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Mediating Witnessing

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The language of witnessing is found across a wide range of research areas and disciplines. In communication studies, media theorists illustrate, precipitate, and challenge longstanding debates on witnessing in religious studies, law, philosophy, psychology, memory studies, thanatology, environmental studies, indigenous studies, and the visual arts.

The exact linguistic origins of 'witness' are subject to ongoing debate. Whether Greek or Latin, however, the meanings themselves are not so dissimilar. The Greek word *parastetei* or "testicles" means witness or bystanders; whereas in Latin, *testis,* which correspondingly refers to male genitalia, gives rise to the terms *testis, testes, and testicles* (Anderson, Hicks, & Holmes, 2002). It has been argued that this gendered association is literal in that in Roman and Babylonian courts, men would swear on their testicles, linking truth to the notion of virility (Anderson, Hicks, & Holmes, 2002).

Witnessing also has strong religious connotations. The word witness is etymologically rooted in the Old English term *witan*, which means "to know." One of the earliest religious references to witness is associated with the Christian notion of martyr and testimony (Peters, 2001; Frisch, 2004; Whitman, 2008). Witnessing is a complex term that contains both passive and active elements, which allude to testimony and martyr, respectively (Whitman, 2008). The passive elements include the intake of an event, either through seeing or listening, and one's participation in the form of intimate or direct presence. The active aspect of witnessing refers to the actions, including suffering, that follow from the observations that have been made. Both the gendered origins and religious usage of witnessing are of political, epistemic, and ethical significance within and beyond media studies of witnessing.

Witnessing has been conceptualized through photography, television, film, the internet, music, and visual arts (Ekman & Tygstrup, 2008; Feldman, 2004; Weine, 1996; Derrida & Steigler, 2008; Maier & Dulfano, 2004; Blocker, 2009; Garner, 2003). The term "media witnessing" refers to the capacity to witness the distant suffering of others through mass media (Frosh and Pinchevski, 2009a; Boltanski, 1999). First coined by Frosh in 2006, Ashuri and Pinchevski (Frosh & Pinchevski, 2009) propose media witnessing to be a new social field, building upon the conceptualization of witnessing that has arisen in response to key historical events: the Second World War, the Holocaust, the atomic bomb, ethnic cleansing, and in recent times, terror attacks (Frosh & Pinchevski, 2009b). They argue that while earlier writings on witnessing have tended to refer to the objectivity and accurate recollection of the individual eyewitness, and how the psychological experience of giving testimony might affect evidentiary claims to truth (Frisch, 2004; Heaton-Armstrong et al., 2006; Lynn & Olson, 2011), different media coverage of events such as WWII and the Holocaust have raised concerns about valuing objective over subjective accounts, and questioning whether objective narrations are even possible (Agamben, 1999; Felman and Laub, 1992; Langer, 1993). Frosh, Ashuri, and Pinchevski's conceptualization of media witnessing only obliquely acknowledges its indebtedness to trauma studies and human rights literature, instead placing emphasis on critiquing representation discourse in media studies (Peters, 2001), grounding itself within structuration theory à la Bourdieu (Frosh & Pinchevski, 2009a; Ropers-Huilman, 1999), and aligning with contemporary literature on risk theory and cosmopolitanism (Frosh & Pinchevski, 2009b). However, a primary objective in media witnessing—to upset unequal power relationships—reveals a strong ethical and political stance that is very much influenced by broader conversations regarding witnessing in the media, and the role of the media to intervene in longstanding human rights issues (Wiens & Dempsey, 2009).

Media coverage of the Holocaust, primarily through photography and film, has greatly influenced the theoretical content and direction of research on witnessing in the media (Lang, 2009, Langer, 1993; Agamben, 1999; Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Studies, N.D.; Felman & Laub, 1992; Zeliger, 2008). With the development and use of different media forms, atrocities elsewhere could be observed en masse by an equally large audience, at times simultaneous with the events themselves (Baer, 2002; Sontag, 2003; Derrida & Steigler, 2002; Hesford, 2004; Rentschler, 2004). Ethical discussions have arisen with regard to journalistic responsibility (Tait, 2011), voyeurism, and spectatorship (Sontag, 2003; Hesford, 2004; Chourliaraki, 2006; Sharpley, 2009). These ethical concerns foreground ongoing philosophical debates on: collective responsibility (Chouliaraki, 2006; Boltanski, 1999; Rentschler, 2004; Zelizer, 1998; Frosh & Pinchevski, 2009a), the authenticity and psychological states of the subject (Douglass & Vogler, 2003; Felman & Laub, 1992), and the riven, fragmenting aspect of subjectivity itself (Sontag, 2003; Oliver, 2001; Ricoeur, 1994).

In as much as human rights narratives enrich the theorizing of witnessing in the media and media witnessing in particular, they do not exhaust the conceptualization of witnessing which has become a hot topic in various academic fields. In broader investigations of witnessing, an important debate has taken place on the politics of recognition (Oliver, 2001; Taylor, 1994; Levinas, 1998; Landry & MacLean, 1996). Oliver argues that witnessing may be a means through which demands for recognition lead to systemic change. While Oliver refers to the Holocaust, her critiques of the hegemony of political recognition are useful in understanding the witnessing of other human-made injustices and events, such as apartheid in S. Africa (Sanders, 2007) dictatorial rule in Latin America (Blocker, 2009) and the genocide of Indigenous communities (Kennedy, 2008). In S. Africa and Latin America, the literature on witnessing

emphasizes its gendered nature, and the need to listen to women as those most often overlooked (Ross, 2003; Coombes, 2011; Maier & Dulfano, 2004; Weingarten, 2004; Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, N.D.; Sanders, 2007; Bravo, 2008). Interestingly, the focus on women as witnesses brings to attention the possibility that for some violence is an every day occurrence, providing critical insights into the construction of political atrocities versus domestic abuse (Ross, 2003; Maier & Dulfano, 2004; Weingarten, 2004).

Another research area, which largely has been overlooked in media witnessing, is the witnessing of disease and illness. In particular, in the past twenty years, the AIDS epidemic has significantly influenced health and media scholarship on witnessing (Brophy, 2004; Coombes, 2011; Sontag, 1989; Weine, 1996). Here, witnessing is conceptualized beyond notions of representation and realism, and instead understood with respect to the living body, embodiment, and performance (Brophy, 2004; Feldman, 2004; Weine, 1996). These experiences crucially call attention not only to the conscious and explicable performances of witnessing but also to the nonconscious, subconscious, emotive, and visceral (Dewsbury, 2003; Peters, 2001). Furthermore, witnessing enters into a dialogue with the ethics of care (Cody, 2001). Cody presents the double-sidedness of witnessing, such that the health professional who bears witness in the same moment is not bearing witness to something or someone other (Cody, 2001). Between considerations of the ethics of care and the non-rationalized (and non-rationalizable) phenomenon of witnessing emerges a more sophisticated ontology of ethical regard that prioritizes interbeing (Watsuji, 1996), thereby extending intersubjectivity beyond collective notions of response and responsibility (Ricoeur, 1994; Levinas, 1998; Deleuze, 2004). Through the expansion of the ethical arises the potential to catalyze systemic, political regime change (Oliver, 2001; Spivak, 1996) and new forms of knowledge formation (Ropers-Huilman, 1999). Moreover, whole-bodied

notions of witnessing call into question the epistemological scope of media witnessing in its disregard for the unspeakable, unrepresentable, and exceptional, especially in cases when witnessing occurs in the distant suffering of others (Knudsen, 2011; Hoijer, 2004; Sharpley & Stone, 2009).

Perhaps the most nascent areas of witnessing come from environmental studies, Indigenous studies, and the visual arts. In environmental studies, witnessing extends beyond human experience, as researchers try to understand new human-land relationships. To this end, traditional Indigenous knowledge (Christian, 1998; Miller, 1998; Dewsbury, 2003) is recognized as opening new perspectives on land conservation, which stands apart from scientific strategies (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2009; Colchester, 2004). However, alongside these collaborations, counter-hegemonic literature on witnessing has been emerging in Indigenous studies in the past twenty years (Kennedy, 2008; Koptie, 2010; Miller, 1998). Scholars in this field challenge the marginalization of Indigenous witnessing in law and in the negotiation of treaty claims (Koptie, 2010; Miller, 1998; Clements, 2010), thereby creating a substantive means to overturn established power relationships in political and academic circles, one of the overarching goals of media witnessing.

In visual arts, witnessing not only accounts for that which is expressible or rationalizable. It also encompasses the incorporeal and esoteric, the unspeakable and unspoken (Peters, 2001; Deleuze, 2004). Visual artists explore the surplus of witnessing; they attempt to critique the limitations of subject positioning and the fundamental categorization of witnessing as passive or active (Ekman & Tygstrup, 2008; Blocker, 2009). Creative distortions make way for visceral, intersubjective and highly interactive experiences that can get to the heart of longstanding ethical issues in

media witnessing such as voyeurism, viewer apathy, presence and absence, and moral

righteousness within human rights discourse.

Key questions that guide my reading of this corpus include:

1. What are the epistemic and political goals and limitations of human rights agendae that underly media witnessing and broader literature on witnessing in the media?

2. What are some of the moral ambiguities and ambivalences that exist in witnessing? How can these ambiguities aid in distinguishing intersubjective from collective responsibility in witnessing in media studies? Why is this distinction important?

3. What would it look like if the literature of media witnessing was substantiated with the analysis of areas such as health, gender, environment, art, and Indigenous literature on witnessing, especially with regard to power inequalities in conflict and crisis situations?

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