

6-2022

Testimony, Violence, and Silence: An Examination of Agamben and His Critics

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Recommended Citation

Uygarkizi, Yagmur (2022) "Testimony, Violence, and Silence: An Examination of Agamben and His Critics," *Dignity: A Journal of Analysis of Exploitation and Violence*: Vol. 7: Iss. 2, Article 5. <https://doi.org/10.23860/dignity.2022.07.02.05>

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Abstract

This paper investigates the difficulties faced by survivors of atrocities in testifying. I work on the case of female victims of domestic torture as reported by Jeanne Sarson and Linda MacDonald. The starting point is Giorgio Agamben's *Remnants of Auschwitz* with his discussion on Primo Levi's paradox and the testis/superstes/auctor distinction. I build on his nuances while arguing that he has not looked enough into power dynamics that render one speechless. "Unspeakable violence" refers simultaneously to incapacity and not being allowed to speak. Pain renders the victim speechless; perpetrators distort language and speak over survivors. Victims are often not allowed to speak at all. The inaudible also largely determines what can be said: potential listeners' incomprehension and disbelief can make testimony impossible. Overall, internal psychological reasons and political structural reasons hinder the testimony of atrocity. I, therefore, investigate the figure of the superstes or survivor who is in limbo between selves, languages, worlds, and time zones.

Keywords

testimony, torture, atrocity, injustice, survivor, violence, Jeanne Sarson, Linda MacDonald, Giorgio Agamben

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Acknowledgements

I am tremendously grateful to my supervisor, Stuart Elden, who agreed to work on this dark topic, even after knowing my irreverence in class. You trusted me to deal with it and gave me the confidence to carry on. I am grateful to V.P. who helped me more clearly see Agamben's obscure writing. Thank you, Marcélio, for enlightening me about a crucial piece of the puzzle, long before I thought about this paper. Thank you, Jeannette Westbrook, for sharing your story. Thank you, G., for telling me about Curzio Malaparte, the seed of this work. Thank you, Jeanne and Linda, for trusting me and changing my worldview—probably forever. To my mother Uygur, the ultimate philosopher with no words, who reminded me of the etymology of "victim" allowed me to elaborate on my reverse Narcissus, I say: inanç ve inat. Akitasan: I couldn't have written this without you. I dedicate this to Léna and Karine.

TESTIMONY, VIOLENCE, AND SILENCE: AN EXAMINATION OF AGAMBEN AND HIS CRITICS

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the difficulties faced by survivors of atrocities in testifying. I work on the case of female victims of domestic torture as reported by Jeanne Sarson and Linda MacDonald. The starting point is Giorgio Agamben's Remnants of Auschwitz with his discussion on Primo Levi's paradox and the testis/superstes/auctor distinction. I build on his nuances while arguing that he has not looked enough into power dynamics that render one speechless. "Unspeakable violence" refers simultaneously to incapacity and not being allowed to speak. Pain renders the victim speechless; perpetrators distort language and speak over survivors. Victims are often not allowed to speak at all. The inaudible also largely determines what can be said: potential listeners' incomprehension and disbelief can make testimony impossible. Overall, internal psychological reasons and political structural reasons hinder the testimony of atrocity. I, therefore, investigate the figure of the superstes or survivor who is in limbo between selves, languages, worlds, and time zones.

KEYWORDS

torture, violence, atrocity, injustice, testimony, silence, Jeanne Sarson, Linda MacDonald, Giorgio Agamben, victim, survivor

*I want to tell everyone what I know
But "You're crazy"
I'm afraid they'll say.
Keeping quiet
Was therefore my destiny.*

Pamela Spence¹

IN 1993, JEANNE SARSON, A NURSE a nurse in Nova Scotia, Canada, received a call from a woman in immense distress named Sara. Sara told Jeanne she would die soon. Jeanne agreed to meet Sara with her colleague Linda MacDonald. Jeanne and Linda learned that Sara is a victim of torture. Soon enough, the two nurses discovered a world they could have never conceived of in the beautiful scenery of Nova Scotia. A world of rape, immobilising, hunger, and desolation.

¹ Author's translation from Turkish: "Bildiğim şeyleri anlatmak istiyorum herkese/Sonra deli diyecekler diye/Korkuyorum yine/Bu yüzden/Susmakmış kader."

Jeanne Sarson and Linda MacDonald discovered that fathers regularly tortured their daughters, meeting with other adults doing the same. Men organised parties with rituals, raping, injuring girls, and enforcing bestiality. Other forms of torture included sleep deprivation, drugging, captivity, and electric shocking.

Since that discovery, Jeanne Sarson and Linda MacDonald have founded the NGO *Persons Against Non-State Torture* and written a book: *Women Unsilenced: Our Refusal to Let Torturer-Traffickers Win* (2021). The title's irony is that the manuscript faced many rejections: "too brutal to read," said some editors. If it's too difficult to listen to, imagine how horrendous it is to live it.

This story made me question the mantra of "unspeakable violence." Why would violence be unspeakable? Is it just a metaphor, or is there more to it? *Why is it so difficult for survivors of man-made atrocity to testify?*

REMNANTS OF AUSCHWITZ

With those questions in mind, I stumbled upon literature by and on survivors of the Shoah (also called the Holocaust).² That historical event is crucial not just because of what we can learn about man-made atrocities but what we can learn from the treatment of Shoah survivors by their contemporaries.

Anything related to the Shoah is extremely sensitive, and some eyebrows might be raised for my use of survivors' experiences. The aim here is not to draw quick parallels. I simply go where the literature is. The real genesis of this paper started two years before it was written when I learned about the treatment given to Italian veterans from WWI. For example, a former soldier turned writer Curzio Malaparte's book *Viva Caporetto!* published in 1921, was censored for years because it openly contrasted the government's official narrative of the war as a heroic enterprise, telling instead the nightmare the author experienced. This example immediately made me think of the "happy hooker" myth survivors of prostitution must face, which prevents their voices from being heard.

These two historical events fostered my reflection on the discrepancy between the voice of authorities and survivors—the paper's central theme. It was not until the WWII atrocities were considered a topic for an in-depth investigation that literature on testimony developed, hence, my reliance on that episode for this paper.

Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben is among the intellectuals who got drawn to the issue. He was born in 1942 and is a leading figure in political theory. His most notable work is the *Homo Sacer* saga, which explores modernity, totalitarianism, and French philosopher Michel Foucault's concept of "biopolitics." In *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (2016), part of his *Homo Sacer* saga develops his analysis from a close reading of Primo Levi, a writer and Auschwitz survivor. He combines it with an "archaeological" approach, using etymologies—the origins of words—to highlight the complexity of bearing witness to an atrocity. After defining the three Latin terms designating a witness, Agamben argues that survivors can only testify by proxy to the destitution of the fallen. Like, say, the migrant who crossed the Mediterranean Sea speaks for her fallen friends, so does the survivor of the Nazi death camps or the veteran of war.³ Essentially, it is impossible to provide a first-hand

² Giorgio Agamben (2016) warns against the use of the term "Holocaust" for it means "sacrifice." He prefers the Hebrew šo'ah, which still a euphemism. It means "devastation."

account of an atrocity because the event is either deadly or too crushing for one to remain articulate. His argument is complex and often contradictory, but as I see it, it only reinforces the mantra of “unspeakable violence.” As such, it completely fails to untangle the power dynamics that silence witnesses. It remains abstract without enquiring whether there is an empirical basis for speechlessness. Because Agamben’s analysis looms large in the literature on testimonies from Nazi death camps and provides valuable examples, it will be the basis of my discussion. However, it is not my intention to respond solely to his work, debunking each argument one at a time. I am interested in how he has gotten close to the experience of survivors without ever assuming or reinforcing common assumptions on the topic.

DEFINITIONS

I am wary of defining testimony once and for all since this article explores various aspects of it. Testimony is an act of communication wherein the person asserts the truth of her claims with the intention that they will be believed by the person receiving the information.

The women that Jeanne Sarson and Linda MacDonald guided in their healing journey were not recognised as victims of torture since, in many legislations (laws), torture is a crime that only the state can commit. To rest their case, Jeanne Sarson and Linda MacDonald (2021) fought for the recognition of “non-state torture.” I think such distinction is unnecessary if not damaging (for a longer analysis, see MacKinnon, 2017). As I will show with the issue of consent, the state/non-state binary is a relic we must move beyond. The torturer’s identity should play no part in the definition of torture. The elements that define torture are: “act-level conditions” that are the “sequential infliction of (...) suffering on a person;” “attitudinal conditions;” or the torturer(s) intentional harm; and finally, “contextual conditions,” such that torture is not used like violence to place a person in a powerless position, the victim is already in that position when torture begins (Maier, 2010, p. 105).

An atrocity is “simply” an act of “savage enormity, horrible or heinous wickedness” (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). I deliberately use the words “man-made atrocity” to describe the male torture of women and girls to give historical weight to the event, conveying its legal and moral gravity. I am influenced by political philosopher Claudia Card’s *The Atrocity Paradigm* (2002), in which she argues that instead of blathering on inequality, political philosophers should prioritise studies on “evils.” If we feminists do not focus on the seriousness of male violence against women, no one else will. Euphemisms give a false impression that accuracy is hyperbolic. Let us not be afraid to call a man, a man, and an atrocity, an atrocity.

The term *victim* is not an insult (Ekman, 2013). I use *victim* to describe the person during the atrocity and *survivor* when the person has overcome the situation even when the danger is not entirely over. There appears to be a tendency, especially in NGOs working with victims of male violence, to shy away from the word. It gives the impression that once a woman has escaped from her violent husband, she is safe forever—which could not be further from the truth, as we will see later in this article.

I will introduce further concepts in the philosophy of language throughout the paper. The reader should not feel daunted by the academic jargon but rejoice over the existence of words that convey dense concepts which at times feel intangible. It is part

of a feminist quest to find the words, to overcome “hermeneutical injustice,” if you will, that I deliberately introduce these terms.

As a note, like Patrizia Romito (2008), I think the adjective “male” in front of violence rebalances the equation, invoking the responsibility of agents as opposed to vague expressions devoid of any meaning like “gender-based violence.”

Unless they are from an English source, all translations are my own.

AIMS

Academics who have worked on testimony from Shoah survivors and those who have worked on the philosophy of testimony, apart from a few exceptions like Susan J. Brison (2003) and Thomas Tresize (2013), have not systematically combined their analyses. Philosophical inquiries on testimony do not single out the testimony of atrocity as one posing a unique challenge (Leonard, 2021). Philosopher Miranda Fricker’s (2007) work certainly stands out for her elaborate discussion on power dynamics in testimony, but even her view of “testimonial injustice” is limited to matters of identity—who says and who listens. Prejudice alone, however, cannot account for the difference between not listening to a woman when she gives road indications in a car with a man driving and when she bears witness to torture. We need much more than that. We must inquire on *what* can be said *to whom* and *when*.

Beyond looking at power dynamics in the testimony of atrocity, I want to challenge death as the ultimate token of credibility. The myth (or the paradox) says that only the dead do not lie. But neither do they speak. Perpetrators and bystanders are responsible for keeping survivors silent, and that will continue unless we quit the “unspeakable violence” mantra.

Taking another step back, among the wider aims, I hope to review the fundamentals of our discipline and politics. The good old science of the polis—the ancient Greek city, giving its name to politics—fails to address the significant cruelties of our time, including torture, pornography, and prostitution (although it is not always possible to separate them clearly). Stuck in the distinction between state/non-state, dwelling on a sexless citizen, politics leaves little room for power relations based on sex. I admit I am being a little unfair for blaming a discipline for not doing what it was never set out to do, but either we reform it completely or develop a new one. As new Leviathans⁴ like Google dominate the world, this reflection is a matter of urgency, lest the discipline disappears altogether.

Finally, my other sincere hope is that male violence against women will eventually gain the status of historical atrocity. As it is, it is deemed at worst an anecdotal, at best a collective but limited phenomenon. Certain injustices and atrocities gain a special status when given the weight of history. For example, the laws against Shoah denialism are difficult to defend from the point of view of freedom of expression but easier to justify the seriousness of the events superseding other considerations from a historical viewpoint.

⁴ The Leviathan is a reference to the eponymous book from 1651 by Thomas Hobbes, who is considered one of the main founders of modern political philosophy. It refers to the ginormous biblical serpent and is used as a metaphor for the state.

PLAN

In the first section, I introduce the Primo Levi paradox. Primo Levi is a chemist, survivor of Auschwitz concentration camp, partisan, and author. His most famous work is *If This Is a Man*, first published in 1947. I explain Giorgio Agamben's triple definition of witness as a third party, a survivor, and an author, showing he fails to build on those fascinating distinctions. Perpetrators deliberately induce a loss of identity and memory that renders their victims speechless. The psychological phenomenon of dissociation can account for the unique position of survivors as both fully inside the atrocity (*superstes*) and outside standing as an external witness (*testis*). The survivor suffers from a lack of recognition of her authority and ability to corroborate facts. I distinguish the *unspeakable* as the inability to speak from incapacity and lack of authority to speak.

In the second section, I explain that linguistic destitution results in subjective destitution and not just the other way around. Survivors must bear witness in a context of deep hermeneutical injustice, that is, in a context where the ability to interpret events is defined by power relations that determine the availability of words. Victims literally lack the words to describe their experiences because those words have not been invented or the meaning of the existing ones have been distorted. I introduce the primary notions in the philosophy of language: locution, illocution, and perlocution. I explain that testimony is a speech act that can be happy or unhappy, also called a speech act that "misfires." I show why victims' testimonies misfire. I emphasise the role of authority introduced earlier. After the perpetrator and the victim, a new character enters the discussion: the listener, who plays a primordial role in the testimony.

In the third part, I expand on the role of listeners, listing the significant reasons for disbelief. The French counterpart of the English "unspeakable violence" or "violence unheard of" (*violence inouïe*) summarises the issue: survivors bring the news of *incredible* atrocities. Having never heard of such things before, bystanders are incredulous. Perlocutionary frustration, that is, the inability to change things with one's speech, isolates survivors even more than they already are. Ultimately, as I try to show, disbelief can also be a form of silencing.

The final section stands as a conclusion and integrates the previous three sections. The timing makes all the difference in testimony. The survivor is an irritating figure shaking off existing ideologies. Listeners can have a vested interest in not believing survivors. Also, as not testifying can be a form of protection, so is not listening and/or believing.

Each section is traversed by axes: listener/speaker; interior state of the survivor/external context; the unspeakable as what one is not *capable* of saying and what one is not *allowed* to say; perpetrator/victim; inside/outside. For each, I develop my view of the survivor, trying to show she is fundamentally in limbo: between various selves, languages, worlds, and time zones.

“IS IT POSSIBLE THAT I’M HIDDEN UNDER THE PAIN OF SUFFERING?”⁵: THE MISSING SELF

*There’s a lullaby for suffering,
And a paradox to blame.
[...]
You want it darker,
We killed the flame.*

Leonard Cohen (2016)

Why is it difficult for a survivor of a man-made atrocity to testify? The survivor lived a near-death experience. She could have died, but she did not. The near antinomy shows what the survivor needs to bridge: death and life.

Why am I scrutinising the survivor of atrocity and not survivors of a mishap? While survivors of disease or natural catastrophes are harmed, they are not necessarily wronged. Briefly, harm is not always the result of an immoral act—wronging is. Harm can be reduced to a matter of well-being, while wronging relates to morality and justice. The state of survival discussed here directly results from someone else’s voluntary immoral action. It relates to matters of agency and human responsibility.

The atrocity under scrutiny here, torture, is an extreme form of desubjectification—the removal of the person’s subjectivity—and dehumanisation. Sophie Oliver (2010) understands the process of dehumanisation as one of loss of identity and exclusion from the community of humans. The two are at play with torture.

In *Women Unsilenced*, the torturers changed their victims’ names to remove their identities. Sometimes the names were related to the type of torture: “Natasha,” an anagram of “Satan,” was used to terrify a young girl (Sarson & MacDonald, 2021, p. 161). Such dispossession of identity served to confuse victims as to who they were, which was key to their silencing, as we shall see. In extreme cases, the torture resulted in “multiple personality disorders,” which are the coexistence of entirely different personas in one individual without her knowledge.

A typical exclusion from the community of humans is through animalistic and mechanic metaphors (Oliver, 2010). A tortured woman testified: “I didn’t even feel human; I felt like an animal, I felt like a pile of shit. I was only a thing to my torturers” (Sarson & MacDonald, 2021, p. 82). Another survivor was told she was “a nothing, worthless, stupid, ugly, bad, fucking shit, fat, or a slut” (Sarson & MacDonald, 2021, p. 231).

Some women did not even know they had skin when Sarson and MacDonald first met them. One was “interested to see what living in [her] own skin feels like” (2021, p. 233). The process of dehumanisation is such that it brings about the annihilation of the women: they barely know they exist. Women are turned into nothing from a fully fleshed (and skinned!) being. The difficulty for the survivor of atrocities should be evident now: how can “a nothing” speak?

THE ATROCITY PARADOX

The atrocity paradox is where Giorgio Agamben starts. In his signature obscure prose, he asserts that “to bear witness to desubjectification can only mean that there

⁵ Sarson & MacDonald, 2021, p. 232.

is no subject of testimony” (Agamben, 1998, p.120-121, as cited in Tresize, 2013, p. 147). Although she is not citing him directly, philosopher Kelly Oliver (2001) translates Agamben’s words. She highlights the conflict between the constative—the content of what one says—and the performative—the act of expression—in a sentence like “I am an object.” The performative is that of a human being presenting herself as a subject (“I”), but the constative (“I am *not* a subject”) cancels out what she does (Oliver, 2001, p. 98). In simpler terms, it is impossible to say “I” when there is no “I”: you cannot present yourself as a subject if you do not even know that you exist as a fully fleshed human being. You cannot claim to be human when you have been dehumanised. Objects, excrements, and nothings do not get to use the pronoun “I.”

Giorgio Agamben elaborates on this first superficial, almost mechanic observation. He draws on Primo Levi’s paradox as described in his essay *The Drowned and The Saved* (2003). Levi’s paradox is that the only ones who can testify to an atrocity are those who have experienced it until the very end, but to live an atrocity until the very end is to die or become speechless (Levi, 2003). He writes, “Those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute” (Levi, 1988, p. 83-84, as cited in Tresize, 2013, p. 135). The Gorgon is the mythical figure that brings death to those who stare at her in the eyes. Facing the horror would mean succumbing to it.

The survivors then, Levi adds, “are not the true witnesses,” the true witnesses are the *Muselmänner* (Levi, 2003, p. 83-84, as cited in Tresize, 2013, p. 135). The *Muselmänn* is the living-dead, the most destitute figure in the Nazi concentration camp, barely alive, probably deriving his name from being perpetually bent as if in a Muslim prayer. He is the one people struggle to call dead once they are dead since his life did not amount to much more than breathing (Agamben, 2016). Only the *Muselmänner* have felt what annihilation is like, the rest only getting close to it but never really hitting rock bottom.

Jean-François Lyotard summarises the paradox: if we are told that an event rendered someone speechless, and then they speak, they must be lying. Similarly, to prove there were murders, one must be dead, but if one is dead, one cannot testify (Agamben, 2016). The logic is impeccable.

To complete the paradox, Giorgio Agamben (2017) identifies three terms to designate a witness in Latin: *testis*, *superstes*, and *auctor* — which I will look at later as he does. The *testis* is originally the third party in court or in any other conflict between two parties—the origin of the word “testimony.” The *superstes* is the one that “attends an event and subsists beyond it”—the survivor (Givoni, 2011, p. 155).

The *testis/superstes* ambiguity is not just a derelict relic we can dismiss; it is felt in our daily language and captures survivors’ unique position. To witness is both bearing witness and being a witness. Witnessing can mean both direct and indirect involvement. For example, you can witness an armed robbery (you are a *testis*) and then testify in court, but you can also be a victim of attempted murder and survive (*superstes*) and then testify in court.

In this framework, Agamben insists that Primo Levi is not a witness in a second sense: he is not a witness to his own destitution but to that of others. He is placed as a third person, bringing the news of atrocity to the normal world (although we will see that he completely contradicts himself). The witness with integrity—integrity here meaning whole (*testimone integrale* in Italian, “complete witness” in the English translation)—is once again the one in zombiehood who is barely capable of realising what is happening (Agamben, 2017, p. 800).

FIRST LIMITATIONS

The impeccable paradox is, first, empirically implausible. It cannot explain why so many survivors of atrocities testify. They cannot all be liars: in the case of the Shoah, the facts concord, and there is also non-testimonial evidence available. Notice how one can already appraise the negativity surrounding the survivor's figure taken to be a *prima facie* liar.

Second, the tension between the performative and the constative is solved if we bear in mind what philosopher Thomas Tresize emphasises in *Witnessing Witnessing* (2013). In German concentration camps, the term *muselmann*, which means “Muslim,” was used to refer to people who were almost dead. The surviving *Muselmänner* does not say, “I am a Muselmann,” he says, just like Agamben reports: “I was [emphasis added] a Muselmann” (Tresize, 2013, p. 149). The speaker is *no longer* a *Muselmann* but a survivor. In a question that sends shivers down the spine, in *Women Unsilenced*, a woman referring to her years of torture and her inability to realise what was going on asked, “Was [emphasis added] I in zombiehood?” (Sarson & MacDonald, 2021 p. 257). These survivors are talking about “their former selves,” as we shall see (Tresize, 2013, p. 149).

Third, the paradox contends itself with a superficial observation. The inability to speak for the survivor is reduced to a matter of linguistic tension. It prevents us from looking at whether there is a causal and empirical link between atrocity and speechlessness and, if so, the reasons behind it. It makes us realise that survivors are in a unique position, yet we treat them as ordinary witnesses—which they are not because of their situation in limbo.

Finally, instead of diving into the ambiguity of the term “witness” and the unique position of survivors, Stefano Levi Della Torre (2003), Giorgio Agamben's most vociferous critic, pinpoints his argument. Agamben asserts that Primo Levi testifies by proxy, as a *testis*, but simultaneously insists that he is not detached enough from events to stand as a third party, so that really, he is a *superstes*. Next to this, he also insists throughout *The Omnibus Homo Sacer* (2017) on the fundamental “lacuna”—the paradox of complete testimony—in the testimony of survivors because they “bore witness to something it is impossible to bear witness to” (Agamben, 2017, p. 768).

SENSE OF SELF AND MEMORY

To solve the last important issue of *testis/superstes*, we might want to look at the “split Self” — an expression Kajsa Eki Ekman (2013) used in her study of a well-documented psychological phenomenon: dissociation. Dissociation is a defence mechanism against unbearable pain. Typically, the victim's mind wanders off—staring at the ceiling, focusing on something else—so as not to suffer. She attempts to do the impossible: split the body and mind. “I left my body” recounts a survivor of torture” (Sarson & MacDonald, 2021, p. 86). This dissociation can also be purposefully induced. Torturers told one woman, “Look what you did to her.” As she puts it: “The ‘her’ was me” (Sarson & MacDonald, 2021, p. 250). Dissociation is another facet of the annihilation of identity seen earlier. We are talking of such degrees of violence that they sometimes permanently break the victims, who are left traumatised.

I think Agamben (2017) himself touches upon dissociation without realising it. In his definition of shame as being fully there without wanting to be there, he conveys the person's willingness to escape from a bad situation and herself. In his concluding remark that “The subject of testimony is constitutively fractured” (p. 8610), one can sense the implicit notion of a “split Self.” This strong statement is—once again—in

contradiction with his concept of “complete witness”: it seems impossible to maintain one’s integrity after such traumatic events.

The word *fracture* is key. The traumatised woman is never quite the same as she was before. Charlotte Delbo writes: “I died in Auschwitz, /but no one knows it” (Delbo, 1995, p. 265, cited in Brison, 2003, p. 36). Some women who have experienced dissociation are incapable of doing things they did before the trauma, like using certain limbs (Ekman, 2013). Rachel Moran (2013), writer, activist, and survivor of prostitution, reports that it was impossible for her to dance after years of male violence.

This traumatising dissociation which confuses one’s sense of Self, helps us better appraise Susan Brison’s (2003) essential question in her philosophical inquiry about her rape: “What self is it that remembers having this experience?” (p. 38). The Shoah survivor Nathan Beyrak cannot believe memories recorded by his former Self in his diary: his past hunger seems “unreal” to his survivor Self (Wieviorka, 2013). Again, if we think about dissociation, it makes sense. What is there to remember if you were not actively there when it happened?

“You were not there” simply because an extremely shocking event shut your registration of the event. As Shoah survivor psychiatrist Dori Laub (1992) explains: it is too violent to be grasped and remembered. Dissociation can take extreme forms, like in the case of Jeannette Westbrook, activist and survivor of torture, who did not remember having gone to therapy for years because she was made to suffer from split personalities (Sarson & MacDonald, 2021). A third psychological explanation for the sense of fracture is dissociative amnesia: the removal of a traumatic event to carry on with one’s life (Salmona, 2018). To put it figuratively, it is as if the brain locked the memory in a small box in the attic: it has not gone anywhere, but you just forget it is there. You might stumble upon it years later: this was the case of TV presenter Flavie Flamant, who was raped as a teenager by photographer David Hamilton. Flamant only remembered the event years after it happened (L’Express, 2017). Whether it is not recorded, recorded by a different personality, or removed, we can now better appraise the difficulties faced by survivors when they are wrestling with their memory. The “lacuna” to which Agamben (2016) repeatedly refers can be interpreted in less figurative ways in the loss or absence of memory.

This deep fracture in the Self tells us something about the Levi paradox and the ambiguities of witnessing. The survivor is simultaneously *testis* and *superstes*. Because of her dissociative response, she saw things happen to her. These simultaneous perspectives are not just a metaphor, as women report feelings of hovering above the room, eye-witnessing what men did to them (Sarson & MacDonald, 2016). The survivor did not just witness external elements like the location, the torturers, or the room, she witnessed her own annihilation. She saw her Self become “shit.” Survivors are in the unique position of bearing witness to and being witnesses of what happened to them.

The survivor is both *testis* and *superstes*, capable of incorporating the ambivalence of witnessing because of her dissociative responses. More than memory loss, her worst lacuna is her lack of authority.

THE MISSING AUCTOR

Surprisingly, Agamben mentions the third Latin synonym of the word “witness,” *auctor*, only at the very end of his book (p. 140). In Roman law, the *auctor* was the one that conferred legitimacy to an act. It was used to designate a salesman that legitimated the transaction or an adviser that conferred the missing arguments to solve

indecision. As an *auctor*, the witness confirmed something that preceded her, that is "I corroborate the evidence: torture did take place in this house."

There is yet another contradiction here. Giorgio Agamben (2016) insists on survivors' lacuna, urging us to listen to their silences, and suddenly, the survivor is capable of *adding* to the discussion. How can the dismembered Self confer validity? She is the opposite of an *auctor*. One of the survivor's most straining tasks is proving she has the legitimacy to author her narrative.

Perhaps because Agamben tends to reduce all differences to symmetries, as Levi Della Torre (2003) says he does, Agamben does not confront enough oppression. From how he writes about it, one would almost believe the "unspeakable" happens in a vacuum. He does not distinguish the different meanings of unspeakable: incapacity or non-authorisation (prohibition) to speak.

The notion of *auctor* inevitably brings in one of *auctoritas* as the two were and are intimately linked (Mousourakis, 2015). In that regard, the authority in place *denies* authority to the survivor. First, officially, there is no such thing as torture in the home—only the state can do that—as in extermination camps. *Authorities*, whomever they may be, present the survivor as a liar, like the paradox. Second, the annihilation is such that it denies existence to the victims, never mind the right to author their testimony. These annihilations can be understood both in terms of continuity of the first case — they do not exist *as* victims because there is no crime—or by a deep loss of identity—if you are unsure as to who you are, how can you defend what you are saying?

The question of authority unfolds mostly in terms of *identity power* (p. 90), as Miranda Fricker (2007) would put it. The torturing men have authority by *virtue* of being men: they have power simply because of who they are. The tortured women or girls are the powerless in a patriarchal world. Each is born a different sex in a political structure that preceded them: men who torture can legitimise this system by acting the way they do. They have authority.

The question of structural identity power has direct implications in the case of torture. The torturing *pater familias* has direct *auctoritas* over his daughter. Jeanne Sarson and Linda MacDonald lament the fact that tortured members of the family were deemed "reliable informants" when their victims were not (p. 236). There are two people in this hierarchical power relation: one can be *auctor*, and the other cannot.

The infliction of dehumanising, annihilating violence incapacitates the speech of victims because of their traumatic impact (loss of memory and sense of Self). Because of that, the survivor is in the unique position of being *testis* and *superstes*. Next, we will see how dehumanisation also works the other way around, linguistic destruction resulting in annihilation.

THERE ARE NO WORDS FOR IT

If I ran away, I'd never have the strength
To go very far
How would they hear the beating of my heart?
Will it grow cold
The secret that I hide, will I grow old?
How will they hear?
When will they learn?
How will they know?

A man can tell a thousand lies,
I've learned my lesson well
Hope I live to tell
The secret I have learned, 'til then
It will burn inside of me

Madonna

If we do not bear in mind the oppressive conditions under which atrocities are enacted, we risk forgetting that loss of the ability to speak is not collateral damage but part and parcel of the process of dehumanisation. Sophie Oliver (2010) demonstrates that exclusion from the community of humans is enacted by exclusion from the “speech community” (p. 92). Torture does that through the infliction of pain.

Pain is paralysing. It is not words that come out of your mouth when you try to talk about it; it is the pain that pangs your throat. Pain renders inarticulate. Think about the interjection “ouch!” The victim can only utter sounds: you are reduced to a “shrilly squiggling piglet at slaughter” (Améry, 1980, p. 37). It confirms the torturers’ belief that the victim is subhuman. Dehumanisation is a snake that bites its tail: it finds proof of inhumanity in the process itself.

Linguistic paralysis is a state induced by the perpetrators (Oliver, 2010: 92). It is not merely a consequence of an atrocious act; it is a core component of it. It is not just annihilation that destroys subjectivity but also the destruction of speech that annihilates. The atrocity is unspeakable simply because of the pain.

The pain of torture also renders speech uncontrollable. Confessions given under torture are, rightly, not receivable. When she manages to speak during the torture, the victim’s words are no longer her own. She is willing to say anything. The torturer authors the language of the tortured. She is dispossessed of her humanity by the confiscation of her speech.

Returning alive is not enough to become “human” again. We are talking about people who do not know they have skin. In a way, they must prove they are (still) human to others and their Selves. The move from annihilation to rebirth of the Self takes place through speech. The use of the “I” is not just about grammatically retrieving a subjectivity: it is about reintegrating that community of humanity from which the victim was excluded. Testimony is an attempt at dialogue.

This return journey is fraught with difficulties. First, the victim/survivor is not allowed to talk about it. Second, she faces hermeneutical injustice. And third, she does not have the necessary authority to have illocutionary force for her testimony.

SILENCING

Secrecy: The Making of a Taboo

Victims of torture are conditioned never to tell. “To tell is to die a horrible death” is a verse in the poem of a survivor (Sarson & MacDonald, 2021, p. 156). Among the three major goals of torturing families is keeping their circle “closed and secretive.” (Sarson & MacDonald, 2021, p. 139). Victims are not *authorised* to testify against their torturers. The unspeakable here must be understood in terms of what is not allowed to be said.

In purely linguistic terms, secrecy can develop into a *taboo*. Because it is kept secret, torture that takes place in domestic settings becomes a taboo topic. Put differently, it is taboo to talk about what happens at home in public, and even more so to label it “torture.”

The word *taboo* is surprisingly absent in *Remnant of Auschwitz*, even though the author implicitly warns against it. First, a taboo keeps the phenomenon submerged. It becomes something like an urban myth that no one really managed to prove—confirmed as *auctor*. It gets removed from “ordinary” people—more later. Second, it confers the phenomenon “the prestige of the mystical” (Agamben, 2016, p. 30). It brings us back to the original meaning of taboo: a sacred object whose use is restricted to an elite but prohibited to women. Torture is thus not just unspeakable, it is untouchable, and so are, by extension, its perpetrators: if no one can talk about them, no one can punish them. Silence protects perpetrators.

More than secrecy, finding the right words is the real challenge.

Absence of Words or Hermeneutical Injustice

“There are no words for it” is used metaphorically but it is in fact, quite literal. That is the idea behind the concept of *hermeneutical injustice* developed by Miranda Fricker (2007) which could be defined as unfair interpretations. Her core idea is that there is an injustice in not being able to convey a significant aspect to one’s social life. This happens because the powerful structure the world according to their own needs. They shape what she calls *collective social understandings* (p. 147) or the way we make sense of events. The powerless on the contrary, do not own what I would call the “means of expression”: they lack the verbal capacity to analyse the world on their own terms and express it accordingly.

Collective struggles can overcome this situation. “Epistemic breakthroughs” (p. 149) or breakthroughs in knowledge undo “routine social interpretive habits” (p. 148), traditional ways of interpreting events. For example, the expression “sexual harassment,” suddenly rendered problematic a pervasive behaviour that was meant to be interpreted as innocuous. The innocence laid precisely in its non-designation (Fricker, 2007). Again, we see how silence protects perpetrators.

When Jeanne Sarson and Linda MacDonald (2021) started, they discovered that “torture,” as defined in international and national law, could not be applied to the cases they were dealing with. What men do to women at home is not considered serious enough to be rendered verbally explicit and qualified as torture. It is “mere” “violence” or “abuse”: all words which do not fit right for survivors. Like dehumanisation, hermeneutical injustice is self-reinforcing.

Distortion of Meanings or Corruption of Daily Language

Victims are left to rely on what the dominant people tell them is happening. And torturers modify words to further confuse their victims. They use coded language. In one case, the word “ceremony” was used for group torture, the word “home” meant vagina, the word “doghouse” meant anus, the word “lollipop,” penis, etc. As a child growing up in these conditions, it is likely that you will not learn the right vocabulary and thus make sense of the events until much later in your life.

The use of coded language corresponds to “corruption of everyday speech” (Oliver, 2010, p. 92). Sophie Oliver (2010), again, remarks that familiar words take a grim connotation in a context of torture. Language that could have helped victims reach out now traps them further in the only world where that language is spoken: one of atrocities. It is a step further in the dehumanisation through linguistic exclusion. Words are not just not-created; as Miranda Fricker shows, they are confiscated.

UNHAPPY SPEECH

Doing Things with Words

In her monumental work, *Sexual Solipsism*, philosopher Rae Langton (2009) examines at length the claim that pornography silences women. She builds on J. L. Austin’s seminal *How to Do Things with Words* (1962). Austin is interested in speech acts or “performative utterances” (p. 7): the actions that we realise by saying something like “I promise.” He further distinguishes between a “locution” (the content of what is said), the “illocution” (the action performed by saying: urging, asking, warning), and the “perlocution” (the consequence of the speech) (p. 102). For instance, by saying “Shoot her!” (locution), the speaker urges the listener to shoot the woman (illocution), and the other is persuaded to shoot her (perlocution) (p. 102).

Women would like to testify (speech act) against torture, but they cannot. Why? Rae Langton (2009) suggests that “one mark of powerlessness is an inability to perform speech acts that one might otherwise like to perform” (p. 39).

Locutionary Failure: Inability to Speak

First, survivors struggle to reach the illocutionary level of speech because they are stuck at the locution. This paralysis is the incapacitation of speech. Among reasons for this, Langton mentions intimidation and secrecy—which we saw and to which we can add pain. She also mentions fear of disbelief which I will explore in the next section. Sometimes survivors do not talk at all: those that return mute.

However, there is more to the locutionary failure. When Austin (1962) writes about the locution “Shoot her!” he writes “meaning by ‘shoot,’ shoot, and referring by ‘her’ to *her*” (p. 102). The key to a successful speech act is a shared understanding of terms. There first needs to be a basic agreement on the meaning of words for those words to have any kind of social impact. In the case of torture, victims used words whose meaning was distorted by torturers. When Sara thought she was testifying against her father who anally raped her, she was actually saying “Dad came in the back door” (Sarson & MacDonald, 2021, p. 147). In the “coded language” (Sarson & MacDonald, 2021, p. 145) of torturers, “ceremony” was used instead of “group perpetrator torture gathering” (p.146), “consummation ceremony” (p.146) was for when an audience was involved “lollipop” (p.146) for phallus, “house” (p.147) replaced “vagina” and “dog house” (p.147) replaced anus.

Philosopher Richard Moran (2018) untangles the problem skillfully. “For a speaker to be in a position to *say* anything,” the sounds she makes must be “*accepted*” by her audience as corresponding to the words of a common language (p. 7). Language precedes us. To be an *auctor* of any language, one must share that language with another. Since the survivor is not accepted linguistically, she is not accepted humanely.

More specifically, the victims/survivors of torture cannot perform a “phatic act” or the pronunciation of words (Austin, 1962: 99). A cry of pain is a sound, and “hello” is a sound that forms a word. A cry is, in Austinian terminology, a “phonetic act”: “The uttering of certain noises” (Austin, 1962, p. 99). Think about Urbinek and his *massklo*: Urbinek is a boy Primo Levi mentions, and Agamben reports because he kept repeating “*massklo*.” It was probably a word in his language, but since no one understood him, it was reduced to a noise (Agamben, 2016). Survivors of torture are reduced to the phonetic act long after their ordeal. Difficulty in expression, too can result in silencing.

Illocutionary Failure: Inability to Act Through Speech

Second, because of this initial failure, the victims’ illocutionary abilities are seriously compromised. Speech acts are not “true” or “false,” but instead “fulfil” or not “felicity conditions”: they are “happy” or “unhappy” (Austin, 1962, p. 14). Those depend on external factors. If you say, “I do” at your marriage, but it turns out the civil servant was bogus, it is true that you said, “I do,” but you have failed in your attempt to get married (and maybe you should give up on the idea entirely while you have the chance). Austin would say your speech was “unhappy” or that it “misfired” (Austin, 1962, p. 14).

When survivors cannot express themselves, the “reciprocity condition for illocutions,” as defined by Jennifer Hornsby, is not effectuated (cited in Moran, 2018, p. 135). The condition requires the audience to understand what the speaker is presenting herself as doing. In our case, the audience does not understand that the girl/woman in front of her is trying to testify. *It takes two to tango*: the survivor’s testimony, if it has no illocutionary force, it misfires.

Apart from the misunderstanding, the survivor is not an *auctor*. She does not author her speech in the two meanings identified by Richard Moran (2018). Her speech does not originate from her, as I have tried to show, and she cannot delegate her speech. When one owns her words, someone else can “speak for” that person: she has the authority to designate someone else to *auctor* for her. However, the survivor is deprived of her voice. The connection between Person and Author described by Moran is broken. The disconnection is the result of simultaneous linguistic and subjective destitution.

Having the right intelligible words will not solve the problem. To understand why we must return to Rae Langton’s (2009) thesis. The ability to do specific speech acts, the “authoritative illocutions” depends on the speaker’s “position of authority in a relevant domain” (p. 37). For example, the slave cannot order her master. She can tell him to shut up as much as she wants, but she is not in a position to do so. I suggested earlier that female torture survivors are deprived of authority because of identity power. “Some speech determines the kind of speech there can be,” affirms Langton (2009, p. 53). If the relevant authority/ies state/s that there is no such thing as torture, then there is no torture: there can be no space for a subaltern speech undermining the dominant one. *His word against hers*. His word does not have the same weight as hers because of hierarchical positions of authority in both speech and sexual

politics. The voice of authority does not “speak for her;” it speaks *over* her. What does a little girl know about torture? We know that in reality, it is in her quality of *superstes* that she is in the best position to tell what happened, but her audience would have to *believe* her to recognise her authoritative position.

The survivor’s testimony misfires in different ways, most importantly because her quality as *auctor* is not recognised: the conditions for her to bear witness to the atrocity are not gathered. Losers do not get to write history.

Interlocutionary Disaster: Inability to Dialogue

An illocutionary failure is an interlocutionary disaster. “Testimonies are not monologues” (Felman and Laub, 1992, p. 70), but they can be turned into soliloquies. If your audience hears noise when they should be listening to you, if they listen to your perpetrators when they should believe you, you are effectively not in a dialogue: you are talking alone in a room full of people. The silencing of survivors takes place because of the shift from potential dialogue to forced soliloquy. Agamben’s (2016) statement that “survivors have nothing interesting to say” (p. 31) takes the potency of prophecy. This dismissal anticipates the next argument: The inaudible determines the unspeakable.

Rebecca Mott (2021), writer and survivor of prostitution, who inspired this section, perfectly summarises it: “you’re not allowed to speak much, and you don’t know which language to speak when you can. Recovery from trauma is finding the words.” The victims of annihilating atrocities are thrown in the ditch, and they keep falling on the way up. The linguistic exclusion that put them there in the first place keeps them captive. Unable, not allowed to tell, and not heard, survivors are further excluded from humanity. Disbelief, as we will see now, isolates them even more.

PLANET ATROCITY

You’re entering a world of pain.

Walter Sobchak

Survivors bring to the “*normal world*” (Agamben, 2016, p. 54) “the atrocious news” that it is possible to be degraded “beyond imagination” (p. 63). David Rousset (1965) correctly talks about the “*Concentration universe*” (emphasis mine). Susan Brison (2003) poetically asserts that “rape victims face the cataclysmic destruction of their world alone, surrounded by people who find it hard to understand what is so distressing” (p. 15). Annette Wieworka (2013) explains the Yiddish *hurbn* (p. 45), destruction, to denote the crumbling of the world of Jewish victims. Similarly, Linda MacDonald and Jeanne Sarson insist on how much helping victims of torture heal changed their “worldview forever;” saying that discovering torture was “crash-landing” into a new “criminal coculture” (Sarson & MacDonald, 2021, p. 17). It is in the Shoah survivor KaTzenik’s harrowing testimony that we can feel on our skin the idea of atrocity as a parallel universe:

I am the historian of Planet Auschwitz. (...) The inhabitants of that planet (...) breathed according to laws that were not that of nature. They didn’t live nor die the way one does on Earth. (...) This planet of ashes that is Auschwitz is

in opposition to planet Earth and still influences it (cited in Wiewiorka, 2013, p. 109).

Those metaphors point to a secluded space with its internal set of norms. This space can be physical: the lagers were purpose-built, hidden from sight. Torture takes place behind closed doors in the domestic sphere. The space is, more importantly, symbolic: walls are made of silence, as we have seen in the previous section. The un-chartered territory is the most safeguarded one. It is harder to travel to and from a place whose existence you do not know.

Say you go to California. You tell your friends. They have never been, but they can imagine. They know what the sun is like, what the sea smells like. They know California exists; it is easy to believe you—you are so tanned!

Now, suppose your father enforces bestiality on you. He calls his friends and inserts sharp objects inside you. At school, you tell your friends, but they have never heard of Planet Atrocity. It is hard to believe you have ever been to this grim *Narnia*. How did you even travel back?

TOO MONSTROUS TO BE BELIEVED: THE ROLE OF BELIEF IN TESTIMONY

Primo Levi's reporting of what the SS⁶ told the prisoners in the Nazi concentration camps is cardinal to apprehend the world of atrocity: "And even if some proof should remain and some of you survive, people will say that the events you describe are *too monstrous to be believed*" (cite in Agamben, 2017, p. 866, emphasis mine). Torturers, too, kept repeating to their victims: "no one will believe you (Sarson & MacDonald, 2021). When testifying is a vital necessity, disbelief is a death sentence—the 81st blow after which, according to the Jewish tradition, it is not possible to pick yourself up (Felman and Laub, 1992).

In his elaboration on Stephen Darwall's "second-personal normativity," Richard Moran (2018) illustrates how certain speech arises from someone else's action. If someone stands on your foot, you tell them, "You are standing on my foot" (p. 122). They are the reason you are talking to them, and you talk to them with a clear intention. Notice, however, that the perlocutionary force of your speech is not within your control: your listener might *not* be persuaded to remove his foot—he might push harder if he dislikes you. With testimony, the survivor is in a similar position. The survivor speaks *for* an audience. The bystander's presence is the reason for speaking up, convincing them of their testimony's veracity and purpose. If she systematically faces "perlocutionary frustration" (Langton, 2009, p. 48), she does not manage to get her speech to have the desired outcome, which is to get her audience to believe her, she might as well stop talking. Just as the audible determines the utterable, disbelief also amounts to not listening, resulting in silencing. Saying survivors return mute is a bit of a shortcut: when they resurface from the depth of the abyss back to Ordinary Planet, they are silenced through disbelief.

⁶ The Schutzstaffel (SS) was a major paramilitary organization under Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party.

SOURCES OF DISBELIEF

No Reason to Believe

We must investigate the sources of dis/belief. There are two strands in the philosophy of testimony: reductionist and non-reductionist theories. Reductionist theories suggest the hearer relies on non-testimonial sources or “positive reasons” like “sense perception, memory and inductive inference” to assess the veracity of a claim (Lackey, 2006, p. 161). For example, a woman tells me a man slapped her. While I do not know this woman, I have no idea how reliable she is; I can see the red mark (positive reason) on her cheek; therefore, I believe her. Notice I am not relying solely on her testimony to believe her. Non-reductionist theories contend that the absence of negative reasons, called “defeaters,” is sufficient to believe the speaker (there is no reason for me *not* to believe; therefore, I believe).

Jennifer Lackey (2006) defends a hybrid view in her paper “It Takes Two to Tango.” She tries to rebalance the roles in testimony, placing a “reliability” condition on the speaker and a “rationality” one on the hearer (p. 170). In her “ALIEN scenario” that perfectly fits, she demonstrates that non-reductionism is irrational. Sam discovers a reliable and veridic alien’s diary recording life on a different planet. Why would Sam *not* believe? Well, Sam has absolutely no other non-testimonial evidence available. He does not even have “background beliefs” to compare the report: no knowledge about what a diary represents in Planet Alien or how reliable aliens are (p. 168). Why would he believe? Lackey tries to show that having no reason to *disbelieve* equates to having no reason to believe. It is irrational to believe when there is no way to know if the testimony is true. The hearer can gasp in incredulity purely out of rationality.

On the reductionist side, there are plenty of reasons *not* to believe the survivor: not wanting to believe, prior beliefs, and dissonant sense perception.

Not Wanting to Believe

The most benevolent and sympathetic listener can also be the most incredulous. It is painful to discover Planet Atrocity, and when that happens to loved ones, it is easier to reject its reality than deal with the unbearable pain. Refusal to believe can be a short-termed mechanism for self-preservation, but it fails victims and benevolent hearers alike.

Prior Beliefs

Refusal to believe can also take place because of a clash of worldviews. “Some [beliefs] determine the sort of [beliefs] there can be” (Langton, 2009, p. 53). In his philosophical inquiry on testimony, Robert Audi (2006) observes that “we all have background beliefs that constrain what we can accept” (p. 27). As I see it, the dominating belief today, which makes it so difficult to believe female victims of male torture, is Voltaire’s *Candide*: “everything’s going for the best in the best of possible worlds” (Voltaire, 1759, n.p.)

C. A. J. Coady (1994) is guilty as charged when he writes in *Testimony: A Philosophical Study* that “one need not be persuaded that child abuse is as universal as often claimed” (p. 36) to admit that children’s testimonies should be given more credit. This sentence could feature in Mary Daly’s *Gyn/Ecology* (1978), for Coady simultaneously recognises and minimises male sexual violence. It is easy to acknowledge *some* sexual violence, but if we acknowledged *all* of it, we would realise that being a victim of male sexual violence for a woman or a girl is the norm, not the exception (Terragni, 2018).

Moreover, that would be the crumbling of the *Candide* façade of our world (or ideology as we will see next) promoted by authority/ies.

“Families are protective” (even if the etymology—servitude—points to the opposite). So, obviously, in *Women Unsilenced*, the nurse in charge allows family visits for tortured women and girls who end up in hospital. She is miles away from imagining she is letting in the perpetrators and terrifying the victim (Sarson & MacDonald, 2021).

The same goes for beliefs about individuals. “The vicar? A rapist? No, that can’t be; he’s so jolly!” “Good guy Greg is a torturer? Nah, he’s a proper cop. I know him well. She must be lying.”

Conversely, why was Susan Brison, the author of *Aftermath: Violence and the Re-making of the Self*, believed? Because the man who raped her acted exceptionally. He breached patriarchal rules but instead conformed to common beliefs about rape: a violent attack from a “bad” stranger against a “good” woman in the public sphere. Had her husband Thomas Tresize raped her—a much more prevalent form of rape⁷ — she would have been met with disbelief.

In short, torturers rely on David Rousset’s (1965) statement that *ordinary people “do not know everything is possible”* (p. 181, emphasis mine). Planet Atrocity is too inconceivable to be believed. Just think of Nathan Beyrak, who could not believe his own (former) Self.

Perceptions

The incredulity presented so far only relates to the content of the testimony, that is, the evidence, not the illocution. Richard Moran (2006) distinguishes the two. A photograph can function as evidence, independently of the way someone presents it. “I see a picture of the death camps; I infer the existence of “planet Auschwitz.” The witness, on the contrary, actively invites us to believe her. She tells you it is evidence; the evidence does not speak for itself. Her illocution has perlocutionary intentions. Hence, testimony requires believing the speaker herself, not just the content of what she says. To believe, the hearer must trust the speaker first. Her whole being is put under critical scrutiny (Coady, 1994).

The dissonance between what the listener will hear (the testimony) and what she will see (the survivor) provides further negative reasons or defeaters to believe the survivor. She is telling of destruction, but she does not look destroyed. In her book, suitably titled a *Deafening Silence*, Patrizia Romito (2008) finds out that the most important reason for not believing a victim of male sexual violence is her failure to act like a “proper victim.” She is blamed for not looking like she has suffered enough.

What I want to ask the Agambens, Lyotards, and the Levis, the espousers of the false paradox, is how much suffering is enough? *How much does a woman have to suffer to be believed?*

The initial paradox takes a much grimmer turn. To say that the survivor of atrocity cannot testify is to tell her she *should* have died, not could have died. *The good victim is the dead victim*. By her incredulity, the listener reminds the survivor that she should not be here. *You should be dead by now*. The survivor knows that. She knows it so well;

⁷ Most women know their rapists as reported by the Ministry of Justice (2013), Office for National Statistics and Home Office joint statistics bulletin on sexual violence.

she feels guilty for being alive. I would like to reinterpret that guilt. It is not just the guilt for having taken someone else's place, as Primo Levi (2003) writes. It is the guilt of not having obeyed your tormentors until the very end: death. Sara is "*confused* and terrified by her decision to live instead of die" (emphasis mine, Sarson & MacDonald, 2021, p. 21). Why is she, the "shit" that does absolutely everything her torturing family says because she does not even know she can say no (another linguistic shortcoming), refusing to die? Why is she insisting on living? I think Levi's (2003) bothering claim that he is "privileged" is in part informed by that. As the word privilege indicates, it seems astonishing that someone who endured the lagers considers himself to hold a superior right. It shows he integrated the dominant view that he *deserved* death and was granted special treatment by being alive. Furthermore, here we can measure the magnitude of the word "survivor": it is a testament to the survivor's resilience that the one that was deemed below life now supersedes it.

Fear

If the survivor does not look like she has suffered enough, what does she look like? *She looks just like me*. Much has been said about the oppressor looking like an ordinary man—the banality of evil—less about how the oppressed looks like any woman. That is much scarier. Fear, too, stops the audience from believing. It is a new form of Narcissus we have here: we are afraid of staring too closely at a survivor lest we see ourselves reflected in her and be engulfed in the cruel world she is telling us about. Remember, the word victim originally means the living being that is sacrificed⁸ (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.) It should be clear by now that Latin does not leave much room for coincidences. The sacrificial lamb protects the living. If that scapegoat is not dead, another must be sacrificed. What if that was me, the listener? *I look just like her. It could have been me—I can be the next one.*

Omertà is another missing word in Agamben's (2016) study. *Omertà* is the "rule of silence": the mafioso solidarity that extends to bystanders who are fearful of retaliation and therefore refuse to denounce or even judge perpetrators of crimes (Trecani, n.d.). The condition of *auctor* depends on external recognition, as said in the second section. In this case, the survivor cannot be *auctor* because she cannot delegate her word. She would like others to speak *for* her, but no one is willing to talk. After misunderstanding and disbelief, listeners can contribute to the silencing of survivors by keeping quiet. Bystanders abiding by *omertà* consolidate the wall of silence the victim will crash into in her flight to freedom. The listener's survival takes precedence over the survivor's.

Jean Améry—a survivor of Nazi torture who proves it is possible to express yourself impeccably after an atrocity—writes that what crushes trust in the world during torture is that no one reacts to your cries for help. When you resurface and beg for help, you realise bystanders will not rescue you. *Omertà* heightens the survivor's sense of isolation. It is like screaming in a soundproof bubble with people passing you by. Planet Ordinary starts looking much closer to Planet Atrocity to the survivor. Remember KaTzenik: Planet Atrocity "*still influences*" Planet Earth. Planet Ordinary is governed by the same rules of secrecy that bound the victim: taboo and *omertà*.

THE CONSEQUENCES

Death as a Token of Credibility

There is only one way out of the Levi paradox: death. Death becomes the ultimate token of credibility. Andrea Dworkin (1998) knew that very well when she said that the only way people would have believed her experience of prostitution was if she were dead. “More listened to dead than alive,” a feminist graffiti in the Parisian suburb said. To the question “What did I do wrong?” a survivor of domestic violence was answered by a police officer: “You are alive” (Anonymous, 2021).

The death of the victim is reassuring. A man annihilates you, and you die. You do not survive. It is in the natural order of the “ordinary” world of the “ordinary” listener. It follows the cause-consequence logic that she thinks makes the world go round. Listeners can play the game of the oppressors. They want the job to be completed so they can carry on with their worldview unbothered. They participate in the persecution started by the oppressors. The *persecūtiō* is the “chase, pursuit, carrying through completion” (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). If only the atrocity were carried out until the very end, then those poor listeners could believe, but as it is, they cannot.

The Return

Misunderstanding and disbelief provoke the “foreignness with the world that cannot be compensated with any sort of subsequent human communication,” as decried by Jean Améry (1980, p. 39). This foreignness with the world has worse consequences than silencing: return to Planet Atrocity. At least there, the survivor is understood. She is no stranger. It may be horrible, but her interior and exterior states are in harmony. It is a world whose rules she knows, no matter how unfair they are. It is a world whose language she speaks. I’m telling the story of the veteran who returns to the front, the war reporter who returns to Syria, and the battered wife who returns to her husband. That, too, is a result of persecution: the feeling of being chased out from Planet Ordinary that you do not recognise and that you cannot make sense of, so you find refuge in the most hostile but familiar places.

What will the bystanders make of the survivor’s return? Will they admit they contributed to her isolation because of their shortcomings? Obviously not. *If she returns, it cannot be that bad.* Just like dehumanisation and linguistic destitution, disbelief is also self-reinforcing.

Survivors try to overcome physical and linguistic isolation by telling of a world of atrocity inconceivable to most. Met with disbelief, they fall into silence. While this disbelief can be benevolent, it quickly takes a malevolent turn. Indeed, the survivor is a bothering figure because she defies the norms of Planet Ordinary.

THAT MATCH NEVER ENDED

*Now, I can see things for what they really are.
I guess I'm not that far,
I'm at the point of no return.*

Madonna

Another surprising absence in Giorgio Agamben's (2016) analysis is the question of *when* the survivor can speak. In this final section, I reflect on the previous three by showing how they are each bound by temporal considerations.

[TIME] STOPPED AT EBOLI: THE SURVIVOR SPLIT INTO TIME ZONES

Victims of atrocities do not just lose a sense of Self; they lose a sense of time. Time stops with the first blow—hence my rephrasing of Italian anti-fascist writer Carlo Levi's book *Christ Stopped at Eboli* (1983). The electrocution/burning/immobilisation/cutting seems endless. "Time there did not have the same measure as on Earth. Each fraction of a second is measured on a different scale," testified KatTzenik (cited in Wieworka, 2013, p. 109).

Susan Brison (2003) elaborates on survivors' struggle with time. During the atrocity, planning for the future is senseless when life is so fragile: Levi reports that "never" in camp slang is translated as "*morgen früh*," tomorrow morning—another—corruption of daily language (cited in Brison, 2003p. 52). There is no past either: you cannot even bring your previous name. No past, no future; atrocity is a state of eternal present felt by the survivor in the aftermath. It is not easy to move on or forget since *that* moment comes to define a whole existence. "You have the age of your trauma" says Auschwitz survivor Marceline Loridan-Ivens (2021, p. iv): she was forever fifteen. Survivors are repeatedly brought back to that/those moment/s. They live in a "split time zone," to use the expression of Chaim F. Shatan in his study of Vietnam War veterans (cited in Sarson & MacDonald, 2021, p. 35).

This eternal present is the meaning behind Giorgio Agamben's (2016) mysterious (as always) assertion that the gloomy football game between the *Sonderkommando* and the SS during a break "has never ended" (24). Interpreted by some as breathing space, Agamben rightly sees in the match between Jews forced to collaborate in the extermination of other Jews and Nazi officers the full magnitude of the horror of the camps. A macabre dance of atrocity and ordinary is a perfect illustration of perpetrators' attempt to get their victims to look like them. It feeds into the worst fear of victims: "I'm never being like them," as women told Jeanne Sarson and Linda MacDonald (2021, p. 171). More than that aspect of oppression that I mentioned *en passant*, I'm interested in the endless value Agamben attributed to the event. There is something dizzyingly repetitive in the mundane of Planet Ordinary, in the scent of ashes whirling in the air, a vertiginous *déjà vu* that turns any setback into a pit of pain. Some of these difficulties are directly linked to the event and testimony, others unrelated. Either way, the match is played over and over and over.

First, testimony makes the survivor relive the atrocity and be re-traumatising (Laub and Felman, 1992). Sara spoke in a child's voice and manner when she told of past ordeals. Sometimes her eyes seemed to disappear deep inside, signaling she was

dissociating again (Sarson & MacDonald, 2021). Testifying is time travelling. Those that return mute, who fail at the locutionary level, might do so to avoid the pain.

Second, memories persecute survivors long after the atrocity. Sara had recurring flashbacks (Sarson & MacDonald, 2021). Body memories are not uncommon: somatisation, diseases, the loss of mobility mentioned in the first section, and the like (Brisson, 2003; Fassin & Rechtman, 2011; Sarson & MacDonald, 2021). Rebecca Mott (2021) says those physical intrusions are oddly reassuring: for the survivors who, like Nathan Beyrak, come to doubt themselves in a context of distrust, deeply physical reactions are more reliable than the fallible memory and deceiving words. Flavie Flament (2017) displays a similar relief when she finds out by a magnetic resonance image (MRI) scan the neurological impact of Hamilton's violence: it is the "proof of suffering," she says.

The third point is wonderfully noticed by Dori Laub (1992): subsequent injustices are not different injustices; they are "second Holocausts" (p. 65). I cannot think of a better example than Walter Sobchak in *The Big Lebowski* (Coen, 1998). A foul in the bowling game, a stolen briefcase, the death of a friend... no matter how unrelated, each episode brings him back to Vietnam. In particular, as Dori Laub (1992) states and I have tried to show in the previous section, disbelief and misunderstanding repeat the annihilation pattern and feels like profound injustice. Notice how Walter is presented as rambling throughout the film when really, he is suffering from "engorgement," which is testifying relentlessly—another form of uncontrollable speech (Parens, 2012, p. 97).

The survivors are in the unique position of being *testis* and *superstes*: returning alive from the dead, speaking about the unspeakable pain, and living in two time zones. We must understand the survivor's psychological state to fully sense her difficult engagement with the external world.

Ideology and the Historical Gap

Primo Levi (2003) writes in his splendid prose that the few fugitives that brought "to the *free world* knowledge of the terrible *secret* of the massacre" (emphasis mine, p. 129) "were almost never listened to nor believed. Uncomfortable truths have a long way to go" (p. 130). There is a "historical gap" between the atrocity and the successful illocution of testimony (Felman & Laub, 1992, p. 84). It took seven years for Levi's *If this is a man* to reach a large readership. Other Shoah survivors had a similar fate (Veinstein, 2020). The lag also holds true for World War I veterans who bore witness to the horrors of the war, breaching the taboo and contradicting the official narrative of patriotic glory (Givoni, 2011).

"The historical imperative bear witness could essentially *not be met during the actual occurrence*" (Felman & Laub, 1992p. 84). "I could not have verbalised this *at that time*" writes Jeanne Sarson of her experience of domestic violence (emphasis mine, Sarson & MacDonald, 2021, p. 47). There is the pain, the lack of words, the loss of sense of Self, of course, but most importantly: an *ideology*.

Laub (1992) argues that to justify their cruelty, perpetrators impose "a delusional ideology" (p. 81) that makes it impossible to maintain a "virtuous perception" (p. 72), as Miranda Fricker in *Epistemic Injustice* (2007) calls it, which simply means seeing things for what they are. Dori Laub suggests that when you are too deeply embedded in an event—inside of it—it is hard to detach yourself enough—to be outside of it—to see things for what they are. Laub's view thus fully concords with Levi's understanding of dehumanisation as the process of othering to the point where bystanders

do not object or see anything wrong with the violence inflicted (Oliver, 2010). That brings us back to the initial detachment Agamben (2016) posed as a condition to be a *testis*.

Laub (1992) mentions, in particular, “trapping roles” (p. 81). When you are denigrated over and over, it takes “wholeness” and “separateness” (p. 81) to realise you are not actually “shit.” In other words, you need a deep sense of Self not to integrate what the voice of authority says about you. From the bystander’s side, why would anyone pity a “shit”? Excrements and nothings are beyond the scope of morality (Oliver, 2010). The few bystanders that stayed lucid enough were too scared to judge or object (*omertà*).

Hermeneutical Injustice and Ideology

Given the role of ideology, I would like to return to the discussion on hermeneutical injustice, which we can frame as the product of an ideology. Coded language, in particular, is not limited to the individuals personally involved in the torture but is prevalent in the wider culture dominated by the same ideology that renders torture both possible and taboo: this is the influence of Planet Atrocity. Female survivors of torture evolve in a culture where Marquis de Sade is a “writer,” not a “torturer,” where leather/whips/chains are part of a “lifestyle.” A culture that condemns torture in Donbas, Ukraine, but welcomes “fetish” societies in universities. “I’ll let you lick the lollipop,” sings the rapist-rapper 50 Cent (2005). What fathers do to their daughters is masqueraded as “BDSM.”

A brief digression: I will be told the crucial difference between those practices and torture lies in consent. Two things. First, consent is the marker of subordination. The one that consents is the one that accepts what another agent offered in the first place (MacKinnon, 2019). Second, consent does not modify the nature of an act. A punch is a punch, consent or not. Torture with consent is still torture. Only with sex, we are wrongly told that it could distinguish it from rape, but as Susan Brison (2003) caricatures: “We don’t think of murder as ‘assisted suicide minus consent’” (p. 6).

Illocutionary Failures and Pornography

In this context of widespread ideological hermeneutical injustice, there is another way the illocution of female survivors of torture misfires: it becomes pornography. Everything Rae Langton (2009) says about Linda Boreman—Linda Lovelace in the pornographic film *Deep Throat*—who was violated in/through pornography is entirely applicable to torture. Linda Boreman’s testimony misfired because a woman who has been in pornography that tries to denounce pornography *at the time* of pornography is saying something pornographic. Her illocution—denouncing, warning, testifying—misfires completely—never mind the perlocution. It is “replaced by a force that is its antithesis” (Langton, 2009, p. 59). (By the way, Linda Boreman returned to pornography in the end, her Planet Atrocity). In a patriarchal context, pornography is the “secret sharing of a collective delusion” (Felman & Laub, 1992, p. 83): the product and vehicle of an ideology that makes it impossible to see things for what they are.

Another digression on this contested point. I want my reader to tell me which scenario is taken from *Women Unsilenced* and which from pornography:

- A: He puts her head in the toilet and flushes it.
- B: Electrocuting with instruments like cattle prods.

- C: He inserts a speculum in her anus. Urinates inside. Puts a hose in. Makes her drink it.
- D: Vaginal penetration in a coffin.

Only scenario B (listed above) is taken from *Women Unsilenced*, although it also features on a pornography website (Farley, 2007). A (listed above) is from *Swirlies*, whose motto *Fuck her then flush her* must have been devised by an attentive reader of Primo Levi (cited in Jensen, 2007, p. 126). C (listed above) comes from the brilliant mind of Max Hardcore, who was only ever condemned for “obscenity,” not “torture” (hermeneutical injustice through coded language, anyone?) (Amis, 2001). Furthermore, D (listed above) is online (Dines, 2010).

MAKING MALE VIOLENCE HISTORY

When Agamben (2016) writes that survivors bring their legitimacy as *auctor*, he does that from a context where the horror of the Shoah is socially and legally acknowledged—where the Shoah is *history*. Antisemitism is certainly well alive, but the Nazi regime is not. The issue of pornography reminds us that female survivors of torture and male sexual violence, more generally, are undertaking the strenuous task of testifying *at the time of* the events when perpetrators are in charge of patriarchal regimes and where the extent of the atrocity is far from Coady’s recognised remark (1994). Their “second Holocaust” is much more than a metaphor. They are effectively running the risk of being victimised again. *Rapists walk among us*, as the feminist motto goes. Even if victims are lucky enough to have the perpetrators convicted (a rarity), they are not safe from other men, and neither are other women and girls who may suffer the same fate. The endless present is not just a personal feeling in this case. *That match never ended* for us women.

Violence is like tectonic plates: it is the foundation of the Earth’s crust, and it becomes visible only when it erupts to the surface. Only acute episodes of annihilation are given historical status. Antisemitism has a long history, but the lagers can be *dated*. What can be dated can be historicised: history is, after all, “a written narrative constituting a continuous *chronological* record of important or public events” (emphasis mine, (Old English Dictionary, n.d.). “Dated” and “history” also mean over: what has begun can end.

Torture is too unknown to be dated. Rape is too old to be dated. What cannot be dated hardly becomes history. Moreover, male violence against women is too repetitive to be deemed historical. When one man is raping one woman (aged 16-59) every six minutes in England and Wales alone (Rape Crisis, 2017), rape is not an acute historical atrocity but the norm, as mentioned earlier. The routine nature of male violence confers the appearance of tolerability. Its silent erosion of women covers the explosions resounding in our heads. Too widespread to be afforded special status, male violence against women and girls is reduced to anecdotal occurrence. Hence, Shoah historian Annette Wieviorka’s (2013) statement that rape is an “individual mishap” as opposed to “a historical event” (p. 178) comes as a punch in the guts. It hurts to read. Male violence against women is too diluted in time and space to gain the status of historical atrocity it deserves.

Flipping Ideology Inside/Out

Where does the survivor stand in all this? She testifies to make the atrocity a *remnant* of the past—another perlocution with unpredictable success. Her denunciation aims to trigger the process of historicisation, the rendering of an event into history.

The eternal present should not overshadow the role of the future in the survivor's life. Precisely because she lives with second Holocausts, she is aware that what happened to her once can happen to her and others again. This last point motivated Primo Levi (2003) to testify in schools while it prevented Marceline Loridan-Ivens (2021) from having children because it would "happen again in twenty years' time" (p. 132).

Collective testimonies serve the purpose of historicisation. They try to make the move from individual and thus biographical to the collective and thus historical. Feminist consciousness-raising groups played that vital role resulting in epistemic breakthroughs (Fricker, 2007). The #MeToo movement is another testimonial cataclysm. The *Allen V. Farrow* documentary (Dick & Ziering, 2021), for example, that recounts Woody Allen's rape of his daughter, Dylan Farrow, and the media treatment of the event, highlights many of the problems discussed here, was released this year in 2021 (post #MeToo) and could not have been made before because the cultural conditions, most crucially willingness to listen, were not gathered.

This political fast-forwarding is possible because the survivor elaborated on what happened to her. Sarson and MacDonald insisted on challenging the women they were helping by making them critically analyse torture. "I did not see things for what they were" says the woman who asked, "Was I in zombiehood?" (Sarson & MacDonald, 2021, p. 257). To say you are a survivor, you must understand you missed death by a hair. This intellectual elaboration indeed requires a sober judgement on the atrocity, sensing its wrongness. To call yourself a survivor, you must have flipped the ideology inside out. How or why some survivors are able to have a virtuous perception, I do not know. I think the unique position of the survivor inside the event and having it seen from the outside helps. We are never fully out of an ideology, though: remember the pangs of guilt for disobeying.

The Bothering Survivor

This time travel, after space travel, can exacerbate the survivor's sense of foreignness in the world. She has already fast-forwarded time to the demise of the atrocity. She has flipped the ideology inside out. However, in this Planet Ordinary that looks like Planet Atrocity, clocks seemed to have stopped ticking too. People are slow to understand and even slower to change. When survivors of atrocities talk at the event, they force a temporal shift, calling for the end of an ideology/atrocity that bystanders are not ready for. Survivors were forced into it. Survivors challenge us because they are ahead of us in their life and intellectual journey. Remember, they already challenged their tormentors by living; of course, they will shake up mental moulds.

This travelling survivor bothers bystanders. She brings the bad news of a Damocles sword "ordinary" people never knew of. That is not the worse part. She directly invokes the responsibility of bystanders. If the sacrificial lamb protects the community, then Planet Ordinary protects itself through the existence of Planet Atrocity—the tectonic plates. I used to see Primo Levi's (2005) introductory poem to *If this is a man* as a lament, but now I see he is furious: your tepid homes are warmed by our bodies; he curses the "ordinary" people. What I mean by this is that the bystander's ignorance or the role they (inadvertently) played in the atrocity gets questioned when the survivor testifies at the time of the event. *Where were you? Why didn't you see?* It takes a new generation, one with better perception or not crippled by guilt, to listen to survivors—the historical gap.

Survivors open the possibility of a different world, different times, and different ideologies. They show an alternative. Furthermore, it is a far more terrifying sight than the Gorgon.

CONCLUSION

*I see dead friends
In my dreams every night
They'll tell me
"There's no place for you here"
That's why
I'm not giving up on my faith*

Pamela Spence⁹

My journey with survivors ends here. I tried to untangle why testimony for them is so painful and full of pitfalls. Torturers inflict such cruelty; survivors are initially unable to talk about it. When they speak, they realise the power of testifying is not just in their hands: it depends on the listeners. Are we ready to hear? Are we even willing?

I wanted to go beyond the platitudes of the “meaningless,” the “unspeakable,” and the “indescribable.” All euphemisms keeping us away from the pain lies in protecting us from what we cannot stomach.

My worldview changed forever. I am more sceptical of our discipline, which seems to fail victims. How long can we evolve in the same old *polis*? The binary code of state/non-state cannot accommodate sex differences or reduce them, like Agamben (2016) does, to man/non-man. How long can we pretend the structure at large is just but suffers only from a minor malfunction that will fade away the moment we put enough oil to get the engines smoothly running? It is hard for anyone who has been in contact, near or far with the reality of torture, to believe that anything but *tabula rasa* will do.

For the past few months, I have lived with survivors. I listened to them. They appeared in my dreams and turned them into nightmares. When writing, I realised I was incapable of remembering any of the descriptions of torture: I think I never registered. I have not—could not—have put on paper everything that I learned.

Survivors proved to me that it is possible to testify, despite it all.

Long live survivors.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am tremendously grateful to my supervisor, Stuart Elden, who agreed to work on this dark topic, even after knowing my irreverence in class. You trusted me to deal with it and gave me the confidence to carry on. I am grateful to V.P. who helped me more clearly see Agamben's obscure writing. Thank you, Marcélio, for enlightening me about a crucial piece of the puzzle, long before I thought about this paper. Thank you, Jeannette Westbrook, for sharing your story. Thank you, G., for telling me about Curzio Malaparte, the seed of this work. Thank you,

⁹ The original in Turkish reads: “Ölmüş dostlar görüyorum/Rüyamda her gece/Derlerki bana/Buralarda yer yok sana/Bu yüzden vazgeçmem kaderimden.”

Jeanne and Linda, for trusting me and changing my worldview—probably forever. To my mother Uygur, the ultimate philosopher with no words, who reminded me of the etymology of “victim” allowed me to elaborate on my reverse Narcissus, I say: *inanç ve inat*. Akitasan: I couldn't have written this without you. I dedicate this to Léna and Karine. *Dignity* thanks the following women for their expertise and time to review this article: Dana Mihailescu, University of Bucharest, Romania, and Heather Brunskell-Evans (emerita) Kings College, London, UK.

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RECOMMENDED CITATION

Uygarkizi, Yagmur. (2022). Testimony, violence, and silence: An examination of Agamben and his Critics. *Dignity: A Journal of Analysis of Exploitation and Violence*. Vol. 7, Issue 2, Article 5. <http://digitalcommons.uri.edu/dignity/vol7/iss2/5>.
<https://doi.org/10.23860/dignity.2022.07.02.05>

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