

The Seeing Chimera:
The Constitution of Authenticity in Eyewitness Testimonies of the Voice of Witness
Book Series

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About two decades ago, literary scholars in the United States developed an all-consuming passion for a new form of autobiographical writing coming from countries of what is still currently named the Third World. Witnesses, “moved to narrate by the urgency of a situation (e.g. war, oppression, revolution, etc.¹”, were courageously reaching out to the West through literature. *Testimonios*, among which Guatemalan Rigoberta Menchù’s *I, Rigoberta Menchù* was undeniably the most acclaimed volume, had rekindled the flickering flame of the hermeneutics of testimonial writing practices while transposing it into a new social and political situation. The enthusiasm was unbridled; as shown by this rather bold assertion by Doris Sommer in an early version of her article entitled “No Secrets”: “To doubt referentiality in testimonials would be an irresponsible luxury given the urgency of the call to action².” In spite of that urgency, *Testimonios* could not escape the long-standing loaded question of the *authenticity* of the *testimonialista*’s voice. Anthropologist David Stoll was soon to discover inconsistencies in Menchù’s story. The controversy that followed along with the evolution of the political situation in Guatemala soon led to burst Humanities’ *Testimonio* bubble.

This academic anecdote shows how significant the question of authenticity—a term which “became part of the moral slang of our days³”—is for autobiographical writing. As ready as readers may be to trust the referential truth of the facts and emotions they are discovering in testimonies, our devotion to authenticity “takes the form of an extreme demand: now that art [...] is expected to provide the spiritual substance of life⁴.” Our contemporary culture, that of reality TV, *real-life* stories and

¹ Yùdice, George. “Testimonio and Postmodernism” in Gugelberger, Georg M. Ed. *The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1996: 42-57, 44.

² Sommer, Doris qted in Gugelberger, Georg M. “Institutionalization of Transgression: Testimonial Discourse and Beyond” in Gugelberger, Georg M. Ed. *The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1996: 1-19, 10.

³ Trilling, Lionel. *Sincerity and Authenticity*. Boston: Harvard Paperbacks. 1972, 93.

⁴ Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 98.

memoire writing, is a “culture of confession⁵” in which authenticity “like an invisible planet [...] has influenced the formation of other concepts⁶.”

In his leading-edge volume *Sincerity and Authenticity*, Trilling explains how authenticity in our contemporary cultural productions “involves a degree of rough concreteness⁷.” Though Trilling concedes that “authenticity is implicitly a polemical concept⁸,” his disciple Antonio Ferrara observed that the authenticity of identities (individual, collective or symbolic) “have built-in *evaluative dimensions* on the basis of which we appraise their integrity, fulfillment or realization⁹.” Those evaluative dimensions, however, may well have been transformed through the lens of *Testimonios*. Critic George Yùdice argues that:

Literary critics [...] have been quick to discard the *testimonialista’s* claim to authenticity, based on the age-old literary premise that narrative voice is always a persona that does not coincide with the individual narrating. [...] I do point out that it is not so much a representation of a referent [...] but *a practice involved in the construction of such an entity*. That is, testimonial writing is first and foremost an act, *a tactic* by means of which people engage in the *process of self-constitution and survival*. It is *a way of using narrative discourse* whose function is not solely pragmatic (that is, for the purposes of self-defense and survival) but just as significantly aesthetic (*insofar as the subjects of the testimonial discourse rework their identity through the aesthetic*).¹⁰

It is a similar point that I wish to develop in this paper. Based on the analysis of what I identified as a contemporary cultural niche in testimonial writing¹¹, I wish to show that testimonies’ claim to authenticity are a narrative practice implying rhetorical strategies whose purposes are indeed *pragmatic* and *aesthetic*.

I will endeavor to evoke this narrative authenticity, a form of perlocutionary realism, by analyzing narratives taken from a volume of the Voice of Witness Book

⁵ Gilmore, Leigh. *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001, 2.

⁶ Ferrara, Alessandro. *Reflective Authenticity: Rethinking the Project of Modernity*. London: Routledge, 1998, 9.

⁷ Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 94.

⁸ Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 94.

⁹ Ferrara, *Reflective Authenticity*, 137 (emphasis in the original).

¹⁰ Yùdice, “Testimonio and Postmodernism” 46, emphasis mine.

¹¹ Although affirming the filiation of testimonies of social empowerment to *Testimonios* would be too bold a statement, my primary definition and analyses were heavily influenced by the critical literature on *Testimonios*. The aesthetic and social issues at stake nevertheless bear significant similarities and deserve to be considered.

Series. The series, based in San Francisco, was created in 2004 by author Dave Eggers and Human Rights activist Lola Vollen. As a non-profit organization, the series' major purpose is to amplify unheard voices by means of the publication of collections of testimonies; a practice they acknowledge to be derived from interview procedures in the field of oral history. Such a filiation inscribes their publications in a long-term cultural tradition while stressing at the same time the urgency of the issues they tackle. By "lending a megaphone to stories that matter¹²," Voice of Witness undertakes the mission to "foster [...] a more nuanced, empathy-based understanding of contemporary human rights crises¹³." Over their twelve years of existence, the series published fourteen volumes covering a wide range of both domestic and international themes. This project is an example of what I identified as testimonies of social empowerment. As a socially focused sub-genre of testimonial or autobiographical writing, these collections pertain to psychological and social practices that may respectively be subsumed under the concept of the writing cure and that of awareness-raising. While exorcising suffering associated with traumatic encounters with injustice, the narrators' ultimate if ambitious goal is to open deliberative fora—what Iris Marion Young calls "decentered public spheres¹⁴"—for solving human rights and social justice issues. By lending a megaphone to voices that were heretofore unheard in either domestic or international discussions, the series help narrators become actors in their environment. Narrators may also support the empowerment of their community as they "become emboldened or strengthened by the process of being heard and having their narrative published¹⁵."

Whether we call it "referentiality" or the "real voice" of the witness, the rhetorically constructed persona readers gain access to through testimonies is what we usually call "authenticity"—this concept which is so often attacked due to the built-in expectations it carries. The authenticity developed through testimonies of social empowerment is in fact halfway between referentiality and credibility, or, to put it in rhetorical terms, halfway between *pathos* (the rhetorical appeal to a specific frame of mind) and *ethos*

¹² Voice of Witness. "Amplifying Unheard Voices". www.voiceofwitness.org.

¹³ Voice of Witness.

¹⁴ Young, Iris Marion. *Inclusion and Democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, p.46.

¹⁵ Eggers, Dave qted in Timberg, Scott. "Dave Eggers on Working for Justice Through Oral History: 'There Wasn't much that Allowed those People to Seem Fully Human.'" *Salon.com*, http://www.salon.com/2015/06/13/dave_eggers_on_working_for_justice_through_oral_history_there_wasn't_much_that_allowed_those_people_to_seem_fully_human/, June 23 2015.

(the rhetorical appeal to the credibility of the speaker/author's persona). The psychological implications of testimonies of social empowerment offer a vivid and poetic image for this discursive constitution of the witness' authentic voice, which French psychologist Boris Cyrulnik tried to capture in his metaphor of the autobiographical chimera. According to Cyrulnik, retrospective memories of traumatic events, "create an animal that exists only in the story being constructed¹⁶" in spite of the fact that all its constitutive elements look familiar. Well-known for his theory of resilience, Cyrulnik is also the one who found solace from his own traumatic experience of the Holocaust in writing the *Autobiography of a Bogeyman*¹⁷. His own journey back into the world of men implied sharing the story of his *seemingly* scarred, crooked, Frankenstein's-creature-like self—a creation he could only appropriate by exposing its *genuine* portrait for the world to see. It is such a process of construction, I argue, that constitutes the core of authenticity in witnesses' narratives of traumatic experiences. Indeed, Cyrulnik's image of the chimera, though it may speak for itself, is that of a (re)construction in which recognizable features are piled up to depict sometimes unfathomable creatures. But these creatures—or creations—show "the substance of life [...] as if it were exceptional in its actuality, and [thus] valuable¹⁸." For, by "reclaim[ing] their narrative," the witnesses "self-define themselves, and that can be a real healing¹⁹." The reconstruction Cyrulnik attributes to memory is, he insists, "shaped by the intentions of the speaker and the impression the speaker wants to make on the person he or she is addressing²⁰." The audience thus gains access to a *designed* authenticity. In testimonies of social empowerment, this authenticity, defined first and foremost by the trope of the voice itself, is primarily based on two textual features underlying the narratives' purposes: an aesthetic meant to exert impact and an ethics centered on responsibility.

While the aesthetic developed in each testimony conveys the impact of the wound (*trauma* in Greek means wound, hurt, or defeat) suffered by the narrator, constant references to ethical values foreground individual and shared responsibilities implied by social life. These two narrative features, like watermarks, support the eventual pragmatic purpose of testimonies. Interestingly, such a description of the texts'

¹⁶ Cyrulnik, Boris. Trans. Macey, David. *Resilience: How Your Inner Strength Can Set You Free from the Past*. London: Penguin Books, 2009, p.33.

¹⁷ His memoir, *Autobiographie d'un épouvantail*, was published in 2008.

¹⁸ Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, p.93.

¹⁹ Eggers qtd in Timberg, "Dave Eggers on Working for Justice."

²⁰ Cyrulnik, *Resilience*, p.33.

inner workings may readily be coupled with an approach borrowed from Aristotelian rhetoric. The impact achieved through the text's aesthetic corresponds to Aristotle's *pathos*, this appeal to emotions—which Aristotle defines as “those feelings that so change men as to affect their judgment²¹”—aimed at “putting the audience into a certain frame of mind²²”. With matter-of-fact descriptions conveying roughness and the candid confession of sentiment, the witnesses share the directness and urgency of their situation in the hope of coming to terms with their experience while raising awareness of human rights issues.

On the other hand, the constant appeal to an ethics of individual and social responsibility outlines the persona—the chimera—that materializes between the lines. This appeal to “the personal character of the speaker” that “may be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses²³” is what Aristotle calls *ethos*. In the case of testimonies of social empowerment, the narrator's *ethos*, instead of pertaining to the speaker's personal character, rather *frames*²⁴ the social positioning of his or her story. I wish here to borrow from theories of feminist rhetoric the concept of a “situated *ethos*²⁵” as explained by Johana Schmertz:

Instead of following a tradition that, it seems to me, reads *ethos* somewhat in the manner of a [...] quality proper to the speaker's identity, a quality capable of being deployed as needed to fit a rhetorical situation, I will ask how *ethos* may be dislodged from identity and read in such a way as to multiply the positions from which women may speak.²⁶

Ethos, thus, becomes a set of positions, a *dynamic* set of identifications, from which witnesses may speak. In the case of testimonies of social empowerment, such a situated *ethos* is realized through four major paradigms each corresponding to the major *social situations or frames* in which testimonies may be summoned.

Most often, testimonies are summoned in the sphere of justice where they permit to make decisions over appropriate behaviors and actions. But testimonies may also

²¹ Roberts, W. Rhys, trans. *Rhetoric*. By Aristotle. The Internet Classics Archive. <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/rhetoric.html>, vol.2 sec.1.

²² *Rhetoric*. Vol.1 sec.2.

²³ *Rhetoric*. Vol.1, sec.2.

²⁴ I use “frame” in the sense of Goffman's framing theory according to which frames allow individuals, groups and societies to organize and communicate their perception of reality.

²⁵ Sharon Crowley's term is defined as “the credibility or authority vested in one's name or social position” in Schmertz, Johana. “Constructing Essences: *Ethos* and the Postmodern Subject of Feminism”. *Rhetoric Review* 18:1 (1999): 82-91, 84.

²⁶ Schmertz, “Constructing Essences”, 83.

appear in the sphere of intimacy where personal experiences are disclosed to an open-hearted bosom friend or therapist in the hope of triggering empathy and soliciting advice. In the public sphere, the practice of awareness-raising sees testimonies as weapons of resistance and change. Finally, the religious sphere established testimonies as the major discursive practice by means of which those who have seen the “truth” may share their larger understanding of the world. Cyrulnik’s chimera, this mythical beast which is fretted and admired at the same time, is made “familiar” in spite of its uncanny contours by means of the *situation* it is described from. The impact of the distant content of the testimony framed in reassuring social frames achieves the purpose of the appeal to ethos: “to make us think [the speaker] credible²⁷.”

Although Voice of Witness’ major body of publications is centered on their intention of disclosing American domestic issues, some of its volumes turn their critical lens towards the outside world. It is such an effort that is epitomized in their seventh volume *Nowhere to Be Home: Narratives from Survivors of Burma’s Military Regime*. Editors Maggie Lemere and Zoë West sought to open a “space” close-by—that is, an entrance in “the realm of our awareness”—for “faraway stories—the experiences of people whose realities seem starkly different from our own²⁸.” Interestingly, their intentions bear strong similarities with the testimonial social frames I described above:

The act of speaking was for some narrators and act of resistance; for others, a plea for help; for others, catharsis. Many narrators were committed to sharing their stories in order to help others avoid facing similar traumatic situations. But for every narrator, the risk of speaking out was and is very real—the act of speaking demanded great courage²⁹.

Where the narrator enacted resistance, their text bears significant traces of features specific to activism in the public sphere. When pleading for help, it is the judicial sphere that the narrators privileged as if enacting the role of a prosecutor. Catharsis undeniably pertains to the sphere of intimacy and the writing cure. Finally, helping others avoid facing traumatic situations recalls the major function of religious testimonies in which born-again believers share their experience and deeper understanding of the world. When collected, these stories enacting different intentions converge to form a bundle of

²⁷ *Rhetoric*. Vol. 1, sec. 2.

²⁸ Lemere, Maggie & West, Zoë. *Nowhere to Be Home: Narratives from Survivors of Burma's Military Regime*. Voice of Witness. San Francisco: Mc Sweeney's Books, 2011, 19.

²⁹ Lemere & West, *Nowhere to Be Home*, 28.

voices, which “offers [them] the chance [...] to be heard in delicate nuance, rather than sweeping generalizations³⁰.”

Before delving in these stories for a deeper understanding of the constitution of authentic voices, let me briefly describe the geographical and social contexts of these “faraway” stories. Burma, nowadays referred to as The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, is a state in Southeast Asia bordered by Bangladesh, India, China, Laos and Thailand. As a former British Colony, Burma gained its independence in 1948. In 1962 a violent *coup d'état* transformed the country in a military dictatorship, this gave way to rampant ethnic and social conflicts. Burma is home to no less than nine ethnic groups among which Burman³¹, Karen, Shan, Rakhine and Kachin are the most important ones. Although Burmese constitute a sweeping 40 million, other ethnic groups comprise large numbers of the population and constitute significant geographical and religious enclaves. After 1962, the military junta had to face relentless and recurring revolutionary attempts from non-state armed groups and pro-democracy demonstrations led by more peaceful organizations—the most famous of these was Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy. Nationwide uprisings emanating from university students in 1988 and from Buddhist Monks in 2007 (also known as the Saffron Revolution) led to fierce retaliations. *Nowhere to Be Home* documents the junta’s abuses such as forced labour, arbitrary arrest and detention, forced military conscription (including child soldiers), physical and sexual violence and the destruction of villages which resulted in an estimate 2 to 4 million displaced citizens. Lemere and West insist that “the narrators encompass a wide range of intersecting and constantly evolving identities³².” These “intersecting experiences³³,” they pledge, constitute a balanced larger picture. Although the narrators’ stories “may seem beyond our comprehension”, they offer “small but important insights into the human condition [...] [which are] vital to our ability to promote the progressive and lasting change we wish to see³⁴.”

Kyaw Zwar’s story opens the volume with a mighty testimony displaying undeniable activist intentions. Throughout the description of his arrest, detention, torture and eventual flight from Burma, Zwar’s narrative is supported by motives

³⁰ Lemere & West, *Nowhere to Be Home*, 19.

³¹ The Burman people may be referred to by both alternate adjectives Burman and Burmese.

³² Lemere & West, *Nowhere to Be Home*, 17.

³³ Lemere & West, *Nowhere to Be Home*, 20.

³⁴ Lemere & West, *Nowhere to Be Home*, 27.

belonging to the frame of activism and advocacy in the public sphere. His social responsibility takes the form of selflessness as inherent to the commitment to a cause: exposing the truth of political totalitarianism. Zwar's appeal to pathos mostly assumes the form of anger, ostracism, and ironically hope in the future. It is nevertheless overpowered by his ethics of duty. At 40, Zwar, who in 2011 when he delivered his testimony lived in Thailand where he had fled in 2008, defines himself as a political activist from the outset. "If I explained how I became a political organizer, I would have to tell you my whole life story³⁵," he claims. In spite of his young age in 1988 (he was 17), he actively took part to the students' uprising looking for "what the truth really was³⁶"—the activist leitmotiv. Though the 1988 uprising was a symbol of the slowly budding evolution of Burma towards democracy, Zwar's description of the impact of those events is that of almost universal commitment. As "everyone was [becoming] involved," he insists, "our forces became stronger³⁷" and were gaining the power to challenge. Zwar describes his discovery of activism as a calling. Not only did it quickly become the bottom line of his life, it primarily developed as a form of revelation as well as a cathartic outlet for his anger:

I don't know how other people felt at the time, but I was very angry—I felt like I was one of the students. My own discontent began there. I did not fear anything. You could say that the first time I started to have real political views and knowledge was during the uprising in 1988, when I started to listen to speeches by [...] the current leader of student groups in Burma³⁸.

His entry in the public sphere led him to directly confront the military junta. But such a struggle, at the time, was like waging a losing battle and Zwar is arrested. Over the twenty pages of his testimony, about two are devoted to the torture Kyaw Zwar had to suffer during his detention. The matter-of-fact description he gives of squatting on top of needles while water was dripping over his head is quickly swept by a return to the activist's motif of duty: "other people may think that we were courageous for answering their questions in this way, but we had to do it. We had to accept the difficulties we would experience³⁹." Rather than capitalizing on the pathetic appeal a description of his physical and psychological predicament would certainly trigger, Zwar remains focused

³⁵ Zwar, Kyaw in Lemere & West, *Nowhere to Be Home*, 31-57, 31.

³⁶ Zwar, *Nowhere to Be Home*, 32.

³⁷ Zwar, *Nowhere to Be Home*, 36-37.

³⁸ Zwar, *Nowhere to Be Home*, 37.

³⁹ Zwar, *Nowhere to Be Home*, 41.

on his idea of commitment; thus emphasizing key responsible behaviors.

Impact and responsibility in Zwar's story become intermingled in his selfless determination. His determination and sense of social duty sometimes borders martyrdom, part of which ironically implies social estrangement:

In Burma, people discriminate against those who have been in prison. They talk about 'the kind of people' who have been in there. [...] Sometimes I would think about my place in life. I was working for these people, but as time passed by I felt further and further outside of society⁴⁰.

This recurring mention of Zwar's position at the margin of society, which is often associated with the figure of the activist, is one of his most blatant appeals to pathos throughout his testimony. It is the anger of misunderstanding and social misrecognition that flares up.

Paradoxically, this resort to anger is coupled with an unexpected yet lofty aspiration for the future. Discrimination, a slow eviction of his social environment and the eventual necessity of flight, which hit him like a ton of bricks, did not sway Zwar's resolution and hope in the coming generations. This final flash of light at the end of his testimony corresponds to another textual feature typical of testimonies of social empowerment: the inclusion of a key passage expressing in so many words the social ramification—the pragmatics—of their story—what I came to term the narrator's *vow*. Zwar's vow is that of hope for the future, his self-sacrifice makes true sense only because he knows that he will pass on the torch. His participation in Generation Wave, a movement created in 2008 after the junta imposed their constitution, serves to bridge a generation gap that was nurtured by the government's misinformation and historical deconstruction through biased education and propaganda. Zwar's vow is that of the young and the new:

I work with Generation Wave because I want young people to have new ways of thinking and taking action. I came into politics when I was young; sometimes young people want to do something, but adults become a barrier for them. [...] Our new generation has new ideas that should be carried out without the control of older people. We want to move our lives and our country forward with new ideas and freedom⁴¹.

⁴⁰ Zwar, *Nowhere to Be Home*, 48.

⁴¹ Zwar, *Nowhere to be Home*, 54.

If Kyaw Zwar is convinced that the answer to military dictatorship lies with listening to and educating the future generation, Saw Moe's story depicts a more somber picture. Moe's testimony is that of a former lieutenant of the State Peace and Development Council—the corps that acted as the strong arm of the junta in spite of its grand-sounding title. It is the first instance of a perpetrator's testimony I encountered in a Voice of Witness publication. As paradoxical as it may appear, Moe's story constitutes a remarkable addition to the volume, as it most meaningfully embodies “the risk of speaking out⁴²”. Not only because his desertion and flight put him in physical danger, but also because his admission of guilt could lead him to be shunned by his new community. For Saw Moe's testimony is exactly that; an admission of guilt in the legal sense of the term framed in what he presents as the junta's judicial *system* which he coldly describes as a set of principles or procedures—as mathematic as “the ‘one enemy one bullet’ system⁴³”.

As if he were a detached observer, Moe's ethics is that of one of the many cogs in the junta's crushing machine, which he describes in a matter-of-fact tone, leaving no space for emotional prevarications. From the very first lines of his narrative, Moe seems willing to construct a faceless chimera. Its body is easily recognizable—if frightful—it is that of the dictatorial ethnic cleansing beast, but its face is anonymous. This anonymity is that dictated by law—this overarching principle that seems to drive Moe's story. But Saw Moe's recurring reference to law establishes the term as a floating signifier that he whimsically assimilates sometimes to the junta, sometimes to religious predestination, sometimes to human nature. Moe's self-portrait is no radiant mythical animal; it rather seems to display chameleon-like features. For, indeed, the pathos that unfolds through the lines pertains to the powerful motifs of social recognition and belonging—assimilation even.

Moe joined the military voluntarily when he was seventeen. A Karen in a mostly Burman community, Moe had trouble fitting in. Conscription, then, seemed the best way for him to foster belonging. Political belonging, if not communal, since Moe ends up fighting his own kind: “As soldiers, we were automatically members of the Burma Socialist Programme Party— [...] so we had to learn about party policies. During that

⁴² Lemere & West, *Nowhere to Be Home*, 28.

⁴³ Moe, Saw in Lemere & West. *Nowhere to Be Home*, 163-183, 164.

time, the enemies we had to fight were [among others] the Karen National Liberation Army⁴⁴.” The first law Moe accepts to follow, then is the junta’s political discourse which he properly identifies as propaganda : “There were two main things that they trained us to do: one was to believe in the propaganda, in the policies of the social party, and the other was to follow orders.” But Moe still seems to consider this training useful in the sense of having the job done: “They trained us very well. The military trains soldiers how to do psychological warfare campaigns—how to persuade someone who dislikes you to like you, and how to make things unclear. [...] We had a very rational way of lying to the people for our benefit⁴⁵.” In spite of the dreadful Orwellian aspect of this all, law is also what unites: “All the trainees *had the same spirit* and we were all very happy, because we had *chosen* to join the army⁴⁶”. This constant movement between law as an overarching inadequate explanation (excuse even) and the need for belonging as a sometimes unconvincing guiding principle is the rhetorical core of Moe’s story.

Law is also that of nature and religious predestination. Whenever describing the death of his fellow soldiers, Moe again seeks a procedural explanation: “I think dying is also about karma. For example, I would step on a mine and it didn’t explode, but then it exploded when another person stepped on it⁴⁷.” He is well-aware, however, that this procedure smiled upon him: “Karma is interesting; I had good luck⁴⁸.” Similarly, Moe explains the situation that eventually led him to desert by means of a very matter-of-fact law of nature, of *human* nature: “human beings make mistakes⁴⁹.” The one Moe is to blame for is to have deployed his men on too wide a territory which led some of them to die in a rebel ambush. His case is tried by a military court and even though Moe “felt it was [his] fault⁵⁰,” he—for once—cannot accept the verdict and decides to fly: “I think normal human beings make mistakes, and it’s normal that you win some battles and you lose some. You can’t say what will happen. But even though I had been in the military for a long time, they couldn’t forgive my mistake⁵¹.” His yarn of belonging surfaces here again.

The role of the judiciary in society is to judge behaviors and to decide who

⁴⁴ Moe, *Nowhere to Be Home*, 164-165.

⁴⁵ Moe, *Nowhere to Be Home*, 165.

⁴⁶ Moe, *Nowhere to Be Home*, 165, emphasis added.

⁴⁷ Moe, *Nowhere to Be Home*, 167.

⁴⁸ Moe, *Nowhere to Be Home*, 167.

⁴⁹ Moe, *Nowhere to Be Home*, 179.

⁵⁰ Moe, *Nowhere to Be Home*, 180.

⁵¹ Moe, *Nowhere to Be Home*, 180.

deserves to be part of *us* (moral citizens) and who will become part of *them* (convicts and other members of the margins). Ironically, it is when he is faced with what he considers an injustice, the threat of being rejected, that Moe deserts law and the social order it stands for. It is at that point, in fact, that Saw Moe truly starts to belong: when he feels abandoned by the junta, he truly becomes part of the Burmese people and understands that “it was not really socialism; it was more like a dictatorship using the cover of a socialist system⁵².” As an instance of the judicial frame, Moe’s plea for help through his testimony is not a plea for forgiveness but for acceptance—acceptance as a member of a truly Burmese, hence multiethnic, society.

The intimate frame of testimonial ethos is, as one might expect, the one that more explicitly draws upon the touch-sensitive and emotional aspects of the image of the witness’ voice—its pathetic appeal. In this regard, Ma Su Mon’s testimony is a particularly interesting instance of intimacy cultivated within the public sphere—presented as our social “family.” Indeed, Ma Su Mon is a journalist: the professional who is supposed to report the *voice of the people*. Interestingly, however, and as opposed to what may be expected on the part of a journalist, she presents her story as *her* innermost appreciation of the events that started in 1988. Her approach is that of utter subjectivity, which the reader primarily accesses through the eyes of a child figure. The intimate frame offers the picture of an individual’s journey taken through a focused lens, usually that of harsh self-awareness. Yet that individual is presented as the member of a family: a strong identifying model with strict connections and rules of respect.

In 1988, Ma Su Mon is a nine-year-old tomboy. Yet, her parents hold great expectations for her. Because they are poor villagers, they realize that their inheritance will necessarily be immaterial: “[w]e can give you only education. Concentrate on your education, because it can make your life better⁵³.” It is with that future in mind that Mon’s father brings her to a demonstration as a father would bring his daughter to the circus:

My father brought me to see some demonstrations nearby, where a lot of people were gathered, and they were shouting slogans, speaking their minds. I felt happy. [...] At the time, I thought democracy was just a big thing my father could bring to our home. I didn’t know, I just felt happy. [...] When we would play, we would

⁵² Moe, *Nowhere to Be Home*, 175.

⁵³ Mon, Ma Su in Lemere & West. *Nowhere to Be Home*, 111-138, 112.

play demonstrations because we saw this kind of thing in front of us⁵⁴.

Although the events here depicted are familiar to all narrators in the volume as serious political events, Mon offers a sugarcoated sepia picture of a childhood memory.

This memory will nevertheless turn out to be defining. Mon will eventually become an activist, but she will never stray from the feeling that such a commitment is akin to that implied by blood relationships. In 1996, Mon takes part in student demonstrations: “I didn’t know anything about politics at the time, I followed the older students, *my seniors*, when they started demonstrating and protesting for democracy⁵⁵.” Here again, though she confesses her own ignorance, Mon follows the authority and example of her elders, even more specifically since these demonstrations seek to protest against the closing down of universities. From 1997 to 2000, Mon will work as an active member of the National League for Democracy (NLD). There again, her understanding of the movement is that of a large family:

I trusted the NLD leaders. We call Daw Aung San Suu Kyi ‘Auntie’—she is the role model of our young generation and all of the party members. [...] I was so impressed by Auntie. [...] Even though she is really the leader of our country, she lives like a simple person. [...] Everybody could go and visit the compound then. Sometimes Auntie would put out a lot of sweets on the table and play the piano for us while we had discussions about the books in her library. [...] She said our members were like our brothers and sisters—and she called us her sons and daughters, like she was our real mom⁵⁶.

Mon’s authenticity is that of the child’s naive description of events she cannot understand but she can *feel*. Activism and politics are here presented as family activities; the strife for social justice is a collective effort that implies bonding before anything else.

Ma Su Mon’s childlike understanding, however, rapidly makes way for a harsh movement back to reality. Mon, in spite of her young age, is eventually arrested because of her political activities. There again, her depiction of her arrest and detention as opposed to Zwar’s self-denial, strikes the intimate chord: “I felt sorry for my father when I was at the prison, because they wrote my family name on a piece of paper that I had to hold when they took my prisoner photo [...] I thought, *I am the daughter in prison*⁵⁷.” As

⁵⁴ Mon, *Nowhere to Be Home*, 112-113.

⁵⁵ Mon, *Nowhere to Be Home*, 115, emphasis added.

⁵⁶ Mon, *Nowhere to Be Home*, 119.

⁵⁷ Mon, *Nowhere to Be Home*, 123.

from this moment, the motif of shame recurs in Mon's story. Even though it is often coupled with the idea of pride she finds in the satisfaction of work that has been done. Similarly, Mon candidly describes her return home and indirectly refers to post-traumatic stress disorder. Yet, her parents will once again show her the way: "My family was really proud of me. That first thing my parents said to me, 'We don't blame you for anything that happened. But you should think about your future now⁵⁸.'" Indeed, it is with the future in mind that Mon flies to Thailand and decides to perfect her education and work as a journalist: "We will need a generation of young, educated people to rebuild our country. [...] I'm a journalist and I do the right thing for my people by reporting on Burmese issues⁵⁹."

Byin Pu is a young Kachin student who left Burma to find work. Kachin is the smallest of the Christian ethnic communities in Myanmar. Byin Pu's story resembles Christian testimonies: her story of human trafficking, modern slavery and sexual abuse does unfold as a journey through hardships that will eventually lead her to "God": an overarching truth only she had access to; that which she calls her "dream for the future," her "new beginning." "Now I feel satisfied with my life," she explains, "because the knowledge in my mind can be multiplied⁶⁰." Pu decided to leave Burma for China because she heard she could find work and proper wages there. A couple first employs her as a nanny. But, feeling sexually threatened by the father and waiting for wages that would never come, Pu then decides to work in a restaurant. One of her coworker's cousins starts making advances and rapidly resorts to abduction when being rebuffed. Byin Pu is then kept prisoner in a hotel room, during a violent night she eventually jumps out of the third-floor window in the hope to escape rape. Pu survives but her spine is badly damaged by the fall which leaves her crippled. The description of her predicament is halfway through an interior monologue and a dialogue in prayer with God. Rather than discussing the fairness of what happened to her or dissecting her own decisions and actions, Pu devotes the rest of her testimony to the effort of becoming "an example for other people in our community who had been through this kind of incident⁶¹." For the situation of Kachin women who are raped and eventually become

⁵⁸ Mon, *Nowhere to Be Home*, 129.

⁵⁹ Mon, *Nowhere to Be Home*, 138.

⁶⁰ Pu, Byin in Lemere & West. *Nowhere to Be Home*, 59-84, 84.

⁶¹ Pu, *Nowhere to Be Home*, 80.

prostitutes in China is well-known, yet “no one was challenging it⁶².”

The second half of Pu’s testimony unfolds as a homily expressing her pledge to help others avoid facing similar situations. Interestingly, she structures her sermon as a series of maxims about human nature. These maxims appear as subtitles for the different sections of her testimony. She first adamantly seeks to defend the truth against political corruption: “a life can never be measured in money⁶³.” Her torturer proposes marriage then money to pay for his crime, but Pu courageously refuses and insists that she wants the truth saying “we ha[ve] to stand for the truth and [...] we ha[ve] to speak up for it⁶⁴.” As the depository of truth, since she lived through that situation, she is the first to speak up and her duty is to spread the word.

Pu’s second maxim echoes issues developed by her fellow narrators and the title of the volume itself— *Nowhere to Be Home*. As an illegal immigrant (not even a refugee, yet) Pu understands that “anyone without an ID is like dust⁶⁵.” The image of dust is of course particularly relevant to Christianity. In this specific case a god-like state is omnipotent in offering or denying people a true identity as real citizens. The image of dust, however, strengthens the common human nature of immigrants and citizens: “for you are dust and to dust you shall return.⁶⁶” In spite of not being a recognized member of society, Pu and her fellow Burmese countrymen and women deserve to be considered as members of humanity.

Pu’s persona is that of a preacher; the figure of a minister of church whose role is communicative and becomes almost dogmatic through her persuasive effort. Her final vow is exactly that of an apostle: “Now my goal is to help other people. By sharing my story I hope that I can prevent this kind of experience from happening to another woman in the future. I want the whole world to know what happened to me⁶⁷.” Her final maxim builds upon an equivalently potent Christian image. Pu here refers to Christ’s multiplication of fish and bread. The food *she* proposes to provide her community with, however, is food for thought: her “knowledge can,” indeed, “be multiplied⁶⁸”.

⁶² Pu, *Nowhere to Be Home*, 79.

⁶³ Pu, *Nowhere to Be Home*, 79.

⁶⁴ Pu, *Nowhere to Be Home*, 81.

⁶⁵ Pu, *Nowhere to Be Home*, 81.

⁶⁶ Genesis, 3:19.

⁶⁷ Pu, *Nowhere to Be Home*, 84.

⁶⁸ Pu, *Nowhere to Be Home*, 83.

Doris Sommer may well have been right when she described the critique of testimonial referentiality in the case of *Testimonios* as a “an irresponsible luxury.” Boris Cyrulnik indirectly offers a similar point of view when he says that we all live in a world *interpreted by others* in which we seek to find our place⁶⁹. In all their accepted (and acceptable) social frames, testimonies are supposed to grant access to factual truth and the authenticity of lived experience. The narratives developed in the Voice of Witness series are no exception to the rule, as Dave Eggers explains when describing his work as one of the series’ editors: “This is understanding [how to see] the world through another’s eyes. Being able to live and breathe another person’s life through their narrative⁷⁰.” In all cases, however, the witness’ narrative will remain exactly that: a *story* in which the main protagonist is *characterized* by the narrative. The narrator constructs his or her narrative through the memory of the events but also, and more importantly, with specific *intentions* in mind. The autobiographical chimera thus imagined positions the story and its narrator within the evaluative frame of authenticity. In the case of testimonies of social empowerment, this frame may be developed as part of one of four different paradigmatic spheres: that of intimacy, that of justice, that of the public sphere and that of the religious. In all four cases, stylistic and rhetorical tropes support these narrative intentions. Mimi Lok, Voice of Witness’s current executive editor explains that the volumes offer “a novelistic level of detail rather than just the case studies⁷¹.” Gaining access to truth, the authenticity of life, then, demands a form of literary mediation. As short-story master George Saunders once said: “to read a Voice of Witness book is to feel one’s habitual sense of disconnection begin to fall away⁷².” Isn’t this a perfect definition of accessing the authentic?

⁶⁹ “Nous habitons un monde interprété par d’autres où il nous faut prendre notre place.” Cyrulnik, Boris. *Les Nourritures affectives*. Paris: Odile Jacob, 1993, 12.

⁷⁰ Eggers, Dave qtd in Timberg, Scott. “Dave Eggers on Working for Justice”.

⁷¹ Lok, Mimi qtd in Timberg. “Dave Eggers on Working for Justice.”

⁷² Saunders, George qtd in Timberg, “Dave Eggers on Working for Justice.”

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