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Themed Issue Introduction: Testifying to violence environmentally: knowing, sensing, politicizing

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Introduction

Over the past decade, a growing number of scholars in the social sciences and the humanities have come to approach political violence as an environmental phenomenon, and conceptualize environmental injustices as violence (e.g. Barca, 2014; Buell, 2017; Gray and Sheikh, 2018; Lee, 2016; Nixon, 2011; Sharpe, 2016). Concurrently, material (including visual) cultural practitioners and theorists grappling with violence have mobilized the testimony of environments (e.g. flora, fauna, landforms, atmospheres, buildings, landscapes and cityscapes) to enhance the sensorial and epistemic valence of their work. This themed issue takes its cue from such mobilizations but also proposes to reconsider them in light of a series of fundamental questions that remain underexplored in this context of violence's 'environmentality' (Agrawal, 2005) even as they have become increasingly complexified by it. These are fundamental questions because they concern the political claims and promises attached to testimony and its various registers such as documentational, figurative, forensic and artistic. We therefore ask: What are the political possibilities and limitations of enlisting environments as authoritative witnesses to violence? What might the sensorial multiplicity associated with testifying to violence environmentally entail for both the primacy of the visual and its critique as a Eurocentrism? How do the truths produced through such testimony bear upon the various politically pragmatic ends it is expected to serve, such as verification, adjudication, resubjectivation, reparation and reconciliation? Contributors to this issue, who work across visual cultures, media studies, architecture and human geography, and who were first brought together in an interdisciplinary symposium held in early 2019 at the London School of Economics and Political Science, explore these questions via a diverse range of contexts including Pakistan, Georgia, Colombia, Austria, Sri Lanka and Lebanon.

The increasing reliance on environments in processes of testifying to political

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violence is in many ways a response to the shortcomings of a paradigm of testimony that dominated the late 20th century and that its proponents termed the 'era of testimony' (Felman, 1991) or the 'era of the witness' (Wieviorka, 2006). This paradigm became subject to criticism in the early 2000s for privileging individual human witnesses in the production of truths about violence. There are various reasons why this privileging has been problematized. It conflates the personal and the psychological with the collective and the socio-political (Douglass and Vogler, 2003). It sidelines empirical sources other than individual human witnesses (Sarlo, 2005: 9–26) and treats survivors as self-evident embodiments of veracity, therefore obscuring the politically charged processes of exclusion, selection, validation and analysis that in fact govern truth production (Givoni, 2011). It casts 'the witness' into a homogeneous category that erases subject-positional differences among those sweepingly categorized as such (Fassin, 2008).

Taking their cue from such criticisms of the post-Holocaust paradigm, material cultural practitioners and theorists have turned to enlisting the testimony of environments. For architect Eyal Weizman (2010: 14), the post-Holocaust paradigm deprived testimony of its epistemic function by employing it 'primarily as an "ethical" resource' whose value rested on 'being delivered in the first place' rather than on 'revealing knowledge or authenticating claims of historical injustice'. Weizman (2014: 29) has heralded a new paradigm of testimony that he has termed a 'forensic' one. It relies on environments to register and convey violent histories in a way that aspires to be universally palpable and that therefore contrasts with the post-Holocaust tendency to understand truth as 'inherently relative, contingent, multiple, or non-existent' – an aspiration that resonates with a growing number of relevant artistic and/or activist endeavours today (e.g. Keysar, 2019; Kurgan, 2017; Heller and Pezzani, 2017; Schuppli, 2013, 2014; Staal, 2016; Weizman, 2010, 2014). Recent retheorizations of testimony and especially those building on post-humanist and neo-materialist methodologies have welcomed such endeavours for their political potential. Susan Schuppli's (2020) notion of 'material witness' explores the potential of physical environments and their constituent components to palpably testify not only to violent events but also to processes of their own production as authoritative witnesses. Writing about 'citizen sensing', Helen Pritchard and Jennifer Gabrys (2016) also associate progressive political potential with widened bodily access to and participation in knowledge production that, for them, characterize collectively actionable and rationalizable methods of measuring and monitoring environmental harm. This emphasis on the collective and the sensorial resonates with Shela Sheikh's (2018) future-oriented reconceptualization of testimony, which both addresses and draws on the increasing discernibility of environmental grievances and their colonial origins. Her reconceptualization, moreover, features constituents of 'the environment' not only as a medium through

which to testify to harm (both past and ongoing) but also as part and parcel of the very 'publics' of testimony, or of its 'more-than-human socialities' that span the 'constructed categories of active/passive' and 'subject/object' characterizing colonial epistemes (pp. 146–151). For these practitioners and theorists, then, the political potential of the turn towards environments centres on epistemics both because it renders knowledge palpable to and useable by collectives, and because it expands the very idea of the collective in ways that upend the epistemic violence of predominant methodologies – not least those relevant to cultural as well as environmental theory and practice.

However, there have also been calls for caution. For Andrew Herscher (2011: 130–141), surveillance-driven human rights advocacy's increasing reliance on environments as 'a witness to violence' risks overshadowing the human causes, driving forces, aims and intentions behind rights violations. This reliance, moreover, takes 'looking' for granted as an unfiltered means of verification and as equal to action, thereby obfuscating the role that political work and power play in determining its societal impacts (Herscher, 2014: 496). For Allison Carruth and Robert Marzec (2014), environmental visualizations used in mainstream climate change advocacy and science require problematization for their neoliberal and neo-colonial claims to a planetary and non-ideological outlook. TJ Demos (2017) has problematized the currency that such an outlook enjoys today among contemporary artists working on environmental issues. For Joshua Ewalt (2011), contemporary humanitarianism's use of real-time satellite mapping renders intervention from outside as the only possible mode in which to engage with rights violations and, in so doing, reproduces the colonial gaze. For Allen Feldman (2015), imperial power increasingly relies on the mimetic hollowing out of forensic procedures and methods; it exploits their symbolic capital for anti-forensic and dehistoricizing ends (p. 82). Humanitarian projects remain permeated by this power insofar as they adhere to the way it compartmentalizes peoples into separate 'media regimes' and 'geographies' of epistemic 'sensibility and insensibility' such as 'the fictive' and 'the documentary' (p. 137). Such calls for caution dovetail with a broader critical tradition in film studies that has problematized the fiction–nonfiction binary as itself implicated in notions of the real shaped by political violence (e.g. Bruzzi, 2020; Renov, 2004).[1]

These debates on the political possibilities and limitations of the turn towards environments in testifying to violence are noteworthy in two respects. First, those interested in the possibilities attribute them in good part to the multisensorial affordances of environments, whereas the critics have remained focused on the visual rather than any other sensorial modality. Yet to develop fully, then, is a critique that acknowledges the multisensorial affordances attributed to the environmental turn in testifying to violence, while also approaching their political implications with the kind of critical

outlook characterizing the visually oriented critics. Secondly, the very notion of the political at work here is itself thrown into sharp relief as meriting further critical exploration. As suggested above, the political possibilities of testifying to violence environmentally are often considered to derive from epistemic ones, while the limitations are also attributed to the difficulty of deriving a certain politics directly and solely from knowledge. This themed issue seeks to make a scholarly contribution in these two respects – in other words, to help clarify both the politics of the multisensorial and that of the epistemic.

A growing body of scholarship over the past decade has theorized the politics of the sensorial through aesthetics. Jacques Rancière's (2010: 36) notion of the politics of aesthetics as 'the distribution of the sensible' – the 'delimitation of spaces and times of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience' (Rancière, 2004: 13) – is particularly relevant here; it has been taken up by scholars writing about just the kind of relationship between violence and the environment that is central to this themed issue.[2] This recent scholarly uptake of Rancièrian aesthetics has seen scholars not only theorize the political implications of sensing and making sense of violence as an environmental phenomenon but also clarify the politics of this theorization itself. The clarification is that 'aesthetics' entails not that which is sensorial but rather a theory thereof and, in the predominant way it continues to be understood and employed today (including by Rancière), a largely Kantian one that originates in the Enlightenment where it enabled the European colonial project by legitimizing Eurocentric humanisms premised upon the dehumanization of the racialized (Goonewardena, 2005: 47–48; Jackson, 2016; Mirzoeff, 2014: 219–220; Yusoff, 2015; Yusoff et al., 2012: 971, fn.1). Recent scholarship that seeks to reclaim the non-European socialities, relationalities, existences and knowledges subsumed by and through Kantian aesthetics has not been free of contention, either, insofar as it has simply reversed the antagonisms characterizing Eurocentric humanisms rather than undoing them entirely. For Arun Saldanha (2012: 278), what is ultimately at stake here is political work – the collective work of protesting, striking, organizing, mobilizing and so on – that risks being overshadowed by too great an emphasis on the presumed politics of that which is multisensorial. Appraising the politics of the diversification of sensorial affordances associated with testifying to violence environmentally, then, requires taking into account *collective* political work carried out on the ground vis-à-vis the violence that is the subject of testimony.

This emphasis on politics as a collective act rather than an ontological trait also informs the themed issue's approach to the epistemic. While, as indicated above, those seeking to mobilize the political potential of testifying to violence environmentally have tended to premise it on epistemics, doing

so remains oriented towards only one of the verbs associated with testimony: witnessing. Testimony, however, entails bearing witness as well as witnessing (Oliver, 2000; Rothberg, 2019). If 'witnessing' concerns experiencing an event at a specific time and place, and communicating this experience to others, 'bearing witness' involves 'that which cannot be seen' (Oliver, 2000: 31). While witnessing orientates one's 'subject position' in space and time, bearing witness constitutes 'subjectivity' – one's sense of agency and 'response-ability' – by continually encouraging one's 'encounter with otherness' (Oliver, 2003: 137) or one's quest to address others and receive their response (Oliver, 2001: 85–106). Attending to both witnessing and bearing witness, in other words, is to understand testimony as constituted by and constitutive of 'complex and uncertain' social relations (Rothberg, 2013: 40) – as a 'social constellation' that requires collective political work (Krämer and Weigel, 2017: x). The political significance of testimony, then, is irreducible to a question of knowing violence more accurately and palpably than before, and/or producing this knowledge in ways that differ from epistemic conventions and categories grounded in violent histories. Appraising testimony's political significance also requires asking who is allowed to produce and use this knowledge in ways they see fit – in other words, who is granted epistemic agency – and the extent to which the answer to this question overlaps with constituencies whose agency was undermined through violence in the first place.[3]

It is with these questions in mind that contributors to this themed issue politicize the epistemic and multisensorial promises of the environmental turn in testifying to violence. The first three contributions do so through theoretically scrutinous reflections informed by the contributors' long-standing commitments to specific empirical contexts. Andrew Barry critically examines the concepts of 'engaged objectivity' and 'material witness' that loom large in recent forensic approaches to environmental violence. He does so both in conversation with several critical theorists of science and technology, and with the case of a hydropower plant planned for the Rioni Valley in Georgia's Lechkumi region, a geography that has long been central to Barry's work. He develops a notion of 'collective empiricism' that refuses to replace collective agency with politically engaged visual documentation and analysis while also mobilizing the latter. Barry advocates long-term commitment to residents contending collectively with environmental violence, to the places they inhabit and to their sense of place – so as to avoid ascribing the materially and visually sourced testimony of environments a political and empirical promise much grander than it could ever fulfil. Nishat Awan discusses, through the case of Pakistan, contemporary humanitarianism's forensically oriented reliance on remote sensing, satellite imagery and visuals sourced from social media. Awan asks how practices of witnessing that employ these technologies and media operate in relation to power relations shaped by the very violence being witnessed through them. She finds that such practices

foreground the epistemic and political agency of institutions (both legal and academic) that are embroiled in the very histories of violence they proclaim to challenge, and therefore risk reproducing violence's erasure of racialized bodies – this time by undermining long-term collective grassroots struggles for truth and justice. Mangalika de Silva writes about two concepts originating in ancient Greece, which came to figure prominently in late 20th-century critical theories of subjectivity not least those relevant to violence: 'ekphrasis' or vividly detailed description, and 'aphanisis' or disappearance. In light of her extensive work on enforced disappearances during the Sri Lankan civil war, De Silva demonstrates that here 'disappearance' functioned as much more than just that; it not only disappeared the abducted (for instance, by covert detention and clandestine burial) but also annihilated their right to having inhabited the earth as socio-political subjects constituting communities that are irreducible to the disappeared. Environmental tropes, she argues, have been central to this annihilation - the state employed them to render off-limits both the disappeared and the territories involved in disappearance. By the same token, such tropes have become amenable to appropriation by surviving kin for undoing the very annihilatory aims of disappearance's organizers and perpetrators.

The following three contributions are practice-based and collaborative in character. Oscar Pedraza and Hannah Meszaros Martin discuss the environmental implications of recent political violence in Coquitos, Colombia, by drawing on a visual methodology that combines what they call situated testimonies and earthly memories. The methodology not only echoes the forensic-architectural approach to the analysis of violence but also grounds it in the grassroots knowledge and struggles of *campesinos* (peasant farmers). Coupling visual analysis with an ethnography whose depth reflects the authors' commitment to the environments and communities involved, Pedraza and Meszaros Martin subvert the conventional (scientific and legal) hierarchies between 'experience' and 'expertise' that relegate the *campesinos* to the former. Philipp Sattler, Dubravka Sekulić and Milica Tomić reflect on their project Aflenz Memorial in Becoming that contends with multiple histories of violence converging at Aflenz an der Sulm in south-eastern Austria. This is a site that served as a labour and concentration camp during World War II and yet lacks any visual reference to its violent history. Sattler, Sekulić and Tomić take readers through the site's multi-layered history of violence spanning not only genocide but also extractive industries and property relations. Consolidating a methodology of 'investigative memorialization' that has gradually emerged from Tomić's work over the past two decades and that in this case involved an excavation on site, the authors employ terrestrial remnants to locate World War II in the long, ongoing and intertwined histories of colonialism and capitalism. Colonial and capitalist histories loom large also in Helene Kazan's contribution as she locates in their violence the recent commodification and financialization of risk in Lebanon. Thinking collaboratively and intersectionally by drawing on

not only her own artistic practice but also that of three other Lebanese artists, Kazan considers slow and spectacular forms of violence together through a focus on what she terms lived-built environments. She advocates an approach that both undertakes visual historical analysis and accounts for the political work undertaken on the ground, including its apparent failures. Doing so subverts the risk industry's continual displacement of violence to the future and reclaims a futurity that comprises futures foreclosed violently – through structural as well as spectacular forms of violence. Finally, Allen Feldman's Epilogue critically interweaves the six contributions to flesh out emergent aesthetic and political organizations, and disintegrations that inhabit the visually charged turn towards environments in testifying to violence.

Contributions to this themed issue are therefore diverse in both theoretical and empirical respects, and at times even in productive conflict with one another. While reducing them to a homogeneous whole would be both futile, and critically and analytically unproductive, there is one concern common to them all: avoiding the assumption that political effects inhere in environmental testimony by turning instead to the specific contexts where collective work imbues it with them. Avoiding this assumption is all the more important for scholars such as ourselves in this themed issue and many others interested in environmental testimony, who inhabit Anglo-American academia (whether institutionally or discursively, or both) even as we seek to dissect and challenge violent histories authored in great part by Western European and North American forces. Approaching our own methodologies not only as enablers of environmental testimony but also as implicated in the environments in which violence takes place – even as we seek to do such enabling work – is necessary for the pursuit of justice as a collective project.

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Notes

1. Similarly, the turn towards environments in witnessing violence also resonates with and has recent precedents in film theory and criticism, which deserve acknowledgment here even though none of the contributions to this themed issue centre specifically on film. For example, Walker (2010) has conceptualized as 'situated testimonies' the ways in which film solicits the testimony of scenes of disaster and political crime as a way of compensating for what human witnesses cannot or do not say; Kara and Thain (2014: 180) have mobilized a focus on 'sonic ecologies' to unpack a 'new materialism' they discern in political horror films; Sarkar and Walker's (2010: 5) concept of 'moving testimonies' also foregrounds the materiality, spatiality and corporeality of the kinds of testimony at work in filmic representations of recent atrocities:

   > the faces and voices that emanate from close or distant locations; the sounds and images that animate our ubiquitous screens; the archives we establish . . . These are the new assemblages that compel us to bear witness, move us to anger or tears, and possibly mobilize us to action for social justice.

2. See, for example, Çaylı, 2021; Dikeç, 2013; Dixon, 2009; Ingram, 2016; Ruez, 2013; Tolia-Kelly, 2019.
3. In their introduction to a themed issue on 'toxic politics', Liboiron et al. (2018: 340) problematize 'the myth that more, better, clearer, affective, localized, and/or embodied representations will lead to more, better, clearer, effective, local and embodied action'. Against solutionist and success-oriented activisms that subscribe to this myth, they endorse 'slow activism': activism that prioritizes 'agency-as-obligation, as ethics', and that therefore 'move[s] toxic politics away from narratives of suffering that essentialize those who bear the disproportionate burdens of harm as victims' (p. 342). While, in making this point, I take my cue from their problematization, I hesitate to formalize activist politics such that some forms of activism are considered more conducive to ethical politics than others.

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