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 discreetness. 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