

Following Laura Marcus: from autobiography to testimony

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Following Laura Marcus: from autobiography to testimony

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ABSTRACT



The publication of Laura Marcus's *Auto/biographical Discourses: Criticism, Theory, Practice* (1994) coincided with a conference that I co-organised with her called 'Modernity, Culture and "the Jew"' (1994). We both expected the conference to be a modest event, but it turned out to be over-subscribed with many hundreds in attendance. In the light of our conference, my essay explores some of the reasons why the 1990s was thought of as an 'age of testimony' which is addressed in *Auto/biographical Discourses* and subsequent essays by Laura. The essay will then compare the playfulness of the autobiographical genre with the ethical seriousness of Holocaust testimonies and slave narratives. At the heart of the essay is Laura's conceptualisation of autobiography and its connections with those who write testimonial memoirs *in extremis*.

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'This shift, if that is what it is, from the self-consciousness of autobiography (which may conceal a cultural demand for confession) and the ethical responsibility to testify, has important implications for conceptions of the status and value of self-writings and for concepts of experience and our relationship to it'. Laura Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses: Criticism, Theory, Practice* (1994, p. 213.)

'Testimony is the literary – or discursive – mode par excellence of our times, and that can precisely be defined as the age of testimony'. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992, p. 5).

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Introductory

In May 1994, Laura Marcus and myself organised a conference called ‘Modernity, Culture, and “the Jew”’ which we thought would be a modest event at Senate House, London, and it turned out to be over-subscribed with standing room only.¹ The plenary speakers were Zygmunt Bauman, Gillian Rose, and James Young, who had all recently published influential and long-lasting accounts on the history and representation of the Holocaust, and on Judaism and philosophy.² Mike Hart, at Compendium Books, known as ‘Britain’s pre-eminent radical bookstore’, provided a densely packed seven-page bibliography of newly published scholarly works related to the conference theme.³ We thought of the gathering as ‘multi-voiced’, reflecting what we called, in our conference introduction, ‘an extraordinary flood of new research’. It felt like a moment when ‘newness enters the world’, as Salman Rushdie put it in *Imaginary Homelands* (1992).⁴

When we first conceived of ‘Modernity, Culture, and “the Jew”’, it was going to be entitled ‘Why Weininger?’ which made us both laugh. Laura had co-organised a London conference in 1992 to mark the centenary of the birth of Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) and we thought initially that we might focus again on one individual.⁵ She was fascinated by Otto Weininger (1880–1903) and eventually co-edited his notorious *Sex and Character: An Investigation of Fundamental Principles* (1903) and organised an event at Sussex University to mark the centenary of Weininger’s death.⁶ One reason for her preoccupation with Weininger is that he influenced the work of some of her favourite modernist writers including Dorothy Richardson and Virginia Woolf, as well as that of Sigmund Freud, and was read widely, in many translated English reprints, in the first half of the twentieth century.⁷ Weininger, a troubling conduit for anti-Semitism and misogyny (‘Hitler’s favourite Jew’), remained a feature in many of her books, but was a mere panel subject at our conference as there was so much else to consider.⁸ Nonetheless, ‘Modernity, Culture, and “the Jew”’ was a nod to the penultimate chapter of *Sex and Character* which contended, all too reductively, that the ‘*spirit of modernity is Jewish*’ (299, italics in the original).

Our conference took place at a time of geo-political optimism. The Oslo Accords were signed at the White House in 1993 with a declaration of principles leading to Palestinian self-government which President Clinton was particularly invested in implementing. A year later, South Africa transitioned from apartheid to majority rule with the African National Congress finally gaining power. In Britain, Tony Blair’s New Labour was close to its ascendancy and its version of multiculturalism, or ‘Cool Britannia’, was starting to make an impact. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum was opened in Washington DC in the same year as the Oslo Accords and was soon followed by the global release, and critical and commercial success,

of Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1994). After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, purportedly signifying the 'end of history', access to vital East European archives was granted for the first time.⁹ This created a 'boom' in Holocaust history, both within and without the academy, and was the wider geopolitical context which energised the so-called 'new Jewish cultural studies' at the heart of our gathering.¹⁰

The conference also coincided with the publication of our first books, Laura's *Auto/biographical Discourses: Criticism, Theory, Practice* (1994) and my *Constructions of 'the Jew' in English Literature and Society: Racial Representations 1875–1945* (1993). Completing *Auto/biographical Discourses* was a struggle, as I can attest from our rueful conversations (albeit full of joyful, self-deprecating humour) concerning its completion. We can also gauge her sombre mood surrounding the book from its dedication: '*For William who suffered and was there*' (italics in the original). But, as we now know, this was a work of considerable importance that mapped out a new way of understanding 'self-writing' which, shortly after, became 'life-writing'. It has inspired my own work on Holocaust testimony which I have been teaching and researching since the late 1980s.

From autobiography to testimony

What interests me is the long history of testimony from slave narratives to Holocaust testimonies and contemporary refugee stories. My starting point for thinking through this nascent project is *Auto/biographical Discourses*, and the essays which flowed from it. 'The Face of Autobiography' (1995), for instance, goes back to the 'shift', first addressed in her book, between the 'self-consciousness of autobiography' and the 'ethical responsibility to testify'.¹¹ When does autobiography become testimony? Does testimony efface the individual subject? What is the relationship between autobiography and ethno-racial difference? After all, 'Autobiography and Ethnicity' is the title of the last section of *Auto/biographical Discourses* and this conjunction is the theme of her final essay which revolves around exiled Austrian- and German-Jewish intellectuals.¹²

'The Face of Autobiography' brings together the memory of Holocaust survivors with the experience of an African American woman after her encounter with racism. Testimonies generated by the trauma of the Holocaust, particularly those who experienced the Nazi ghettos and camps, are related to the 'intellectual work [which] at the moment appears to be concerned with "speaking out" or "remaining silent"' (20). Here Marcus is quoting from Felman and Laub's *Testimony* and its claim that we live in an 'age of testimony' (20). The second example of racial discourse 'defacing' autobiography is by the African American legal theorist, Patricia Williams, who was refused entry to a New York store by a young white man. As

Marcus comments, 'the ideology of race, distorts the "face to face" encounter' (22). Williams was prevented from publicising her story as her editor insisted that it was unverifiable.¹³ These examples from African American and Jewish history recall the 'familiar anxieties over the status of autobiographical testimony and truth' (22). It is these anxieties that I wish to address.

Underlying Marcus's argument is her abiding sense of the 'instability or hybridity of autobiography as a genre' (14). To this extent, the 'ideology of race' is just one means of controlling or containing an 'autobiographical tradition' which has 'served to fashion a composite face of European culture' (22). Autobiography, in her evocative phrase, first used in *Auto/biographical Discourses*, is a 'dangerous double agent'. The genre moves between opposites – 'self and world, literature and history, fact and fiction, subject and object' (14) – and, simultaneously, is a 'magical instrument' which reconciles these opposites.¹⁴ What remains irreconciled is the tension between the playfulness and 'self-consciousness' of autobiography and the 'ethical' imperative of testimony. Is the 'shift' from autobiography to testimony merely another set of binaries which may, or may not, be resolved? Because of its universal nature, Marcus recognises in her book that testimony has 'important implications for the status and value of self-writings and for concepts of experience and our relationship to it' (213). Testimony, she argues, entails a 'move away from self-reflection towards a sense that we are all witnesses of history's tragedies and may be summoned to testify to our knowledge of them' (213). But there remains an unresolved binary as the shift from autobiography to testimony also involves a move away from the 'self' to the 'world'. After all, testimony, in its strictest formulation, needs a more worldly context so that its evidentiary value can be assessed. As Marcus notes, 'referential truth continues to be judged as an essential element in autobiography in its role as the literature of witness'.¹⁵

The universalising of testimony ('we are all witnesses of history's tragedies') has the humanistic virtue of inclusivity which should not be underestimated. As Tzvetan Todorov similarly notes, using the language of testimony, 'Each of us is the witness of our own life'.¹⁶ Such humanism informs *Auto/biographical Discourses* and her *Autobiography: A Very Short Introduction* (2018) both of which include memoirs by concentration camp survivors, such as Primo Levi and Ruth Kruger, and also by survivors from the American slave plantations such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs. But, since the 1990s, the exponential growth in identity politics has made it increasingly difficult to bring together minority histories (even under the rubric of autobiography) for fear of being accused of inauthenticity or cultural appropriation.¹⁷ In 'Autobiography and the Politics of Identity' (1995), another essay written soon after her book, Marcus was all too aware of the dangers of identity politics particularly as a way of diminishing the concept of 'personal criticism' as championed by Nancy Miller.¹⁸ But,

sadly, identity politics and personal criticism has become increasingly elided. The intellectual work of the Auschwitz survivor Elie Wiesel, for instance, eventually reinforced an identity politics. In a lecture on 'The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration' (1977), which was the starting point for Felman and Laub, Wiesel argued that 'there are the witnesses and there is their testimony':

If the Greeks invented Tragedy, the Romans the epistle, and the Renaissance the sonnet, our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony and we all feel we have to bear testimony for the future. And that became an obsession, the single most powerful obsession that permeated all the lives, all the dreams, all the work of these people. One minute before they died they thought that was what they had to do.¹⁹

The claim that 'our generation invented a new literature' prompts Felman and Laub to ask: '*Why has testimony in effect become at once so central and so omnipresent in our cultural accounts of ourselves?*'²⁰ But, rather than universalise, Wiesel makes clear that he is speaking specifically about Holocaust survivors as testimonial witnesses: 'There were historians in every ghetto, chroniclers in every camp' (10). Testimony is a 'new literature' precisely because Wiesel thought, speaking in the mid-1970s, that ghetto and camp survivors needed a voice: 'obscene, that is, to deprive the victim of his memories' (18). The context here is significant. Up until the 1970s, continuing even to the present-day, eyewitnesses to the ghettos and camps have hardly been included in histories of the Nazi genocide. That is why Wiesel insisted on calling his fellow survivors 'historians'. In stark contrast, Raul Hilberg, whose *The Destruction of the European Jews* (1961) was a path-breaking history, stated that he 'found contemporary German documents far more reliable than post-war survivor memoirs'.²¹ The eschewal of the eye-witness can also be found in a recent comprehensive account of 'The Final Solution', where David Cesarani argues against the historical value of survivor testimony as 'survivors are atypical of what the majority of Jews endured under Nazi rule'.²²

Hilberg, the doyen of Holocaust studies, was researching in a context in which West German judges were systematically discrediting survivor testimony in courts of law. Victims were 'subjected to aggressive questioning, and at times felt as if it were they, not the accused, who were on trial'.²³ As late as 1972, in an anti-Nazi trial in Hamburg, the presiding judge argued that eyewitness testimony was 'the most unreliable form of evidence' and the ideal witness needed to be 'disinterested' and 'distanced' in contrast to the Jewish witnesses giving evidence.²⁴ Such prejudices were widespread even after the 1961 Eichmann Trial which is rightly thought to have empowered eyewitnesses to the ghettos and camps: 'The Eichmann Trial freed the victims to speak. It created a social demand for testimony'.²⁵ As with

autobiography, testimony cannot be understood outside of its social context. Soon after the witness emerged as a 'social figure' they were moralised as 'the quintessential witnesses to genocide, not because of anti-fascist heroism, but because they survived an assault on their collective existence'.²⁶ Hence the association of testimony, unlike autobiography, with an ethical perspective from the position of a survivor. That is why Wiesel spoke of a new testimonial literature and Felman and Laub went beyond the 'advent of the witness' to promote a supposed 'age of testimony' which Mary Fulbrook has called the 'era of the survivor'.²⁷

What is missing from Felman and Laub is the long history of testimony, its theological and judicial origins, which, in their book, has been superseded by a 'new' genre or epoch. After all, the etymology of 'martyr' comes from the Greek 'martur' or witness and is at the heart of Christian theology. Bearing witness, in religious terms, means commemorating a transcendent truth. As James Young has demonstrated, the word 'testimony' derives from the Latin for 'witness' (testis) which is why witnessing and testifying leads to knowledge.²⁸ The growth of the 'moral witness' certainly speaks to this etymology of experience leading to ethical knowledge but does not resolve the anxieties concerning the truth-bearing attributes of secular testimonies. To this extent, testimony is no less 'unstable' or 'hybrid' a concept than the genre of autobiography. In Robert Gordon's formulation, testimony is a continuum moving from 'fact to reflection, from court deposition to writerly composition' and back again.²⁹

Testifying as part of a judicial process is a performative act on the side of objectivity, what Gordon calls 'bare witnessing' (3). In other words, jurisprudence momentarily resolves the anxieties concerning the truth-bearing qualities of the eyewitness. But such resolution is not 'magical'; rather it is at the expense of a self-conscious form of narrativizing which, in its literariness, may well have a broader appeal and a more poetic sense of justice.³⁰ Narrative or 'flexible' testimony is much closer to autobiography but recounting a life-story is not the same as reliving a traumatic event. As Marcus argues, 'exceptional or extreme historical circumstances, such as war, are fertile ground for the writing of the literatures of testimony and witness'. That is why testimony or 'the literatures of witness' is a subset of autobiography. It relates to events 'which are so extreme that they fracture history's flow and create an absolute divide between then and now'.³¹ Such an unprecedented history of loss and suffering leads to an aura, as Gordon asserts, which surrounds testimony:

Testimony brings with it a genuine rhetorical power. It taps into time-honoured traditions of memory and mourning; it gives voice to a mass of individuals who have little or no expertise in speaking or writing, only the authority of being there [in the camps, plantations and ghettos]. Furthermore, it has the noble ring of collective, public action: testimony is a defiant deposition against crime: against evil (1).

With the ‘advent of the witness’ after the Eichmann trial, the social and historical visibility of the Holocaust survivor has grown exponentially. As a result of this process, as Berel Lang has observed, there are now hundreds of thousands of Holocaust testimonies, given by survivors, in archives and museums which have become a ‘distinctive form of memorial’.³² Today, it is the collective nature of Holocaust testimony, rather than individual voices, that is most compelling. Wiesel, in this communal spirit, placed testimony, transmitted from ‘mouth to ear, from eye to eye’, in a Judaic Talmudic tradition by referring to Auschwitz as a ‘new Sinai, the place of a new covenant’ which is open to theological interpretation. But, as Henry Greenspan has rightly contended, when it comes to the Jewish genocide ‘we have no sacred text to recite and no laws of conduct whose meaning might be enlivened by interpretation’.³³

Such ‘sacralization’ of history, with ‘Jews as the sole bearers of Holocaust memory’, in Zygmunt Bauman’s words, has reduced the Jewish genocide to an ahistorical symbol of radical evil.³⁴ To this extent, it has become commonplace, as Peter Novick notes, to more generally ‘invoke the Holocaust to dramatize one’s victimhood – and survival’ despite its claim to uniqueness.³⁵ This has resulted in a shift away from the Holocaust witness to the ‘moral witness’ who has assumed a global role as a ‘dismayed spectator aghast at violations of human conscience’.³⁶ I now want to explore the tension between a particularised eyewitness and an all-encompassing ‘moral witness’ by thinking through narratives of the American slave plantations and the Nazi concentration camps under the sign of testimony.

From slave narratives to Holocaust testimonies

Novick ends his book *The Holocaust in the American Life* (1999) with a warning against turning past victimisation into a communal ‘civil religion’: ‘Whether the memory is of slavery, the Holocaust, or any of the terrible events of human history ... the role of that memory in group consciousness has to be carefully considered’ (281). As a historian, Novick’s careful consideration may well mean contextualising specific ‘terrible events’ so as to distinguish one from another. But it may also connect entirely different histories where traumatised memories are transformed into testimonial narratives. My current project investigates the latter possibility of affiliating testimonial narratives across history which can be fraught with difficulties as exemplified by the November 19, 1942, entry in Anne Frank’s diaries: ‘It’s like the slave hunts of the olden days. I don’t mean to make light of this; it’s much too tragic for that. ... I often see long lines of good, innocent people, accompanied by crying children, walking on and on ... No one is spared. The sick, the elderly, children, babies and pregnant women – all marched to their death’.³⁷ Why Anne Frank thought that referring to ‘the

slave hunts of the olden days' was 'making light' of what she witnessed from her attic window is a mystery. To be sure, no Jewish person was 'spared' under Nazi rule; being born Jewish was a death sentence. But the danger here, although understandable for a visceral eyewitness, is thinking in terms of a hierarchy of victims and of one's own group suffering as uniquely terrible.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), alongside Anne Frank's diaries, has been accused of reinforcing a hierarchy of suffering with its epigraph, 'Sixty million and more' as personified in the novel by the heroic Sixo. This importation of the Holocaust into the history of slavery was defended by Morrison on the grounds that 'modern life begins with slavery' and centuries of racism made 'everything in World War II possible'.³⁸ To be sure, the history of slavery took place over hundreds of years and encompassed vast swathes of the world, in stark contrast with the Jewish genocide on the continent of Europe over half a decade. Perhaps 'sixty million' is designed to indicate these radically different temporal and spatial histories and to highlight the invisibility of slave narratives in the 1980s as part of an untoned, unrecognised, unrepaired past.³⁹ But where *Beloved* can be linked to representations of the Holocaust is on the level of narrative. As Young has long since shown, novelists of the Holocaust manufacture 'their own testimonial authority as part of their fictional discourse' (50). That is, literary novelists create a sense of authenticity by reconstructing historical documents within their figural compositions. Morrison does exactly this by incorporating the horrific story of Margaret Garner who attempted to escape slavery in 1856 and, while trapped in Ohio, killed her three-year-old daughter with a butcher's knife.

The question of documentary authority brings together both antebellum fugitive slave narratives and Holocaust testimonies although the critical literature on this topic remains largely confined to separate spheres. As directed by the American Anti-Slavery Society (1833–1870), antebellum slave narratives, not unlike Wiesel's version of Holocaust testimony, claim that they give a picture of 'what Slavery really is', in the words of Harriet Jacobs.⁴⁰ Both forms of testimony are supposed to offer unmediated access to experience and are written in the form of documentary realism, apparently devoid of *poiesis* (shaping or making), as James Olney has shown.⁴¹ In this way, a critical orthodoxy emerged where the memories of both the concentration camps and slave plantation are said to lead straightforwardly to testimonial knowledge. After all, both forms of testimony were used to reveal the enslavement and mass murder of racialized peoples and ranged from factual documentation to more personal figurative memoirs.

Many Holocaust survivors, who had produced either oral or written accounts, testified in courts of law. Between 1830 and 1860 around one hundred antebellum American slave narratives were published, as part of

the movement for the abolition of slavery. These narratives were often mediated by the mainly non-black American Anti-Slavery Society who argued in their preface to *Slavery as It Is* (a large collection of newspaper cuttings) that 'the value of testimony is by no means measured by the novelty of the horrors he describes' but that 'corroborative testimony – facts, similar to those established by others – is highly valuable'.⁴² The tension between dramatising 'horrors' and documenting 'facts' is at the heart of both Holocaust testimonies and slave narratives. To resolve this tension many survivors employed what has been called the 'rhetorical strategies of law'⁴³ as can be seen in Primo Levi's idealised version of his authorial voice articulated in the 1976 appendix ('appendice') to the popular children's edition of *If This is a Man* (1947):

I repress hatred even within myself: I prefer justice. Precisely for this reason, when describing the tragic world of Auschwitz, I have assumed the calm, sober language of the witness, neither the lamenting tones of the victim nor the irate voice of someone who seeks revenge. I thought that my account would be all the more credible and useful the more it appeared objective and the less it sounded overly emotional; only in this way does a witness in matters of justice perform his task, which is that of preparing the ground for the judge. The judges are my readers.⁴⁴

Just as the rhetoric of law is voiced in Levi's appendix, the same rhetoric is a key feature of the framing material for slave narratives. Take, for instance, the author's preface to *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) by Harriet Jacobs: 'Reader, be assured that this narrative is no fiction. I am aware that some of my adventures may seem incredible; but they are, nevertheless, strictly true ... Only by experience can anyone realize how deep, and dark, and foul is that pit of abominations' (5). In his long preface to *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845), William Lloyd Garrison, a co-founder of the American Anti-Slavery Society, concludes that the 'testimony of Mr. Douglass ... is sustained by a cloud of witnesses, whose veracity is unimpeachable'.⁴⁵ Douglass, in the early chapters of his narrative, is suitably factual and characterises himself as 'a witness and participant' (15) which leaves open the space for two interpretative and autonomous autobiographies which followed *Narrative of the Life*. A final example, out of many, is the preface of Louis Hughes to his *Thirty Years a Slave: From Bondage to Freedom* (1897) where he argues that his narrative is 'not presented with the adjuncts of literary adornment or thrilling effects'.⁴⁶ Once again, experience leads to unadorned testimony, however 'incredible' and unreal.

Olney has read the commonalities of fugitive slave narratives as a product of their abolitionist sponsors as well as a clearly defined anti-slavery readership: 'how, then, could the narratives be anything but very much alike one another?' (154). In this reading, slave narratives are a collective endeavour

rather than an individual initiative, not least as many were ghost-written by white abolitionists. Olney notes that most, including Douglass, Jacobs and Hughes, begin with the phrase ‘I was born’ as if this limits the text to a series of factual statements. But what makes the narratives of Douglass and Jacobs exceptional (in all senses) is that they self-consciously incorporate the conventions of the time and, equally, challenge them in a plurality of different registers. Douglass is quite explicit about this:

I deeply regret the necessity that impels me to suppress any thing of importance connected with my experience in slavery. It would afford me great pleasure indeed, as well as materially add to the interest of my narrative, were I to gratify a curiosity, which I know exists in the mind of many, by an accurate statement of all of the facts pertaining to my most fortunate escape (69).

The pleasure of storytelling, making his narrative more interesting, needs to be weighed against the ‘hazard of closing the slightest avenue by which a brother slave might clear himself of the chains and fetters of slavery’ (69). The suppression of facts, even if it makes the testimony less trustworthy, is sometimes necessary to protect other slaves who attempt to escape the southern plantations. William Wells Brown, in an 1847 lecture to promote his popular slave narrative, contended that ‘Slavery has never been represented’ and that ‘Slavery never can be represented’.⁴⁷ But Douglass is not just talking about the limits of representation, he is instead painfully aware of a ‘curious’ readership that includes those hunting fugitive slaves. At the same time, he cannot simply be an objective witness because he is also a ‘participant’ who, as a child, ran away ‘terrified and horror-stricken’ at the ‘bloody scene’ (16) of his Aunt Hester being publicly flogged. The pleasures of narrative include the revulsion of slavery.

One reason why Brown foregrounds the limits of representation at the point in which he published *The Narrative of William W. Brown: A Fugitive Slave* (1847) is that he is all too aware, as a ground-breaking novelist, that language and narrative conventions have been corrupted by slavery. Douglass, in his famous lecture, ‘What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?’ (1852) rightly contends that ‘freedom’ and ‘independence’ has little meaning in times of slavery. Christian belief and practice are equally degraded and undermined by slavery as Douglass highlights in his appendix to his *Narrative* and Jacobs throughout *Incidents*. This is obviously true of the constitutional ideals of democracy and equality as well as conventional notions of the extended family, ripped apart by slavery, and normative versions of domesticity. A new language and way of thinking has to be conceived to truly represent slavery not least when those testifying are not considered human. That is why Douglass was particularly angered by Garrison’s abolitionist movement who introduced him, before his lectures, as a “‘chattel” – a “thing” – a piece of southern “property”” with ‘the chairman

assuring the audience that *it* could speak'.⁴⁸ As Felman has argued, the 'body's testimony' creates a '*physical*' dimension to legal witnessing and a form of advocacy which goes beyond language. Douglass, when he first started giving his abolitionist lectures, was often asked to show publicly the scars on his back from being whipped.⁴⁹

With established conventions and modes of expression unable to account for the experience of slavery, narratives from the plantations included an affective dimension to complement the orthodoxy of documentary realism. Jacobs, in *Incidents*, incorporated the language of sentiment from Harriet Beecher Stowe's immensely popular novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), not least with abolitionists, but to very different ends. After she willingly engaged in a sexual relationship with a white man, to avoid being raped by her insidious slave master, she directly addressed her white, female readership:

But, O, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, who have been free to choose the objects of your affection, whose homes are protected by law, do not judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely! If slavery had been abolished, I, also, could have married the man of my choice; I could have had a home shielded by laws; and I should have been spared the painful task of confessing what I am now about to relate; but all my prospects had been blighted by slavery (49).

Her ability to choose whom she loves, under slavery, is no longer possible. Not only is she left unprotected by the law, but her 'purity' and emotions are no longer her own. Being 'free to choose the objects of your affection' is a matter for those who are not incapacitated by the 'demon Slavery' (49). Although she wanted to 'keep myself pure under the most adverse circumstances' (49), such sentimentality could only apply to her white female readers, however well-intentioned, and the imagined world of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Unlike Stowe, Jacobs was to 'write only that whereof I know' (48).⁵⁰ Jacobs was routinely accused of fictionalising her slave narrative, but her melodramatic tone, in contrast to her role as an eyewitness, is a means of adding an affective layer to her testimony. Her slave narrative is uniquely written from a female perspective and replaces the falsely universalised heroic masculinity of most other narratives with an account of the brutal curtailment of motherhood and mothering.⁵¹ Other slave narratives embellish their prosaic accounts with emotionally resonant and equally affecting poetry. Solomon Northrup's *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853) (ghost-written by the white abolitionist David Wilson) is prefaced by lines from William Cowper's *The Task* (1785):

Such dupes are men to custom and so prone
To reverence what is ancient, and can plead
A course of long observance from its use,

That even servitude, the worst of ills,
 Because delivered down from sire to son,
 Is kept and guarded as a sacred thing.⁵²

Northrup's conventional slave narrative – 'My object is to give a candid and truthful statement of the facts' (31) – juxtaposes such unadorned documentary realism with the disbelief ('even servitude') and rudeness ('dupes') that has transformed slavery ('the worst of ills') into a venerated masculine custom passed down from father to son. By the time of *If This is a Man*, Levi's 'concise and bloody poems' preface his testimonies and enrich the voice of 'the calm, sober language of the witness'.⁵³ Here we have Levi's version of the Biblical curse, taken from Deuteronomy (6: 4–7), where those who do not hear his 'words' are doomed to suffer. As with Cowper's 'The Task', Levi refashions revered conventions to frame *If This is a Man*:

I commend these words to you.
 Engrave them on your hearts
 When you are in your house, when you walk away,
 When you go to bed, when you rise.
 Repeat them to your children.
 Or may your house crumble,
 Disease render you powerless,
 Your offspring avert their faces from you.⁵⁴

Within two years of leaving Auschwitz, Levi wrote an early version of *If This is a Man*, co-authored *The Auschwitz Report* (1946) – a scientific commentary on the physical effects of those incarcerated in Auschwitz-Monowitz – and distributed his enraged poems to his family and friends. Like Douglass and Jacobs, his flexible testimonies have a continuum of registers, from poetry to science, which incorporate the literary underpinnings of Dante's *Inferno*, 'objective' accounts of the camp as 'pre-eminently, a gigantic biological and social experiment', and dramatic encounters with his inmates.⁵⁵ Wiesel also includes poetry in *Night* (1958), the testimony of his time in Auschwitz, to articulate some of the worst horrors he witnessed. This is obviously in tension with his dismissal of those who write figurative works on the Holocaust and his championing of documentary realism. 'Never Shall I Forget', a poem taken from *Night*, has been published separately. Here are the first two stanzas:

Never shall I forget that night,
 The first night in the camp

Which has turned my life into one long night,
 Seven times cursed and seven times sealed.
 Never shall I forget that smoke.
 Never shall I forget the little faces of the children
 whose bodies I saw turned into the wreaths of smoke
 beneath a silent blue sky.⁵⁶

As with Levi's reworking of the Hebrew bible from a humanist perspective, Wiesel has composed an anti-psalm with a black hole replacing the light of God. This articulation of a 'new Sinai, the place of a new covenant' became, as we have seen, Wiesel's interpretative bedrock to help him understand the unending trauma of his suffering as a fifteen-year-old in Auschwitz. He also subverted, skilfully, the established literary convention of the *Bildungsroman* by writing an anti-*Bildungsroman* where self-discovery ends in death rather than life and meaninglessness rather than knowledge. As with the affective role of poetry in slave narratives, both Levi and Wiesel supplemented the narrative orthodoxies of 'bare witnessing' with a more evocative means of expressing their traumatised rage.⁵⁷

What is clear is that the four major figures of slave narratives and Holocaust testimonies that I have discussed – Douglass, Jacobs, Levi and Wiesel – are exceptions who have been canonised and have come to represent the large number of plantation and camp inmates who are no longer heard or who cannot speak for themselves. But they do have a great deal in common not least their ability to write self-conscious narratives about their extraordinary experiences. There are few survivors who are able to experiment with the boundaries of documentary realism in their testimonies and to acknowledge and undermine the racialized expectations of a white Christian readership which both overtly and covertly mediate their texts.⁵⁸ That is why their work is equally a feat of literary accomplishment as well as historical witnessing. While Levi has become the representative Auschwitz survivor in Europe and Wiesel assumed that dubious role in the United States, it was not until the 1980s that their iconic status was understood as a form of masculinised universalism. The rediscovery of Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents* in the 1970s also broadened our understanding of the gendered nature of slave narratives.⁵⁹ But the question remains: should a few outstanding testimonies be privileged ahead of the thousands of oral and written accounts of the camps and plantations which act as a collective or collected memorial?

The oppositions in *Auto/biographical Discourses* that destabilise autobiography – 'self and world, literature and history, fact and fiction, subject and object' – remain irresolvable in the remarkable figures that I have explored. Such fluidity has enabled their texts to be open to considerable interpretation

and to endure after many readings and rereadings. And yet, it would be a mistake to conclude that the work which conforms to more orthodox definitions of testimony is less worthy. As historians are now demonstrating, an accumulation of eyewitness accounts can enhance the historical record when other forms of archival material are unavailable.⁶⁰ Perhaps this does reinforce the division between the self and the world and hard definitions of testimony and their softer, more capacious, counterparts. But it also demonstrates the value of literary testimonies to reach a vast readership who may want to approach the history of the plantation or camp through the complex narratives of an ‘anomalous minority’ or ‘atypical’ survivor.⁶¹

Notes

1. See Bryan Cheyette and Laura Marcus (eds.), *Modernity, Culture, and ‘the Jew’* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), pp. ix–xi.
2. Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), Gillian Rose, *Judaism and Modernity: Philosophical Essays* (London: Verso, 1993) and James Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1988).
3. John Williams, ‘Mike Hart: Bohemian Bookseller and Champion of New Fiction’, *The Guardian* (December 9, 2002).
4. Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991* (London: Granta Books, 1991), p. 394. See also *Modernity, Culture, and ‘the Jew’*, chapter 1.
5. Walter Benjamin is the central figure in Laura Marcus’s final essay, “‘The Last Witnesses’: Autobiography and history in the 1930s’, in Jean-Michel Rabaté and Angeliki Spiropoulou (eds), *Historical Modernisms: Time, History and Modernists Aesthetics* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), chapter 1.
6. Laura Marcus and Daniel Steuer (eds.), *Sex and Character: An Investigation of Fundamental Principles by Otto Weininger* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005). Further references to this book will be in parentheses in the body of the text.
7. Laura Marcus, *Virginia Woolf* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1997), p. 56 and p. 180. See also *Modernity, Culture, and ‘the Jew’*, chapters 2 and 5.
8. Allan Janik, *Hitler’s Favourite Jew: The Enigma of Otto Weininger* (New York: Simply Charly, 2021).
9. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).
10. Frank Rich, ‘The Holocaust Boom’ *New York Times* (April 7, 1994), 27. See also Daniel Boyarin and Jonathan Boyarin (eds.), *Jews and Other Differences: The New Jewish Cultural Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) and *Modernity, Culture, and ‘the Jew’* chapter 18 by Paul Gilroy.
11. Laura Marcus, ‘The Face of Autobiography’, in Julia Swindells (ed.), *The Uses of Autobiography* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1995), p. 20 and chapter 2. Further references to this essay will be in parentheses in the body of the text.
12. Marcus, “‘The Last Witnesses’: Autobiography and history in the 1930s’ includes the life and work of Walter Benjamin, Sigmund Freud and Stefan

- Zweig in connection with the 'condition of exile, both from place and the past' (p. 48).
13. This is an extension of Marcus's discussion of Paul de Man's 'Autobiography as De-Facement', in *Auto/biographical Discourses: Criticism, Theory, Practice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), pp. 212–13. Whereas de Man colluded with the racial oppressor of others and remained silent, Patricia Williams's silence was enforced.
 14. See also *Auto/biographical Discourses*, p. 7. Further references to this book will be in parentheses in the body of the text.
 15. Laura Marcus, *Autobiography: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: OUP, 2018), p. 28.
 16. Tzvetan Todorov, *Hope and Memory: Reflections on the Twentieth Century* (London: Atlantic Books, 2003), p. 129.
 17. Bryan Cheyette, *Diasporas of the Mind: Jewish and Postcolonial Writing and the Nightmare of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), pp. 32–40 for the 'anxiety of appropriation'.
 18. Laura Marcus, 'Autobiography and the Politics of Identity', *Current Sociology* 43.2 (1995), pp. 41–52.
 19. Elie Wiesel, 'The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration', in *Dimensions of the Holocaust: Lectures at Northwestern University* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1977), p. 9 and pp. 4–19. Further references to this lecture will be in parentheses in the body of the text.
 20. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (London: Routledge: 1992), p. 5. Italics in the original.
 21. Cited in Christopher R. Browning, *Collected Memories: Holocaust History and Postwar Testimony* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), p. 40. For a similar refusal to include slave narratives in histories of slavery see, for example, Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1959).
 22. David Cesarani, *The Final Solution: The Fate of the Jews 1933–1949* (London: Macmillan, 2016), p. xxvi. Cesarani does, however, incorporate eyewitnesses into his book where their testimonies reinforce a historical narrative.
 23. Mary Fulbrook, *Reckonings: Legacies of Nazi Persecution and the Quest for Justice* (Oxford: OUP, 2018), p. 362.
 24. Christopher R. Browning, *Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave-Labor Camp* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), p. 2.
 25. Annette Wievorka, *The Era of the Witness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), p. 87.
 26. Carolyn J. Dean, *The Moral Witness: Trials and Testimony after Genocide* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), p. 5.
 27. Wievorka, *The Era of the Witness*, chapter 2 and Fulbrook, *Reckonings*, p. 361 and chapter 14.
 28. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*, p. 19. Further references to this book will be in parentheses in the body of the text.
 29. Robert Gordon, 'Introduction: Bare Witness', in Primo Levi, *Auschwitz Testimonies 1945–1986* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), p. 3. Further references to this book will be in parentheses in the body of the text.
 30. Lindsey Stonebridge, *The Judicial Imagination: Writing After Nuremberg* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 4.

31. Marcus, *Autobiography*, pp. 25–28 and “‘The Last Witnesses’: Autobiography and history in the 1930s’, p. 48.
32. Beryl Lang et al, ‘Engaging Survivors: Assessing “Testimony” and “Trauma” as Foundational Concepts’, *Dapim: Studies in the Holocaust* 28.3 (2014), p. 223.
33. Cited in Wievorka, *The Era of the Witness*, p. 139 and see also Henry Greenspan, *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors: Recounting and Life History* (Westport: Praeger), p. 27.
34. Zygmunt Bauman ‘Categorical Murder, Or: How to Remember the Holocaust’, in Ronit Lentin (ed.), *Re-Presenting the Shoah for the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004), p. 31.
35. Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), p. 201. Further references to this book will be in parentheses in the body of the text.
36. Dean, *The Moral Witness*, p. 170.
37. Anne Frank, *The Diary of a Young Girl: Definitive Edition* (New York: Bantam Books, 1997), p. 71.
38. Paul Gilroy, *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures* (London: Serpant’s Tail, 1993), p. 178 and chapter 12. See also, Emily Miller Budick, *Blacks and Jews in Literary Conversation* (Cambridge: CUP, 1998), chapter 4.
39. Toni Morrison took the figure of 60 million from Armet Francis, *The Black Triangle* (New York: Seed Publications, 1985), p. 163. See also Morrison’s introduction to Ann Goldstein (ed.), *The Complete Works of Primo Levi* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2015), pp. xi–xii and her claim that ‘before there is a final solution, there must be a first solution, a second one, even a third’ cited in Alberto Toscano, *Late Fascism* (London: Verso, 2023), p. 26.
40. Francis Smith Foster and Richard Yarborough (eds.), *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl by Harriet Jacobs* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019), p. 5. Further references to this book will be in parentheses in the body of the text.
41. James Olney, “‘I was born’: Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and Literature’, in Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (eds), *The Slave’s Narrative* (Oxford: OUP, 1985), pp. 148–75. Further references to this essay will be in parentheses in the body of the text.
42. Cited in Jeannine Marie DeLombard, *Slavery on Trial: Law, Abolitionism, and Print Culture* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), p. 16.
43. Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: OUP, 1997), p. 12.
44. Primo Levi, ‘A Self-Interview: Afterword to *If This is a Man*’, in Marco Belpoliti and Robert Gordon (eds), *Voice of Memory: Interviews with Primo Levi, 1961–87* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), p. 186. The school’s edition of *If this is a Man*, with the appendix, was first published by Einaudi in Turin in 1976.
45. William L. Andrews and William S. McFeely (eds.), *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2017), p. 10. Further references to this book will be in parentheses in the body of the text.
46. Louis Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave: From Bondage to Freedom* (London: Read Books, 2020), p. 21.
47. William Wells Brown, *A Lecture Delivered Before the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Salem, at Lyceum Hall, Nov. 14, 1847*. (Boston: Anti-Slavery Society, 1847), p. 4.

48. Nick Bromell and R. Blakeslee Giplin (eds.), *My Bondage and My Freedom by Frederick Douglass* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2021), p. 222.
49. Shoshana Felman, *The Juridical Unconscious: Trials and Traumas in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 163. See also Dwight A. McBride, *Impossible Witnesses: Truth, Abolitionism and Slave Testimony* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), chapter 1.
50. Harriet Beecher Stowe, significantly, refused to support the publication of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.
51. Jacobs was the only antebellum book-length slave narrative written by a woman from a secular perspective. See Deborah M. Garfield and Rafia Zafar (eds.), *Harriet Jacobs and 'Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl'* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), p. 4.
52. Solomon Northrop, *Twelve Years A Slave* (London: Read Books, 2020), p. 28. Further references to this book will be in parentheses in the body of the text. See also Sarah Meer, 'Slave Narratives as Literature', in Ezra Tawil (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Slavery in American Literature* (Cambridge: CUP, 2016), chapter 4.
53. Primo Levi, *The Periodic Table* (London: Michael Joseph, 1985), p. 151.
54. Primo Levi, *If This is a Man* (London: Abacus, 1987), p. 17 and *Collected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1988), p. 9.
55. Levi, *If This is a Man*, p. 93 and *Auschwitz Testimonies*, chapter 1.
56. Hilda Schiff (ed.), *Holocaust Poetry* (London: Harper Collins, 1995), p. 42 and Elie Wiesel, *Night* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), p. 34.
57. By far the most important testimony to incorporate poetry into her witnessing is Charlotte Delbo, *Auschwitz and After* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).
58. For the mediation of Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi see, respectively, Naomi Seidman, 'Elie Wiesel and the Scandal of Jewish Rage', *Jewish Social Studies*, 3.1 (1996), pp. 1–19 and Bryan Cheyette, 'Appropriating Primo Levi', in Robert Gordon (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Primo Levi* (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), chapter 5.
59. Deborah McDowell, 'In the First Place: Making Frederick Douglass and the Afro-American Narrative Tradition', in William L. Andrews (ed.), *Critical Essays on Frederick Douglass* (Boston: G.K. Hall and Co., 1991), chapter 17.
60. Browning, *Remembering Survival*, uses nearly 300 eyewitness testimonies to narrate the history of a Nazi slave-labour camp.
61. Primo Levi, 'Shame', in *The Drowned and the Saved* (London: Michael Joseph, 1988), p. 64 and chapter 3. See also Cesarani, p. xxvi.

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