

Briefing document

AHRC Workshop 3: The Politics of Culture as Testimony

1. How are cultural forms of testimony used and misused for political goals in the present?

A key discussion point of the day was once again the issue of mediation. Testimony must always be mediated, that is, put into language in order to be communicated to an audience. However, the integration of testimony into literature, film, documentary theatre, educational projects etc. adds further layers. This gives the producer of culture or educator significant power over that testimony, a power which might be subject to misuse. It is therefore the responsibility of those who use testimony for artistic, political and educational purposes to be self-reflective and to recognise their own agenda. In the absence of any clear line between legitimate use and misuse, this might be on the basis of a normative commitment to democracy, peace-building and the witness's right to self-determination.

The discussion of the potential for the misuse of testimony led to consideration of what some network members termed the "industry of testimony", that is, a voyeuristic demand for the narration of extreme experiences with the aim of generating profit or spectacle. This was seen to be especially prominent in the media's use of testimony when reporting trauma and violence; however, this appropriation of testimony was also detected in truth and reconciliation commissions and other political mechanisms for dealing with the past. In this context, while the giving and receiving of testimony were viewed by network members as important for the survivors of trauma and violence, concerns were expressed that grassroots projects were being used as an alternative to a politics that might address the root causes and enact real social change. The performance of testimony might become "tit-for-tat", with one experience of victimhood being constructed as a denial of another. These stories were described by Theme Lead Alan McCully as the "brickbats of history" being thrown at the other side after physical conflict has ended.

These concerns aside, network members agreed that one potential benefit of cultural forms of testimony in processes of post-conflict reconciliation was its ability to give voice to multiple perspectives and to encourage audiences to let go of the deep-felt conviction that their own position is the only "truth". The *epilogues* project is an excellent example of how this can work in practice. It confronts the audience with the testimony of the other and encourages them to give that testimony equal status to the voices of individuals from their own community. One way in which it does this is by refusing to identify the witnesses using the expected categories (e.g., "British soldier", "political prisoner"). This means that the audience hears and empathises with their accounts of violence, loss and the search for justice without knowing for certain if they are speaking from a Republican or Unionist perspective. The aims of *epilogues* might represent the potential of cultural forms of testimony more generally: underscoring democracy as a conflict-resolving process; creating awareness and understanding of the differences within and between the various perspectives; highlighting the contested nature of history and its role in shaping perception.

These aims also point towards the central role of the audience. For testimony to function in the ways outlined above, audiences must be ready and open to having their entrenched views challenged, to receive a "disruptive truth". This is, moreover, a two-way process, the witness him- or herself must learn to tell his or her story in a way that is acceptable to those on the other side of the conflict. In this regard, network members worked with the concept

of the “provisional”, that is, the idea that testimony can only provide an interim “truth” that is subject to revision. Indeed “authenticity” was another key term throughout the day. Authenticity is constructed in the process of the reception of testimony, that is, it is the audience who determines whether or not a “witnessing text” (Frosh, 2009) will be received as authentic. This is often based on the perceived identity of the witness and what is sayable in a given cultural context. Authenticity is therefore a political category, as it is only testimony deemed authentic that is given the authority to construct versions of the past.

2. How is culture as testimony incorporated into processes of transitional justice carried out at a political level (e.g. truth and parliamentary commissions in South Africa, Romania or Germany)?

There was general agreement amongst network members that politicians do not readily engage in the kinds of self-reflexive approaches to testimony and past conflict described above. Nonetheless, numerous examples of testimony being used in processes of transitional justice (broadly understood) were cited throughout the day. This ranged from the incorporation of (fictional) testimony into political reports and the deployment of film to inspire and support EU resolutions, to the use of children’s art as a form of evidence. One area in which humanities scholars might play a particular role and where there is clear potential for interdisciplinary collaboration is in analysing this use of testimony using the tools of cultural studies – identifying the modes of discourse and institutionalisation of testimony and reading “against the grain”. An important part of this is an understanding of the function of genre and we might speak of the “genre” or “genres” of testimony. As highlighted in Theme Lead Codruta Pohrib’s position paper, genres are also social institutions and different memory genres perform specific tasks. The question is then what task the genre of testimony fulfils in these political contexts. There is a risk that genre becomes a template for dealing with the past (seen, for example, in the copying of the form and rhetoric of Holocaust museums across many different contexts), which may not be appropriate to the specific cultural setting (e.g., Western templates or models of testimony being used in post-colonial nations).

3. What status does cultural testimony have before the Law and what is its potential to feature in and enrich legal proceedings?

Testimony has a quite specific meaning in the legal context and yet the giving of testimony in a court of law (or at a TRC) can also be regarded as a specific mode or genre of speech that is also institutionalised. On the other hand, as indicated above, other genres of testimony might initiate or contribute to legal processes, serving as evidence where no other exists or even taking the place of legal processes where these prove inadequate. Network members also expressed concern about what might happen to the testimony provided for processes of transitional justice after the transitional period ends, or as social, cultural and political contexts shift and change. The question of law also relates to the issue of perpetrator testimony and its status. Theme Lead Sara Jones asked at the start of the day whether perpetrators can be considered “authentic” witnesses. She concluded that they were not often ascribed this status. This is not necessarily because their testimony is found to be inaccurate, but because audiences recognise the power that comes with being given the right to testify and for that testimony to be given truth value. On the other hand, network members noted that perpetrator testimony is often essential to processes of transitional justice – because it is the only evidence available, or because it is needed for social reconciliation. Victims and survivors might need recognition of wrong-doing (a form of

symbolic justice) that can only come from perpetrator testimony. However, in order to motivate perpetrators to testify, political actors often need to provide amnesties, which can later prove frustrating to victims seeking legal forms of redress.