

The Uses of Testimony

Birmingham-Nottingham Workshop, 23 June 2014

Abstracts

**Bill Dodd (Department of Modern Languages, University of Birmingham),
“I will bear witness, to the bitter end”. Observations on different modes of ‘bearing witness’ during and after the Nazi regime.**

My research has focused on the area of the German “inner emigration” during the Nazi period, and the post-war legacies of some of these oppositional discourses. In my presentation I will outline the main differences between the public and the private oppositional discourses to Nazism after 1933, and their different legacies in post-1945 Germany. This touches on the question of whether there are (very) different forms of testimony, and the impact of different forms of testimony both during and after the period of dictatorship.

Roger Woods, (German Studies, UoN) Post-1945 German Life Writing as Testimony.

The subjective experience of history, captured in life writing and summarised as the authentic voice of hitherto unheard groups, has been hailed as a new field for researchers. Yet the dominant image of much German life writing is the courtroom, an image that suggests the authentic experience is going to be outweighed by wilful distortion for the purposes of self-exoneration. The challenge to the testimony of perpetrators runs parallel to the challenge to the life writing testimony of victims from historians who have classified it as ‘mythical memory’. Research on life writing has also moved away from the idea that it could be drawn on as the truth about a life and towards the view that it is a branch of fiction. Leaving aside the inconsistency and lack of balance of much life writing, its testimony is frequently misused by others to fit a particular agenda. So what is the specific nature of the testimony of life writing, and what is it good for?

**Isabel Wollaston (Department of Theology and Religion, University of Birmingham),
‘Screaming truth to the world’ or hidden in plain sight? Celebration,**

marginalization and mythologization in contemporary usage of testimonies of the Auschwitz Sonderkommando.

The Sonderkommando (SK), prisoners who worked in the crematoria and gas chambers at Auschwitz, were dubbed *Geheimnisträger* (bearers of secrets) because they could not be allowed to live to bear witness to what they had seen. Some, certain they would not survive, buried their testimony as an act of resistance and/or self-justification. Very few of these texts were recovered. Some that were found are difficult to decipher and reconstruct, and/or to access, with two dated and partial English-language editions long out of print. As we approach the 70th anniversary of the SK uprising (the only act of organized armed resistance in Auschwitz, on 7.10.44), it is evident that there has been a substantial growth in public and cross-disciplinary scholarly awareness of the significance of the SK as eyewitnesses, with a range of memoirs by, and interviews with, surviving SK published, and interest from museum curators and film-makers. Simultaneously, there remains considerable ambivalence towards the SK, and I would argue that they embody, in extreme form, the challenge of testimony as much about them remains uninvestigated, unsaid, even unsayable – because of the nature of their experience, and the fragmented, partial and contradictory nature of what has survived and/or been put on record. (201 words)

Maiken Umbach, (History UoN), Historical Photography: Testimony, Ego-Document, or Evidence? A Historian's Perspective.

Amateur photography, and the associated habit of documenting one's life in a family or personal photo album, was one of the most ubiquitous types of ego-document production of the twentieth century. Although a particularly large number of photographs and album survive from the Third Reich, which has been at the centre of debates about "testimony", such images have rarely been considered in this context. This paper asks what happens if we approach them from this point of view, and considers findings of a very recent workshop at Nottingham with museum curators from various memorial sites and Holocaust museums about the tensions around using both perpetrator photographs and the much rarer images taken by victims to document persecution and genocide. At the same time, it also uses the medium of amateur photography from this period to call into questions neat distinctions between 'testimony' and 'propaganda photographs', by considering the overlaps between both forms of ego-documents, and the agency of those in front of the camera, which is not always aligned with that of the photographer.

Sara Jones, University of Birmingham (Department of Political Science and International Studies and Department of Modern Languages), 'Approaching Witnessing from the Wrong End': Memory, Testimony and Mediation.

Writing in the edited volume, *Media Witnessing* (2009), Paul Frosh advocates approaching 'witnessing from the wrong end, so to speak, by assuming that testimony [...] is created in the interaction between audience and text, rather than between the witness and his or her own utterance'. This paper takes up this challenge through examining the interaction between individual accounts, mediation and reception in three different cultural forms – autobiographical writing, museums and documentary films. My focus is memories of the East German Stasi. The aim of the paper is to develop a new approach to testimony that takes into account the complex interactions between individual and collective memory in the 'media-culture societies' (Schmidt, 1998) of the present. In order to have an impact on society's commemorative agenda, testimony must be recorded in a lasting form with the potential for mass distribution. However, mediation changes the testimony in qualitative terms: in particular, recording, copying and distribution may impact on the authenticity of the account as it is perceived by the recipient. I argue that the producers of the medium compensate for this loss of authenticity in various ways, two of which are the creation of *mediated remembering communities* and *complementary authenticities* – two new theoretical concepts that will be elaborated in the paper.

Ute Hirsekorn (German Studies, University of Nottingham): GDR political elite and their post-*Wende* public engagement as testimony.

Against a background of public accusations following the collapse of the GDR, formerly prominent East German party officials started to publish their life stories in various types of autobiographical text, including interviews, memoirs, letters, diaries and essays. In their accounts, they attempted to explain their personal development, their role in the state and the events leading to its demise in 1989. Initially, German studies of the GDR tended to reject these testimonies as manipulated descriptions, focusing exclusively on the objective content of their narratives. However, by analysing the functionaries' behaviour in their texts, their strategies of explanation and their attempts to create a narrative identity offering a consistent picture of self-development – either as part of post-*Wende* German society or (more often) in resistance to current German society – specific patterns can be identified. My work traces the habitus of this group of individuals over different periods (GDR, immediate post-*Wende* and later), revealing a particular form of leadership mentality amongst GDR *Politbüro* members and other top party functionaries. With reference to concepts such as collective memory, identity, and autobiographical memory, my

reading of the testimonies of ex-party officials therefore aims to reconstruct the specific features of a collective mentality shared by the GDR political elite.

Vanessa Pupavac (Politics and IR, UoN): Our Unbrave World through Shakespeare's Eyes: Testifying To Our Humanity Under Global Governance.

Shakespeare's tragedies in both Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell's 1984 are banned works because they testify to the possibility of an authentic human life which has been crushed in their respective dystopias. This paper is concerned with the trajectory of international development and humanitarianism, and what human life is being offered under contemporary global resilience governance. Specifically the paper is concerned with how resilience governance envisages a degraded form of human existence. Just as Huxley put Shakespeare at the heart of his critique of his dystopia, I invoke Shakespeare's tragedies to question resilience governance. In particular I draw out how Shakespeare's tragedies affirm human speaking and acting in the world against our reduction to processes and behaviours under resilience governance.

John Curtis, University of Birmingham (Shakespeare Institute), Citing Shakespeare in Judicial Contexts

This is a short presentation on research underpinning a PhD project on Shakespeare and the English Judiciary. The data is drawn from the English Law Reports and spans 1750 to the present day. It features instances of judges using Shakespearean quotations and analogies for rhetorical purposes within judgments and to assist in determining the 'meaning' of words. In each instance, Shakespeare 'speaks' and his words are recorded as the Court's own. Some attention will be also given to the framing remarks that confer status on Shakespeare, explaining how these relate to Aristotle's concepts of logos, ethos and pathos.

John Jackson, Professor of Comparative Criminal Law & Procedure, School of Law, UoN, "The peculiar demands of legal testimony"

The presentation will seek to explain the restricted meaning given to 'testimony' and 'testimonial evidence' in legal proceedings and the peculiar demands that are placed on the way in which testimony is presented and used. Some observations will be made on why these restrictions are placed on legal testimony with reference to contemporary debates.

**David Parker and Christian Karner, School of Sociology and Social Policy, UoN
Twitter as Testimony: Reflections on the Alum Rock Road**

What kind of witness is Twitter, or more accurately the flow of short messages posted onto the platform?

As part of a much longer-term study of the Alum Rock area of East Birmingham we have begun to explore how the locality (a highly contested place in recent years) has been represented on Twitter.

Drawing on content analysis of several thousand messages posted on Twitter that refer to Alum Rock we will explore some of the discursive repertoires in play, how new and old media are cross-referenced in the reporting of events, how the condensed form shapes the expression of sentiments, and the extent to which researchers exploring a place need to encompass its online manifestations.

**Nigel Hunt (Division of Psychiatry and Applied Psychology, Medicine, UoN):
Use of Narrative Exposure therapy (NET) to deal with traumatic stress**

The resolution of psychological trauma involves developing narratives that make sense of the traumatic episode. Two key elements need to be resolved, the behavioural link between the memory and associated emotions; and the distorted cognitions about the event. Therapy can be difficult for many people not only because it is difficult to talk about trauma, but also because the tasks involved may seem unusual. Narrative Exposure Therapy (NET) goes some way to resolving these problems. NET is a combination of cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) and testimony therapy. The victim tells the story of their life in detail, focusing on the traumatic event. This focus provides the necessary exposure, and storytelling helps resolve distorted cognitions, as it involves making sense of what happened, providing an explanation. NET has been shown to be effective with refugee populations, and now we have used it with earthquake victims, firefighters, and Iraqi students.

Stephanie Lewthwaite (American and Canadian Studies, UoN), Latino and Latina art as testimony.

Latino artists have done much to explore the memory of “wounded places” (Till, 2012) in their critique of colonialism, land loss, spatial displacement and racial segregation. I argue that place-based memory has helped to define the direction of artists working across the Latino diaspora by functioning as an alternative mode of bearing witness and cultural politics. This paper examines the scarred physical landscape as a site for individual, collective and family memories of immigration in contemporary Chicano (Mexican American) and Cuban American art. Delilah Montoya’s installation *Sed: Trail of Thirst* (2004) and Alberto Rey’s paintings in his *Las Balsas* (rafts) series (1995-1999), position the US-Mexico border and the Straits of Florida respectively as “contemporary middle passages” marked by traces of human loss embodied in the objects left behind on the journey. Connecting the idea

of the remnant in Cuban American art with the aesthetics of fragmentation, spirituality and recollection in Chicano art, I consider Montoya's and Rey's works as altar-like pieces of remembrance that bear witness and "create dialogue where there is silence" (Lara, 2005).

Sofia Mason, (Spanish, Portuguese and Latin American Studies UoN), Memory and Latin American Testimonies Written by Women.

This paper will briefly introduce the relevance of the field of Memory Studies to Latin American testimonial literature with reference to Foucault's theory of "counter-memories" and Halbwachs's concepts of "collective" and "autobiographical" memory. Lira and Weinstein's "The Testimony of Political Repression as a Therapeutic Instrument" will also be explored.

Testimony has been defined as: "Personal or documentary evidence or attestation in support of a fact or statement; hence, any form of evidence or proof." This notion of the personal traversing with the factual is relevant to Latin American testimonial literature, a genre known in Spanish as *testimonio*, which originates in Cuba and aims to inspire political solidarity by articulating the lived experiences of those relegated to a position of subalternity by Western, patriarchal cultural norms and capitalist, neo-liberal political and economic structures. Accordingly, it is a form of testimonial narrative that presents personal, lived memories and political counter-memories simultaneously.

Susan Hunston (Department of English, Birmingham, not attending), Evidentiality

Evidentiality has been studied in Linguistics since the mid 20th century. It is central to the study of languages that have obligatory evidentiality marking built into their morphology (unlike English), but its use in English has also been extensively explored. Much of this research identifies and categorises the resources used to express evidentiality (e.g. apparently, according to..., I think, x demonstrates that...), and there is also work on the role that evidentiality, under different terminology, plays in the construction of argument and persuasiveness in text.

This presentation will examine the role that evidentiality plays in the construction of scientific knowledge and in particular how that knowledge is transmitted from an expert community (scientists) to a lay community (the general public). The paper will focus on a single written popular science book (the Rough Guide to Evolution) and on interviews with scientists broadcast on the Radio 4 Today programme. The paper will demonstrate that scientists talking to a lay audience use language to meet a number of sometimes conflicting needs, including transmitting an ideology of science (objectivity trumps subjective interpretation), and justifying the use of public resources (the scientist as planner, observer and interpreter). The language used in

these contexts will be interpreted in the light of a hierarchy of evidence adopted from Philosophy.