangeably. By contrast, since this book sets out to historicize the intertwining of witnessing and testimony (the act and its discursive product, the “saying” and the “said”), I have generally preferred to preserve the distinction between these two terms and sometimes use them in pair (“witnessing and testimony”).

² Lawrence Binet, *Genocide of Rwandan Tutsis* (MSF, September 2003–April 2004), 3. This and the subsequent quotes are drawn from the foreword to the case studies, an identical text reproduced in each volume. As a result of the fierce debates provoked within the MSF

that featured in this in-house historiographical endeavor (which by the time of writing has grown to encompass 12 studies) was disillusionment with the power of relief operations and factual reporting to provide effective protection to victims. Further, many of the cases involved a resort to, or at least contemplation of, bolder public statements intended to provide a corrective to the inadequacies and manipulation of aid.

MSF set out to revisit these historical cases of contested witnessing with a pedagogical mission in mind. The stated aim of “MSF Speaking Out” was to “help volunteers understand and adopt the organization’s culture of speaking out on issues,” a task made all the more pressing by the controversies that had polarized the MSF international movement since the 1990s over the meaning and adequate forms of humanitarian witnessing. The case studies went about fulfilling this aim by reconstructing in great detail the manifold and sometimes competing ways in which MSF’s humanitarian activists struggled to translate their commitment to bearing witness into concrete and defensible practices. More than as full-blown case studies, they were structured as a mosaic, or in the words used by the editors in the foreword to the original French edition, a “*texte-montage*.” The studies wove together excerpts from news reports, meeting notes, internal correspondences, field reports, and interviews specially conducted for the series, arranging all these raw materials in chronological order with minimal exposition and no commentary. The narrative frame that held these elements together in an early version of the project was later abandoned at the request of MSF’s International Council in order to avoid what was perceived as a biased presentation of the rival positions in the intra-organizational debate over witnessing. Yet the literary form forced upon the project as a result of this decision to discard any interpretive structure threatened to bring to naught its entire *raison d’être*. Copiously presenting each and every recorded position that related, however remotely, to the issue of witnessing in real time, the study ended up reproducing the disparate perspectives on bearing witness that it was intended to unify, and indeed accentuating their divergence. Instead of harmonizing the conflicting interpretations of humanitarian witnessing, “MSF Speaking Out” reaffirmed the elusiveness of this practice, which

international movement by the issue of witnessing, the case studies featured in “MSF Speaking Out” were initially classified as internal documents and published only several years after their completion, on a website dedicated to the series: <http://speakingout.msf.org>.

once again seemed fated to remain open-ended, perplexing, and infinitely demanding.

How did witnessing, an act that seemingly involves the most mundane gestures of observation and reporting, become such an intricate and explosive matter? How, if its meaning is so deeply contested by its most ardent supporters, are we to make sense of the obligation to bear witness? And what does MSF's preoccupation with witnessing, which has anything but subsided since the publication of the first volumes of "MSF Speaking Out," tell us about the ethics of contemporary witnessing more generally? In this book I argue that the troubles, the reflexive elaboration, and the rigorous investigation of witnessing that this humanitarian project crystallizes are characteristic of a whole range of witnessing practices, and that they form a fundamental and under-discussed dimension of witnessing in contemporary settings of genocide, disaster, and war. The concerns of humanitarian witnessing point to a broader predicament of witnessing, a practice that during the twentieth century grew to be not just the most available solution for an increasingly pressing need to cope with political evil but also, and simultaneously, an intricate problem.

Testimonies of genocide survivors, victims of torture and atrocities, veteran soldiers, and humanitarian aid workers and human rights activists are now an inescapable feature of Western public spheres. Whether it is called upon to provide factual support for political arguments, a face to collective grievances, a touch of reality to analyses of political evil or a boost to civil mobilizations, the voice of individuals exposed to or affected personally by violence and persecution has reaffirmed itself as indispensable to a broad range of public projects and initiatives, ranging from collective memory to human rights campaigns and from processes of reconciliation to popular revolts. Acts of witnessing and testimonial narratives have become so deeply integrated in political life that it is hard to imagine politics without witnesses and testimonies and to think of witnesses and testimonies as confined to juridical and historiographical arenas of truth making as they have been in the past. On the one hand, the alignment of political truth with personal experience, of calls to action with social sentiments, and of moral judgment with narratives of suffering makes public life ever more dependent upon the visceral appearance of the witness. On the other hand, the versatility of witnessing and testimony and their dispersion across fields of practice that include, beyond the standard first-person reports, ethnographic inquiry, historical research, artistic creation, and therapeutic dialogue reinforce their image as ethically motivated acts and practical conduits of engagement.

Behind this compelling presence of witnessing and testimony in public life, which has earned the present period such titles as “the age of testimony,” “the era of the witness,” and “the century of witness,” lies a tortuous history that has yet to be told.³ As I aim to show in this book, beyond the growth in the visibility, impact, and social status of witnesses, the surge of witnessing and testimony in the twentieth century was marked by two seemingly contradictory trends that came together in producing the contemporary legacy and public sway of these practices. As the experience of victims, ex-perpetrators, and activists acquired unparalleled authority as a source of moral and political truth, its unique capacity to generate adequate testimonies was consistently called into doubt. While practices of witnessing gained a growing popularity, they were also thought of, conceptualized, debated, and problematized with great intensity. Works and projects that sought to evaluate testimonies, outline the appropriate and resonant forms of witnessing, untangle the challenges that witnesses face, and shape the mode of insertion of witnessing into the political field abounded as new devices, specialized institutions, and more proactive and detailed schemes of witnessing were forged. Curiously, some of the same witnesses, intellectuals, and experts who most vehemently promoted witnessing as an imperative and consequential act were also invested in foregrounding its inherent deficiencies and perils. Indeed, far from curbing the growth and expansion of witnessing and testimony, the sustained confrontation with their problematic performance has been integral to their consolidation as the tenacious trace of humanity in politics.

This study interrogates the commanding position of witnessing and testimony in public life while following this conflictual trajectory of their rise to power. Presuming neither to encompass the diverse origins of contemporary witnessing nor to provide a thorough mapping of the many social, cultural, and political mutations that have bolstered its attractiveness and popularity, the book attempts to retell the contemporary history of witnessing and testimony as the story of the success of a failure. Moving beyond the image of the witness as a modern day prophet or a prolific source of “sad and sentimental stories” that generate

³ See, respectively, Shoshana Felman, “The Return of the Voice: Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah*,” in Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York & London: Routledge, 1992), 204–283, 201; Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006); John Ellis, *Seeing Things: Television in an Age of Uncertainty* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2000), 9.

humanitarian concern, my aim is to explore what witnesses have brought to ethical and political life through their preoccupation with and reflections on the works of memory and advocacy and their predicaments.⁴ The historical episodes of witnessing recounted here offer a window onto the ascent of the witness to the status of a commanding political figure, a cultural icon, and a celebrated carrier of collective memory as seen from the vantage point of the persistent questionings of bearing witness and its various portrayals as a compromised, vexed, and even impossible venture.

In calling attention to the reflective impulse that has grown out of and continues to flourish around the troubles of witnessing, this study is markedly at odds with the common appraisal of witnessing. Many activists, journalists, photographers, and, not least, victims of atrocities subscribe to a heroic notion of witnessing, portraying it as a risky attempt to document and make known a wrong that is otherwise bound to be concealed, denied, or forgotten, so as to infuse the cause of its victims with the power of facts. Indeed, this standard view of witnessing as a gesture that is likely to be tampered with by the ruling powers precisely because of its unhindered access to truth – a gesture facing purely extrinsic obstacles that only serve to confirm its intrinsic solidity – seems to undergird human rights work and humanitarian witnessing as invoked, for example, by MSF. Yet, as attested forcefully by MSF’s difficulties in making sense of the group’s own self-chosen commitment to bear witness, the common association of witnessing with “speaking truth to power” covers only part of what witnessing to genocide, disaster, and war is actually about.

One of the most persistent, even if not the most readily visible features of bearing witness as it was practiced and formulated by individuals and groups who sought to call attention to the human toll of politics was its bifurcation from eyewitnessing in its modern empirical sense. In several of its major paradigms, which otherwise had very little in common, bearing witness to genocide, disaster, and war was construed as the continuation of eyewitnessing through other means if not as a practice that played by the rules of a different kind of truth game. Although the act of witnessing is still steeped in empirical naiveté, ever since it settled in the heart of

⁴ The witness is equated with the prophet in Renaud Dulong, *Le Témoin Oculaire. Les conditions sociales de l’attestation personnelle* (Paris: Éditions de l’École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 1998), 16. On “sad and sentimental stories” and their role in stretching the confines of the imagination and arousing moral concern, see Richard Rorty, “Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality,” in Stephen Shute and Susan Harley, eds., *On Human Rights: The Oxford Amnesty Lectures 1993* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 111–134, 119.

public life its universal ability to convey the truth of the witness relying on nothing but the conventional paraphernalia of first person reports has been seriously called into question, first and foremost by witnesses themselves. In their preoccupations with the prospects and troubles of witnessing, witnesses as well as those intellectuals and experts sympathetic to their cause have made it clear that in order to become a witness to exceptional manifestations of human suffering and degradation it is not always required and not always enough to perform the same gestures by which individuals could effectively turn themselves into eyewitnesses in more mundane settings.

In his fascinating account of the social conventions of eyewitnessing, French sociologist Renaud Dulong points out that being an eyewitness is a deliberate effect of language and not just a matter of a chance encounter with an event that has been duly observed and registered. He claims that one becomes an eyewitness retroactively, by way of a speech act in which one declares having been present where events unfolded and having seen them with one's own eyes. In his words, "the perception of a sequence of real actions is undoubtedly the basis and the origin of the private destiny of the witness and that to which he refers in telling. Nevertheless, his public history only begins with the first story in an autobiographical format. That which he saw, heard, and lived is sharable only in this narrative form and with verbs inflected in the past tense and in the first person singular."⁵ While there exists a standard procedure for becoming an eyewitness that requires a self-designation in language, there also seems to be an understanding, found in many reflections on contemporary witnessing to genocide, disaster, and war, that the invocation of the "biographic formula" "I saw," to quote Dulong again, hardly suffices and is not always necessary to designate an individual as a witness to atrocities or mass violence.⁶ Becoming a witness of the latter kind often commences before a single word is uttered, and often lingers long after one's immediate impressions are conveyed. This observation applies with particular acuity when witnessing acquires a "migratory quality," that is, when it ceases to be the preserve of those unwillfully located in harm's way and is adopted passionately by a host of professionals – photographers, journalists, anthropologists, historians, physicians, psychotherapists, artists, and

⁵ Dulong, *le témoin oculaire*, 13.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 56.

activists – as a marker of their ethical commitment and professional identity.⁷

While contemporary observers have not been oblivious to the challenges that attend witnessing, they have addressed them in a rather fragmentary and sporadic manner. Most of the scholarship on the subject centers on testimonies related to the Holocaust, which are understood to be marked by trauma and incomprehensibility and cast as inherently failed. Poststructuralist thinkers such as Jean François Lyotard, Shoshana Felman, and Giorgio Agamben, whose works will be explored at length later in the book, foregrounded the crises that witnessing encounters in the wake of the Holocaust and provided keen analyses of its deficiencies as stemming from the violent assaults on the victims. At the same time, their theory of testimony, which built its case around the predicaments of Holocaust survivors, portrayed the difficulties of bearing witness to the genocide as an unsurpassable but also deeply intimate concern. From their viewpoint, the troubles of witnessing had the potential to affect political discourse only insofar as they unfolded beyond the sphere of politics and transgressed its practical urgencies and heated debates. Placing a premium on the melancholic reenactment of witnessing to one particular historical catastrophe that was seen to epitomize all others, the prolific writing on Holocaust testimonies overlooked the opportunities that the cautious endorsement of witnessing and testimony as a response to atrocities created not just for contemporary ethics but also for contemporary politics. This absence was all the more pronounced given the fact that the political power of witnessing and testimony was precisely the issue that preoccupied those studies that looked beyond the Holocaust and the construction of collective memory to the use of witnessing and testimonies in campaigns for global justice, human rights, and humanitarianism. While attentive to the politics of witnessing and testimony, however, these latter studies adopted an overly simplified notion of these practices as mediums of factual representation and emotional identification, and failed to give rigorous attention to the questions and dilemmas they begot. Glossing over the passion to bear witness and the frustration that attended its expansion into new fields of practice, works that dealt with acts of witnessing to distant atrocities were concerned primarily with the ineffectiveness of witnessing and testimony in

⁷ The “migratory quality” of witnessing was alluded to by Samuel Moyn in “Bearing Witness: Theological Roots of a New Secular Morality,” in Dan Stone, ed., *The Holocaust and Historical Methodology* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), 127–142, 130.

mobilizing publics saturated with media images of suffering. Thus, both strands of the literature on witnessing and testimony missed an important dimension of these topical phenomena: testimony theory provided a compelling account of the ethical transformations of witnessing in response to atrocities and of its inevitable and significant breakdowns but ignored the political settings in which witnessing unfolded, whereas studies that looked at witnessing and testimony through the prism of global media and global advocacy campaigns focused on their political instrumentality but neglected the ontological mutations they had undergone as they burst into the domains of ethics and politics. For studies of the latter kind, witnessing has been no more than a launch pad for testimonies, and testimonies – merely an especially compelling way to establish the truth and tell a larger story.

This book seeks to fill these gaps by juxtaposing episodes of reflexive witnessing that are rarely brought together, in which the ethics and politics of witnessing played mutually reinforcing roles. Looking beyond the testimonial narratives on which most inquiries of witnessing dwell, it draws attention to what I call “meta-testimonial discourses,” i.e. to the incisive preoccupations with the conditions of witnessing and testimony, their risks, and the keys to their effective performance. Setting aside those critical commentaries that discredited witnessing as psychologically dubious and therefore epistemically flawed, I deal with works and projects that have brought witnessing and testimony under critical scrutiny in an attempt to realize their full potential as valuable ethical and political devices.⁸ Though this book deals extensively with witnessing, it hardly discusses any testimonial texts, a task already undertaken with considerable success by a vast academic literature; my aim is rather to show how the center of gravity of witnessing shifts toward acts that are considered an incarnation of witnessing though they do not necessarily involve a deposition of factual testimony, and how a certain reflective relation to testimonies has come to qualify as an act of witnessing in its own right. Principally, my historical interest lies with the widening gap between the fact of witnessing – being on the spot, observing with one’s own eyes, living through the historical events – and being a witness. How and with what implications did the witness come to be perceived not as something that one is, but rather as something that one becomes? How are we to

⁸ For one famous exemplar of witnessing-related research of the first kind, see Elizabeth F. Loftus, *EyeWitness Testimony*. 2nd edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

make sense of the fact that witnessing and testimony were no longer deemed to be seamless, organic extensions of experience even as they were grounded, seemingly more firmly than ever, in what was portrayed as radical and transformative experiences of destitution and loss? By following the trails of this historical transformation and this constitutive paradox of contemporary witnessing, I recast both the current dilemmas of humanitarian witnessing (of the kind that haunted MSF and other aid agencies following what came to be known as the “complex political emergencies” of the 1990s) and the quandaries of bearing witness to “Auschwitz” into a single multilayered field of unsettled witnessing. In contrast to the standard portrayals of witnessing sketched above, witnessing thereby emerges as a practice that is neither easily performed nor predestined to failure, a practice prone to discontents that do not block but reinvigorate action.

The historical chapters of the book feature three projects that engaged with the potential and limits of witnessing and testimony in particularly ambitious, rigorous, and innovative ways. Chosen for their contribution to the crystallization of the stakes of witnessing to atrocities, its tribulations, and the position of the witness in the political sphere, the projects are Jean Norton Cru’s *Témoins* (Witnesses) (1929), a comprehensive review of war books written by veterans of the Great War; The Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University, an initiative launched in 1979, which pioneered the video recording of Holocaust survivors’ testimonies; and the humanitarian witnessing to third world emergencies elaborated by MSF since the 1970s. At first glance, these meta-testimonial ventures confirm the tenacity of witnessing as a default response to genocide, war, and disaster, and its incremental expansion and evolution. At the same time, however, by bringing into sharper focus the protocols, aims, and political positionings of witnessing and witnesses, these initiatives also offer the unique benefit of accentuating the historical disparities over what it means and what it takes to be a witness. When the Great War, the Jewish Holocaust, and third world emergencies are examined as triggers of vigorous – and incompatible – scenes of tormented witnessing, the shifting roles and responsibilities of witnesses in history, the various perils they face, and the gamut of exemplary performances and skills developed to address those perils are underscored. In this way, the multiple histories of concerned witnessing that I trace here call into serious doubt any celebration of witnessing as an accumulative human project, an

unfaltering mission, and a consistent expression of moral revolt.⁹ Moreover, they dispel the image of the “era of the witness” (a term that owes its currency to a book published under that title by historian Annette Wieviorka) as a single, homogeneous historical block framed by the rise and fall of the witness.¹⁰ When examined through the prism of the vigorous reflections and debates about witnessing and testimony, the history of witnessing in the previous century appears less like a steady trail of modest victories over violent and oppressive regimes and more like a multifaceted struggle that, while better orchestrated and more finely tuned than ever, is still trying to find its bearings.

Beyond their historiographical benefits, these histories of the manifold ways in which witnessing has been cast as a problem also forge new ground for theorizing the contemporary ethics of witnessing. The preoccupation with the alluring but laborious processes of becoming a witness has yielded, as I show in this study, an infrastructure of calculated practices that facilitated the transformation of witnessing and testimony from juridical and scientific acts of truth-telling into a social vocation. The recurrent discussions of the challenges of witnessing have not been motivated by a philosophical quest; their immediate and practical aim has been to trace optimal conduits and modes of behavior that individuals seeking to turn themselves into witnesses can follow and adopt. In their explicit dealings with the stakes and desired modes of witnessing, these meta-testimonial discourses made it apparent that the reflexive process of becoming a witness is much of what the act of witnessing is actually about. But on top of that, these discourses also attested to the active role that the problematizations of witnessing have played in the reframing of witnessing and testimony as gestures that are bound to instigate a subjective transformation and not just produce empirical or metaphysical truths. Drawing, as I explain in more detail in the next chapter, on Michel Foucault’s notion of ethics as a reflective and socially guided care of the self, this book seeks to follow the manifold framings of

⁹ Such an approach is vividly expressed by Avishai Margalit and Jay Winter, each describing an archetypal figure of a moral witness whose struggle stretches over several twentieth century catastrophes. See Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), ch. 5, and Jay Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2006), ch. 11.

¹⁰ Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness*.

these reflexive transformations that witnessing involved in the twentieth century.

The increasing subordination of witnessing and testimony to the process of becoming a witness, an arduous trial that they are expected to both serve and put on display, demonstrates, as was already alluded to, that the practice of eyewitnessing consolidated in law, science, and historiography is neither the unique nor the most influential model of witnessing to genocide, disaster, and war. Actually, since the previous century, acts of witnessing in such settings were conceived of in terms that were more reminiscent of the Christian doctrine of witnessing, which casts the witness – or in his Greek name, the martyr – as a lived testimony of a transcendent truth that he incarnates in flesh and spirit. John Durham Peters seems to have touched upon the kernel of contemporary witnessing when he wrote that “within every witness, perhaps, stands a martyr, the will to corroborate words with something beyond them.”¹¹ The current amalgamation of the witness and the testimony thereby provides additional support to an argument recently made by Samuel Moyn in relation to the historical origins of Holocaust testimonies. According to Moyn, the appeal of these narratives and the enthusiasm that surrounded their reception should be traced back to the Christian conception of witnessing that was revived during World War II and in its aftermath to bridge the divides between Jews and Christians. Moyn maintains that “a culturally specific theory of religious witnessing may have provided the most relevant framework for the early intelligibility of the idiom [of witnessing] and the meaningfulness of the practices,” but also emphasizes that witnessing has since embarked on an independent and secularized itinerary so that contemporary moral witnesses are “hardly a simple residue of a Christian culture.”¹²

The ethicalization of witnessing may well have been one indirect consequence of the percolation of religious motives to practices of witnessing to political events. Yet the present study puts forward more questions than answers when it comes to the genealogy of those forms of witnessing it sets out to analyze. In Chapters 4 and 5 I will allude to other historical factors that may have played their part in the ethical reshuffling of witnessing, such as the consolidation of trauma discourse, the politics of Holocaust memory, the critique of expert cultures, and the preoccupation with the unintended consequences of humanitarian relief. Without purporting to

¹¹ John Durham Peters, “Witnessing,” *Media, Culture & Society* 23 (2001): 707–723, 713.

¹² Moyn, “Bearing Witness,” 131, 139.

pinpoint the ultimate origin of the ethical formations of witnessing, I will dwell instead on their considerable variations and stress the flexible contents that witnessing may entertain once it is cast as a desired mode of existence and the likely consequences of this variability of witnessing.

The chapters that follow, then, make no attempt to provide a comprehensive history of practices of witnessing, offer an exhaustive survey of their contemporary instantiations, or explain their ascendancy as a standard response to war, disaster, and atrocities. Several sites and platforms of public witnessing, such as slave narratives, truth and reconciliation committees, the Latin American genre of *testimonio*, and evolving types of visual media, whose contribution to the consolidation of the nexus between witnessing, ethics, and politics has been significant, intriguing, and complex, are not broached here in a way that adequately reflects their historical and political importance. Instead, I focus on one critical peculiarity that runs through multiple episodes of witnessing in markedly Western settings and seems to have reverberated across the broader field of witnessing. The reflexive preoccupation with witnessing, provoked by the desire and the obligation to bear witness and increasingly commingled with them, is probed here as a highly suggestive and yet underexplored phenomenon that stands to help us gain a more nuanced understanding of what has made witnessing so ethically pertinent in the West – and not as a key to its transhistorical, quintessential qualities.

In this regard, it is notable that in the case of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), one of the most salient forums of ethical and political witnessing of the last decades, the kind of reflexive questioning of witnessing that I aim to trace here is found most prominently perhaps in the influential book by the Afrikaner poet Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull*, and more recently in her co-authored *There Was a Goat*, which attempts to make sense of one particular incomprehensible testimony delivered to the TRC. In contrast to this preoccupation with witnessing, *Khulumani* (Zulu for “Speak Out”), a broad membership organization of Apartheid survivors, which lobbied to make the TRC’s hearings public, later recognized the limits of story-telling in transforming victims into “active citizens” and refocused its activities on other, more politically assertive domains.¹³ This example demonstrates that any expansion of the political and cultural scope of the reflexive interrogation

¹³ See Tshepo Madlingozi, “On Transitional Justice Entrepreneurs and the Production of Victims,” *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 2(2), 2010: 208–228, and www.khulumani.net.

of witnessing beyond the West will have to be carried out with great care and attention to detail. While such an expansion could doubtlessly yield interesting insights, it lies beyond the aims of the present research, and might actually obscure the force of one of my main arguments – namely, that the Holocaust is not the exclusive site and matrix of the crisis of ethical witnessing. For if, as I aim to show in this book, the performance of witnessing to genocide, disaster, and war has been deeply contested even within Western cultures, and if witnessing is seen to pose problems that do not coalesce into one meta-concern even when considered through a relatively narrow contextual prism, then the view of the Holocaust as *the* historical event that led witnessing to both thrive and collapse can be seen to be much more seriously undermined.

While the bulk of the book is devoted to the making of the practical ethics of witnessing, the next two chapters attempt to elaborate on the theoretical discontent that propels this historical inquiry and to start to flesh out an alternative conceptualization of the ethics of witnessing. Chapter 1 discusses the connections between the ethics of witnessing and nongovernmental politics and argues for the need to dwell on these connections given the inclination of poststructuralist thought, which brought the ethical dimensions of witnessing into relief, to distance ethical testimony from the political. Drawing on Foucault's studies of ethics and on his view of ethical practice as principally lodged in the relation of the self to itself, this chapter starts to develop another notion of an ethics of witnessing that better reflects, as I show in the subsequent chapters, the meanings that were grafted onto witnessing following the atrocities of the twentieth century. Alongside its engagement with Foucauldian ethics, this chapter looks to the notion of nongovernmental politics developed by Michel Feher in order to articulate more clearly the reliance of this political form upon practices of witnessing that, in their orientation toward the cultivation of self, tend to trigger more questions than answers and lay bare the quandaries that political engagement in extreme situations involves.

In order to expand on my claim about the rather unsatisfying relations forged within contemporary testimony theory between the ethics and the politics of witnessing, Chapter 2 turns to a critical reading of the poststructuralist theory of testimony and reconstructs the main arguments that supported the reinvention of witnessing and testimony as ethical gestures in Jean François Lyotard's *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (1983), Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992), and Giorgio Agamben's

Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive (1998).¹⁴ This close engagement with a theoretical corpus that this book otherwise strives to call into question is crucial for my reappraisal of the ethics of witnessing, since it was Lyotard, Felman and Laub, and Agamben who set the terms of the highly influential debate that cast witnessing and testimony as ethical performances of a subjectivity in an irremediable crisis. While explicating comparatively a key concept in critical theory that is often the subject of laudatory commentaries but is rarely expounded systematically, this chapter sets out to critically examine the applicability of the poststructuralist concept of witnessing to contemporary catastrophes and emergencies. My main argument is that testimony theory's success in liberating witnessing to genocide, disaster, and war from the straightjacket of the juridical and scientific paradigm of eyewitnessing was obtained at the cost of losing the specificity of witnessing as an ethical and political practice. Thus, the same features that won testimony theory intellectual fame – its transhistorical and universally transposable model of witnessing, its transformation of the witness into a philosophical paradigm, and its marginalization of the political arenas in which acts of witnessing unfold in favor of a seemingly miraculous conjuring of injustice – obfuscated the practical support that witnessing afforded to the creation of ethical and political subjectivities and created an artificial wedge between the ethics and politics of witnessing. Due to its consecration of the Holocaust as the model of contemporary political evil, I claim, testimony theory is ill-equipped to address the moral and political issues raised by global witnessing to contemporary political disasters, whose dynamics do not replicate, and indeed profoundly diverge from, the logic of the Nazi persecution and extermination.

The historical discussion of the meta-testimonial discourses and of the ethics of witnessing reflected in them begins with World War I, an event that rendered the cracks between the fact of witnessing and the condition of witnessing readily and publicly visible. Chapter 3 focuses on Jean Norton Cru's monumental book *Témoins* (Witnesses) (1929), a detailed review, annotated bibliography, and condensed compilation of excerpts from some three hundred war books published in French during and after the Great War. Based on Cru's publications and on published records of the controversies sparked by *Témoins*, the chapter reassesses the critical apparatus that Cru put in place in his attempt to establish the public status of combatant-witnesses on firmer and more scientific grounds. Cru has been blamed by his contemporaries and retrospective critics for

¹⁴ All dates refer to the original editions.

subjugating war narratives to harsh and inappropriate standards of factual verification. Yet these charges overlooked the ultimate aim of his efforts to authenticate combatants' testimonies, which was not to assess the quality of testimonies as such so much as to provide an indirect standard for the integrity of the witness. As I show, Cru's meticulous labor of corroboration was actually called for by the new substance of testimony, which he believed was to be made up of psychological facts whose truthfulness could not be ascertained directly. In my discussion of Cru I contend that his screening of combatants' testimonies involved setting up procedures and textual devices for the concomitant creation of collective and individual witnesses. I dwell on two related premises that underlie Cru's critique of testimonies: first, that authentic acts of witnessing require a strict adherence to lived experience, a state of mind that can only be brought about by self-discipline; and second, that testimonies need to be crosschecked using the procedures of historical criticism in order to establish each witness as a spokesperson of a collective witness.

The sifting and classification of testimonies that were central to Cru's project would be inconceivable in the realm of Holocaust survivors' testimonies, in which every testimony is considered valuable either as a therapeutic, pedagogical, or political instrument. Cru's efforts to bring witnesses together and turn them into a public would be similarly alien to Holocaust witnessing projects, which usually frame the witness as a lone figure and rarely cast her testimony as an instance of one collective voice. Chapter 4 focuses on one ambitious collection of Holocaust survivors' testimonies whose methods of forging ethical witnesses were radically unlike those employed by Cru. Among countless initiatives to collect and disseminate Holocaust survivors' testimonies, the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University, founded as a grassroots community project in 1979, stands out in its attempt to provide the institutional conditions in which survivors can become witnesses to their predicaments in their own singular way. Chapter 4 looks at two practices of secondary witnessing (i.e. practices that involve witnessing to processes of witnessing performed by those designated as direct eyewitnesses to atrocities), the one therapeutic and the other pedagogical, that supported the objective of the Yale project while bringing the preoccupation with the problems of witnessing to a new level of theoretical abstraction. The chapter's main focus is on the formation of empathic listeners and alarmed spectators as outlined, respectively, in the works of Dori Laub, one of the founders of the Yale Archive, and Lawrence Langer, a senior adviser to the project. It offers a reinterpretation of the arguments

presented in Laub's and Langer's acclaimed works – Laub's contributions to *Testimony* (1992, co-authored with Felman) and Langer's *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (1991) – in light of their less known and in Langer's case more practice-oriented publications. The chapter looks back to the early days of the Holocaust Survivors Film Project that preceded the Yale Archive and points to the project's emphasis during this period on fostering community relations as a precursor to Laub's theory of testimony. Further, I argue that Langer's contributions to the pedagogical program developed for the Yale project by the nonprofit Facing History and Ourselves show that his work on Holocaust testimonies was similarly geared toward the making of secondary witnesses and its prerequisites.

The open controversy surrounding witnessing stands at the heart of Chapter 5, which revisits one of the most legendary episodes in the history of contemporary humanitarianism – the foundation and consolidation in the 1970s of the French humanitarian organization Médecins Sans Frontières. In this chapter I claim that humanitarianism “without borders” was the outgrowth of the legitimacy crisis of the medical professions and that its practice of witnessing has ultimately been a mode of self-cultivation by means of which physicians could fashion themselves as more enlightened personae. Questioning the equation of humanitarian *témoignage* with defiant acts of truth-telling, this chapter traces it back to its original and overlooked association with the relatively low-profile choice and passion of Western experts to be physically present in far-flung theaters of war and disaster. Moreover, it examines the recent concern with the detrimental side effects of humanitarian action in so-called complex emergencies as the culmination of these practices of self. The chapter concludes by probing the political implications of humanitarianism, an endeavor that in recent years came under scathing critique, through the lens of its elaborate practices of ethical witnessing.

The concluding chapter reflects on the alternative that the practical ethics of witnessing poses to contemporary ethics and on the prospects of this practical ethics of witnessing in light of new media and advanced Communication and Information Technologies that turn witnessing into a mundane, widespread, but also more collaborative and technical endeavor. To set the scene for this discussion, and to reiterate and elucidate the problems of witnessing that the book aims to unravel, the chapter opens with an analysis of Shlomi Elkabetz's film *Testimony* (Edut), in which actors enact eyewitness accounts by both Israelis and Palestinians on episodes related to the Israeli occupation in the Palestinian territories.

Following this illustrative summary of the issues that witnessing faces today, I turn to a closer examination of the ethics of witnessing, whose point of departure is the acknowledgement, in poststructuralist testimony theory, of the potential of witnessing to transform the domain of ethics, and the concomitant failure of this theory to refer in substantive terms to the ethical alternative that witnessing heralds. The chapter argues that witnessing has brought to life an ethics that dispenses with and transgresses the coercive confines of moral, juridical, or religious law insofar as it delimits a self-contained ethical universe in which moral conduct serves as its own ultimate foundation. Thus, witnessing generated coherent and reflexive models for ethical existence that were the haphazard products of individual initiatives to live a morally meaningful life and that relied on little else besides an interpretation of what witnessing and testimony should immanently entail. The second part of the chapter discusses innovative scenes of witnessing that may lead its ethics into new frontiers in the years to come. Wearable mobile cameras used in what is described as a mission of “*souveillance*,” crowdsourced techniques and web platforms of crisis mapping, and the creation of holograms of Holocaust witnesses that will outlive the actual survivors are described as instances of a posthumanist incarnation of witnessing. As things, machines, and technologically mediated publics occupy the place once reserved for the individual witness in performing acts of vigilance, truth-telling, and rescue in the domains of human rights and humanitarianism, the ethics of witnessing, so I claim, faces a formidable and intriguing challenge.

The last chapter reaffirms the observation already encountered in earlier parts of the book – that the politicization and democratization of witnessing are intertwined with shifts in its ontology. Largely focusing on tracing these mutations and re-adaptations of witnessing and testimony, the historical and conceptual studies I present in the following chapters do not put forward definitive answers to questions such as what is witnessing, how it should be performed, and whether it is an effort worth undertaking. Nonetheless, I hope they do manage to come up with more nuanced and perhaps also more productive articulations of these and other issues related to the individual and social handling of wracking manifestations of political violence. When it comes to witnessing, so I hope to demonstrate, all general prescriptions, standard formulas, and tested advices ultimately stand on shifting sands. However, it would be a grave mistake to conclude that these efforts toward a self-regulation of witnessing are superfluous and to shrug off the persistent questions that impel them.