LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Testimonial Convers(at)ions

Richard Carter-White

Macquarie University

The institutional preservation and presentation of genocide survivor testimony is becoming increasingly conversational. Over the past 15 years, organisations working in the context of Holocaust memory have drawn on digital technology, and specifically artificial intelligence, to develop exhibitions and interfaces that simulate the experience of having a conversation with a survivor (see Boswell and Rowland 2023; Traum et al. 2015). Users of this technology sit before a screen or hologram, or wear a headset, and ask questions into a microphone. The AI system uses natural-language technology to convert each question into a search term, which is then matched up with the most appropriate of over 1,000 pre-recorded answer clips, which is then played in response. The effect, when things go smoothly, is of a live conversation with a digital rendering of a real Holocaust survivor, a conversation that is driven and directed by the questions of the user. While this technology has been primarily developed in relation to the Holocaust, it has also been used to record the Mandarin-language testimony of a child survivor of the 1937 Nanking Massacre (USC Shoah Foundation 2016), and such digital 'conversations' are likely to become an increasingly prominent part of the preservation of historical and political memory.

This development represents an interesting conceptual shift in the usual way that testimony is presented in museum settings, which – aside from the opportunities for conversation offered by special Q&A sessions and guided tours by survivors – has traditionally tended towards the monological, using written text or audio-visual media to deliver stories and memories to a more-or-less receptive visitor audience (Aragoni and Galani 2021). This is, after all, the logic of witness testimony as a genre: the witness has a special, unique knowledge possessed by no-one else (Derrida 2000). It is up to the audience to listen and receive. This monologic remains the norm in many museums around the world; the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, for example, is replete with a vast and moving array of testimonial media – words, paintings, video recordings which

confront the visitor with their emotional power – and although there is some level of visitor participation offered in the option of selecting specific clips among the vast testimonial archive to watch, the role of the visitor is largely to *be affected*, not to shape the proceedings themselves. It is precisely against the background of this conventional presentation of testimony as a one-way flow of information that the digital is seen as offering museums an opportunity to 'assembl[e] the monologic format of the testimony in more dialogic orchestrations' (Aragoni and Galani 2021: 251), by explicitly drawing on the contributions of visitors and users to bring testimony into being.

Despite enthusiasm for the potential 'democratisation' of museum narratives, the critical literature that has begun to emerge around this particular mediation of testimony has questioned the extent to which it can really be considered to constitute a conversation, given the self-contained nature of each AI-facilitated 'exchange'. As Boswell and Rowland (2023: 45) write:

> while the interaction allows a questioner to talk *to* a virtual survivor, it does not allow them to converse *with* them. There are none of the digressions, interruptions, interrogations, or two-way flows of information that mark most real-life conversations.

The distinction drawn here between talking *to* and conversing *with* provides a helpful reminder of the etymology of *conversation*, which is grounded in meanings of intimacy and familiarity, as gained from spending time in the company of someone else. This seems quite different to the rapid-fire, staccato question-and-response sessions currently facilitated by different iterations of AI-augmented testimony, where the dynamic is more akin to pitcher and batter than mutual conversants. This question of *familiarity*, though, this state of conversance with the world of another, does loom large in what can perhaps be too easily written off as the monologic of conventional survivor testimony, and particularly its literary manifestations.

As more than three decades of work in trauma studies and its incorporation across the humanities and social sciences has made clear, it is difficult if not impossible for survivor testimony to function purely as a monologue. This is because the fundamental basis for the authority that is vested into the position of witness – proximity to an event that is deemed in some way significant – is also that which, in cases of violent, overwhelming or otherwise traumatic events, often makes it difficult for the witness to recount the past in a coherent and historically 'accurate' way. The ways that traumatic events imprint themselves upon and obstruct processes of comprehension and recollection will often cause errors and gaps in memory, as well as involuntary forms of remembrance, all of which would cause testimony to *fail* if it was treated simply as a transcript of the past that requires nothing of the reader except to absorb its factual contents (Felman and Laub 1992). It is accordingly well-established that there is sometimes considerable participation needed from the reader in order to help interpret the complex and layered forms of truth and insight that are conveyed through traumatic witnessing (ibid.). This, in the terms of Robert Harvey (2010: 73), is the 'witlessness' that animates witnessing and lends testimony its *witnessness*: instances of doubt and uncertainty that allow '[v]istas for the reader's imagination [to] open up in these wordless spaces'.

The readerly labour gestured at here has little in common with the back-and-forth of conversation promised by AI-augmented testimony; it instead constitutes a gesture of reaching over to the world of the testimonial address, being made to find familiarity and articulation in the gaps where testimonial address reaches its limit (Carter-White 2022), albeit without veering into an unethical and, indeed, undesirable process of 'unchecked identification with victims' (LaCapra 2014: 102). A convergence without contact, but a convergence of sorts nonetheless.

The imaginative and empathetic participation demanded of the reader is not the only kind of conversation at work in survivor testimony. The possibility that testimony is itself the product of an internal conversation within the witnessing subject is raised by Primo Levi's well-known claim that his ability to remember and speak about life in Auschwitz is itself evidence that he did not experience the camp's full horror; and instead, that those who did so 'have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute, but they are . . . the complete witnesses, the ones whose dispositions would have a general significance' (Levi 2005: 64). Levi characterises his testimony as an act of speaking on behalf of these complete witnesses, something that emerges 'by proxy' (4) in the impossible exchange between the ones who saw but cannot speak, and the one who speaks but did not fully see (Agamben 1999). These observations can be extended to the trauma studies framework of memory and testimony referred to above, particularly as articulated in Cathy Caruth's influential *Unclaimed Experience* (2016 [1996]). For Caruth, trauma puts into doubt 'simple models of experience and reference' (12) because the overwhelming nature of traumatic experience renders it incomprehensible and therefore unavailable to conscious recall. By definition, traumatic experience – or at least the specific form of acute trauma to which Caruth implicitly refers (on different forms of trauma see Pain 2021) – remains belated and unknown, and announces itself through 'the often delayed, uncontrolled experience of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena', that is, through 'what remains unknown in our very actions and our language' (4). Errors, gaps and enigmas in the text are therefore not only an invitation and an imperative for the reader to engage in a certain 'conversation' with the witness and their inevitably imperfect accounting of the past; they are also an index of the ungraspable traumatic event itself, an otherness that demands to speak even as it eludes the consciousness of the witness (Harrison 2010). From Levi to Caruth, there emerges a sense of testimony to traumatic experience as the outcome of a conversation between what is known and what is unknown, between possession of the past and possession by the past (LaCapra 2014).

If it seems out of the question to describe testimony as a monologue, a one-way transmission of factual information, then trauma theory's decentring of the witnessing subject makes its conversion into a two-way dialogue seem equally improbable. The AI exhibits mentioned at the outset look to the format of conversation as a way of making eyewitness accounts available, approachable, amenable to the participation of museum visitors for generations to come, yet this brief consideration of the conversational dynamics of witnessing only serves to foreground the complexity and opacity that defines testimony as a genre. Testimony is undoubtedly a conversation, but an infinite one whose conversants speak not only past one another but *past themselves*: the witness made to heed the voice of silent otherness, the reader made to step beyond their passivity and participate in the production of sense. It could even be said that testimony is propelled

by conversation, but by the strangeness of conversance, the converse of estrangement. No doubt AI-augmented testimony will become optimised over time, producing smoother, faster, more personalised responses to the interrogations of users increasingly conversant with the quirks of new technological interfaces, but more difficult to countenance is how it will replicate or reinvent the uncertainties and distances that make of testimony a conversation.

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