

# Testimony in Practice

## A Guide



*Testimony in Practice Exhibition (Maciek Bączyk and Emma Lockey), Centrala Space, September-October 2019*

This guide has been produced by Prof. Sara Jones (University of Birmingham) in collaboration with *La Conquista del pol sud*, Carmen-Francesca Banciu, Philip Holyman, and Emilie Pine (University College Dublin).

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To learn more about the "Making Of" the theatre performance *A Land Full of Heroes*, watch our short film available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DpXhLKp-sXA>

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*A Land Full of Heroes*, BE Festival 6 July 2019. Image © Alex Brenner.

## What is “Testimony in Practice”?

In this guide, “testimony” is understood very broadly to include all forms of expression that give voice to and are based on lived experience. Testimony is an account of an individual’s personal experiences by that individual. But the form that account takes could be anything from theatre, documentary film, autobiographical writing and literature to video recordings and social media. Testimony might also be used by others to create new forms, such as when works of art, film, and literature are based on testimony, or several interwoven testimonies. We can understand all of these things as a form of testimony; yet, each form of testimony should be approached on its own terms and with different ethical and practical issues in mind.

“Testimony in Practice” refers to the use of testimony for social, artistic or educational purposes. In our resource pack, [Using Testimony in the Classroom](#), we have drawn on many of the same theoretical considerations outlined here, but focused on education. Here, we present our (diverse) approach to using testimony in creative writing and theatre. The ideas gathered here are based on our varied experiences as academics and producers of culture and our collective learning through the project [Testimony in Practice](#). We hope that these experiences will be useful to anyone exploring the use of testimony in and through culture.

### What did you do in *Testimony in Practice*?

Testimony in Practice was a genuine collaboration between academic scholarship and creative practice. It built on relationships established through the research network [Culture and its Uses as](#)

[Testimony](#) and sought to take these further through the co-production of artistic work. The project was led by Sara Jones (University of Birmingham) with Emilie Pine (University College Dublin, author of the award-winning *Notes to Self*) and supported by Phil Holyman (*Little Earthquake* theatre company). It had three major outputs:

- 1) The innovative theatre production *A Land Full of Heroes*, co-written by Catalan theatre company *La Conquesta del pol sud* and Romanian and German novelist, Carmen-Francesca Banciu. The play is based on Carmen-Francesca’s life and literature and is performed by Carmen-Francesca herself alongside her daughter, Meda Gheorghiu Banciu, a professional actor. Meda was also author of a monologue included in the play.



*A Land Full of Heroes* rehearsals, Berlin, June 2019.  
Image: Lucila Guichon

- 2) The multi-media exhibition *Testimony in Practice*, based on the testimonies of Central and Eastern Europeans living in the UK gathered in an online campaign. The exhibition was commissioned by the Central and Eastern European arts space, Centrala

Gallery and produced by Maciek Bączyk (Poland) and Emma Lockey (UK). It was displayed in Centrala and the Romanian Cultural Institute in autumn 2019.

practical tips from the artists involved in the project.



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- 3) A series of workshops for creative practitioners focusing on: theatre, creative writing, and youth artists. The workshops were led by *La Conquesta*, Philip Holyman, Carmen-Francesca Banciu, Emilie Pine and the Bulgarian-born visual artist, Boyana Aleksova.



*Youth Artists Workshop, Centrala Space, September 2019*

The remainder of this guide is divided into three sections: theory, practice and ethics. In each section, we combine reflections based on our research in this field with

## Theory

Testimony should not be put into practice naively. It is a complex form and one that is attached to real lived experience – our own or that of other people. This is particularly, though not only, the case if you are dealing with traumatic pasts. The following reflects on some of the theoretical problems and concerns that might underpin your creative work.

### Authenticity

The issue of authenticity tends to be central in any discussion of testimony. But when people describe a testimony as “authentic”, what do they mean? Sometimes authentic can refer to provenance. A testimony is authentic because it is produced (or assumed to be produced) by an individual who had the experience that they recount – that is, this is genuinely their story. In this understanding, all testimony can be considered “authentic” even if the person giving the testimony has made mistakes or misremembers. Authentic in this sense does not necessarily mean “true”, rather it is closer to the meaning of the term “genuine”.

Why does all this matter? Firstly, it points us towards an important feature of “authentic” testimony – it does not have to be (and usually is not) 100% accurate. Instead, it is important that there was an intention to tell the truth about a personal experience. Secondly, it tells us that we, the audience, have a role to play in deciding whether or not a testimony is “authentic”. If we agree that a text is “authentic” or “genuine”, then we are

saying something about the person giving testimony – namely, we are recognising them as trustworthy. From a creative perspective it opens up the possibility that authentic testimony can also be told through fiction. We explored to great effect the fluid boundaries between authenticity, fiction, literature and testimony in *A Land Full of Heroes*.

### Empathy

We may feel that empathy is a desirable response to hearing testimony. The research literature also suggests that emotion and feeling the pain of others is important in promoting an engaged response to the stories of others. However, there are also risks with empathy. It is worth dwelling a little on what we might mean by the term. The philosopher Amy Coplan notes that some of the most popular definitions of empathy include:

- (A) Feeling what someone else feels
- (B) Caring about someone else
- (C) Being emotionally affected by someone else’s emotions and experiences, though not necessarily experiencing the same emotions
- (D) Imagining oneself in another’s situation
- (E) Imagining being another in that other’s situation
- (F) Making inferences about another’s mental states<sup>1</sup>

Often practitioners engaging with testimony focus on definition (D), using techniques that encourage audiences to feel as if they can experience the events recounted as if they were the witness.

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<sup>1</sup> Amy Coplan, ‘Understanding Empathy: Its Features and Effects’, in *Empathy: Philosophical*

*and Psychological Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 3-18 (p. 4).

This is problematic for ethical reasons – it is an appropriation of the experiences (and often suffering) of others, and methodological ones – can we really experience the pain of others? If we do, are we not likely to be overwhelmed by and focused on our own emotions, rather than engaging with the story of the witness?

The model of empathy that Coplan proposes and which we would adopt and reformulate here is rather different. We have rejected (D) and would instead suggest a combination of (A), (B), (E) and (F). In this model, the audience recognises the emotion experienced by the witness (fear, sadness, despair). However, they recognise that emotion from the perspective of the survivor (what Coplan terms “other-oriented perspective-taking”), and are continuously aware of the difference between themselves and the witness (“self-other differentiation”).

This approach means we can engage the power of emotions to draw audiences in without risking appropriation of someone else’s story, or personal distress that can prevent the kind of distance from an account that is needed for critical thinking. Indeed, artistic practice is especially fruitful for encouraging “other-oriented” empathy. The creative process and the self-consciousness of artistic media allows a certain distance that provides space for critical reflection.

#### Perpetrators

Addressing traumatic histories raises the question of perpetrator testimony. Should we use perpetrator testimony in our artistic practice? What are the risks and what are the potential benefits? The risks of using perpetrator testimony relate

strongly to the issues of authenticity and empathy. We might worry that by using perpetrator testimony as a source we are implicitly recognising it as “trustworthy” in some way, even though we might find its contents abhorrent. Secondly, we may have concerns that our audiences would empathise with or adopt the xenophobic or hate-fuelled perspectives presented by perpetrators. It may feel like an ethical imperative to give voice to the victims over and above those who persecuted them.

But if one of the aims of our practice is to highlight the societal causes of such violence, can we really do that without understanding its origins? How can we understand those origins if we don’t engage with the perspective of those who committed that violence?

So we would recommend that perpetrator testimony can and should be used, but this needs to be done in a framework that encourages audiences to identify the challenges posed by these testimonies (e.g., the pressure to justify one’s behaviour, the effect of ideology). It is especially important when approaching these texts that we encourage an “other oriented perspective” with regards to empathy (see above).

In many cases there may be no easily identifiable perpetrator (e.g., in *La Conquesta del pol sud’s Raphaëlle* there is no such duality). The difficult experiences recounted by the witness may be caused by social structures and attitudes, rather than by identifiable witnesses. In such contexts, the audience of the testimony may also be directly implicated. The witness in this regard might be better understood as representative of a

minority group within that society, rather than as a victim diametrically opposed to a perpetrator. Their testimony gives the audience or reader an insight into a unique perspective on that society.

### Secondary Witnesses

The term “secondary witnesses” is used in the research literature, particularly with reference to memory of the Holocaust. As a concept, “secondary witness” can be useful as a way of describing individuals who give an account of a past event from a personal perspective, but who didn’t experience that event themselves. This might refer to the children and grandchildren of survivors, who tell the stories of their parents and grandparents. But the term might also be applied to creative artists who work with first-person testimonies to tell an individual story in a different form, e.g., a film or theatre performance.

But are secondary witnesses really witnesses? Isn’t it confusing to use a term (“witness”) that has a very specific meaning in this context, to in fact mean something else? It is actually very common in everyday life for people to be asked to provide an account of and knowledge about something which they have not experienced first-hand. Even in more formal situations of giving testimony, e.g., the courtroom, a witness can be called on the basis of what they have learned, rather than what they have experienced. However, when it comes to traumatic experiences, we tend to think of only primary witnesses as the “true” witnesses. This is in part because what we are interested in is not only what happened, but also what it felt like, and for that physical presence is important.

If we think of ourselves and our artistic practices as a form of “secondary witnessing”, it is important to be clear what we mean by this and, equally, what we do not. We do not mean that we have somehow experienced the event being recounted; rather we have “witnessed” the witnessing of that event and feel ethically bound to share and re-tell that story. This means using the medium to convey your relationship to the story, highlight the gap between experience and re-telling, show fractures where you do not know and resist the urge to “complete” the story. In *A Land Full of Heroes*, the theatre-makers insert themselves into the text, showing how the making of the piece was also a journey of discovery for them and highlighting the distance between past and present.



*A Land Full of Heroes, BE Festival 6 July 2019. Image © Alex Brenner*

## Practice

This section provides advice on how you might go about putting testimony (your own or that of others) into creative practice with a focus on writing and theatre. The advice given comes directly from the international group of artists involved in *Testimony in Practice*.

## Writing

Award-winning Romanian and German novelist, **Carmen-Francesca Banciu**, has written multiple works of fiction based on her own experiences as a dissident in Ceausescu's Romania, the transition to democracy, and her fraught relationship with her parents, both committed communists. She offers practical advice on how to write yourself in both fiction and non-fiction.

### *Be Clear about Motivation*

Reflect on the reason why you want to transmit your story. Do you want to

convey an important message to the reader/society/humanity? Do you want to pass on your own life experience? Do you want to leave your story to your family and friends? Do you want to understand your past for yourself and put it in relationship with your present life? Or do you want to entertain/inform/educate?

### *Decide on your genre*

The motivation of writing will determine the kind of story you are writing: memoir, novel or other artistic/fictional form of expression, reportage.

### *Write it all down and select what you need*

Gather all the material that is relevant for you, put everything down that you want to include. The selection comes later. But don't overwhelm the reader with too much information. Choose what is relevant for your purpose and motivation.

### *Explain your story*

Put your story in a context (political, familial, social, artistic), make the reader



understand why things happened as they did, why you acted as you did.

#### *Use multiple perspectives*

Make your story interesting by looking at things/events/your life also through the eyes of others (siblings, parents, relatives, peers, friends and enemies). Enrich the story by looking also from your older self to the past. What did you discover, understand, and learn? Make your text polyphonic, colourful and vivid. Write the story you want to read.

Alongside the narrative part of your life story, use short complementary stories, jokes, dialogues, letters, memories, quotations, photographs

If possible, try to contact relatives who know you and your family from childhood. You will be surprised about what you will hear about yourself. You can use this in your story, even if in some cases their memories contradict your own.

#### *Create your world in writing*

Don't forget that the reader has to enter the universe you are creating. Nourish them with details, reactivate your senses and recreate the moments you are describing.

Remember a scene in your life and try to re-enter in your imagination the time in which it happened. Try to be as present as possible in that past moment. Write it as it would happen now.

#### *Be authentic*

Use the language representing you as a person/artist/individual, don't try to be smart, but be authentic. It is your story about yourself. Show you as you are, not as you would like to be seen.

In addition to this practical advice, writers should consider the note of warning sounded by **Emilie Pine**, author of the best-selling *Notes to Self*.

“When you tell your story you get to decide what you will tell and what you will keep private. There is a difference between privacy and secrecy. Often, telling your story will lift the weight of secrecy and get everything out in the open. But there is nothing wrong at all with keeping certain elements private. This is particularly important to think about in advance of making your story public - once you have told it, it becomes public property. You are still the person it happened to, but readers and audiences can decide what it means to them. Decide which bits of your life you want to maintain as yours alone.”

*Emilie Pine*

#### *Theatre*

The theatre company *La Conquista del pol sud* has worked for several years directly with witnesses, putting their stories on stage and helping them to perform those stories themselves. This has resulted in their trilogy – *Nadia*, *Claudia*, and *Rapahëlle* – and also in the work they produced with *Testimony in Practice*, *A Land Full of Heroes*. Set designer **Eugenio Szwarcer** and director **Carles Fernández Giua** have the following advice for others considering working with witnesses.

#### *Collaborate and Communicate*

The witnesses should be the (co)authors of the play and not (only) its subject. Communication is essential in this context. You need to make sure that everybody fully understands what is being done at all levels of the production – the narrative of the witness, but also the artistic framing of that narrative. This makes sure that everyone involved supports the production and that the

witnesses are committed to it. The witness has to feel free on stage, they need to feel very sure about the meanings that emerge from the *mise-en-scène*; that is, the mix of languages that are combined on stage. The way in which narration, images and sounds are combined can create different senses, contents and meanings.

#### *Use Multiple Perspectives*

The witness story should be complemented with different perspectives on the facts. This decreases the pressure on the witness in terms of taking full responsibility for the whole work. It also makes for a more interesting production, because the audience has to balance different aspects, perspectives and versions. This makes the audience more proactive and allows them to think more critically. When the witness is on stage or is talking, the performance works mainly in an emotive way; the main mechanism by which the performance is received is empathy – as we note above, this can be overwhelming. *La Conquesta* try to break this relationship at certain points of the production in order to allow the audience the necessary distance for critical thinking.

One of the most important things in *La Conquesta's* work is the relationship between the individual and the collective layer. The integration of alternative perspectives in their plays (i.e., other than that of the witness) allows them to point the audience towards the collective histories and experiences that lie within and behind the memories of the witness.

“Allow your audience to understand the context in which the experience grew up. Give your audience the chance to think critically, add some different points of view. Try to connect the individual experience to the collective”.

*Carles Fernández Giva*

#### *Experiment*

Communicate with the witness at the beginning of the project and explain that the process of developing the project is a process of experimentation. Encourage them to try everything (in the work on the text, but also in the rehearsal room) with the understanding that you will later decide together what will be in the play and what will not, with the final decision resting with the witness. Witnesses are often surprised at how different (artistic) languages can give them access to something that in advance seemed impossible to address.



*A Land Full of Heroes rehearsals, Berlin, June 2019. Image: Lucila Guichon*

**Phil Holyman** is Co-Director of the theatre company *Little Earthquake*, who have also engaged closely with autobiographical re-tellings and working with communities through creative practice. Phil supported *Testimony in Practice* in particular in its engagement with Central and Eastern

European communities and the testimonies campaign that underpinned the *Testimony in Practice* exhibition. He reflects on some of the practical issues surrounding working with witnesses as follows.

### *Reflect on your own position*

Before you even get started on any project which will involve real people (i.e. not people who are already invested in the artistic world of the project), be honest in thinking about whether you are the right person to be carrying out that project. Just because you believe your project is important and relevant to the people in a particular community, it does not mean those people will automatically think so, too. This is especially true if you are not yourself directly connected to or embedded in that community. What you will need, in that case, are some influencers — people who do have those direct connections who can help you and advocate for you.

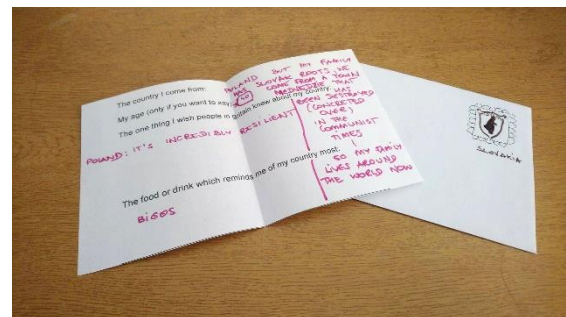
### *Consider barriers to participation*

Consider what barriers to participation might exist for the people whose experiences, opinions and testimonies you want to solicit. There are countless barriers which might be in place, some obvious, but most very subtle and very specific to the unique circumstances of both the community as a whole and each individual connected to it. Start by listing your presumptions about what the barriers to community participation might be — and then start interrogating them. This will inevitably mean asking other

people if your presumptions are correct or not — and often these conversations can be the very first in-roads into establishing relationships of trust with influencers and with community participants.

### *Meet communities on their own terms*

Even in a digital age, it's still very easy for people to ignore, postpone or forget about opportunities to share information through surveys, emails and other online mechanisms. It is always much, much easier to gather testimony material through in-person, face-to-face conversations. So that means creating spaces for this to happen, and it makes obvious sense to create these spaces in locations which already feel safe and familiar to the participants you want to hear from. Meet them on their terms, where they will already feel more empowered. And facilitate a conversation which is all about prompting them to speak so that you can truly listen. It is highly likely that what they have to say will conflict with or contradict many of your core preconceptions about your own project. This is all to the good. So embrace it. Remember that they are the experts in their own experience. Learn from them.



*Engaging with communities at Testimony in Practice launch event in March 2019*

## Ethics

The practical advice given above indicates that working with witnesses raises ethical questions that are unique to this particular form of practice. If we are putting a witness and/or their story on stage, we need to think about our motivation and theirs, what it will mean for them to voice their experience, and how we can ensure that they retain ownership of their story. At the same time, the creative practitioner should not try to disguise the mediation of that story and their own presence in its re-telling. This will not decrease the authenticity of the account; rather ensure that there is an “honesty” in what is being presented to the audience.

Emilie Pine has worked with witnesses directly in the project *Industrial Memories* and has studied the methods and ethics of mediating witness stories in the theatre.

### *Witnesses own their stories*

Witnesses who give their stories are not “victims” or “sources”, but storytellers, with full agency over their stories, deserving co-authorship credit (unless anonymity is appropriate and agreed). They should be the first intended audience of the creative output.

### *Witnessing is physical and emotional labour*

Witnesses perform a great deal of the labour of storytelling: the crafting of their narratives, and the emotional labour. They need to be a) recompensed (e.g. travel/per diem costs), and b) protected. Often witnesses feel empowered by the process of being listened to, but this can

be followed by feelings of alienation. Follow-up support is vital, as is continued ownership of their own intellectual and emotional capital

### *Protect audiences and yourself*

The audience also needs to be protected. Think carefully about the balance of trauma/non trauma in the material being presented; give audiences some space to develop their own intellectual and emotional responses. Creative practitioners are also vulnerable when they engage deeply in the traumatic experiences of others; be careful of “second victim” syndrome

**Phil Holyman** echoes Emilie’s reflections on the importance of ensuring witnesses retain the right to their own stories.

“There’s no point going to the trouble of building these relationships of trust and actually getting testimonies from people if you are then going to completely reshape what they’ve shared in order to fit your own artistic or academic agenda. The form and content of whatever work you create as a result of gathering this material must be guided by what the participants have given you. It’s essential to honour and respect what they have contributed — otherwise you may as well just create an entirely devised or imagined piece of work from the outset.”

*Phil Holyman*

Phil adds that creative practitioners and academics owe it to their participants to follow up with witnesses after the project has concluded.

When artists and academics finish a project, it's easy for them to walk away and move onto the next thing — but what lies beyond your project for the people you have cultivated as participants? What are you going to do with the relationships of trust you have built? What after-care might your participants need or deserve? How does the work they have been instrumental in creating have a life beyond the funded parameters of the original project? If you overlook these things, you're not just undermining your own project and practice, you're also likely to poison the well for the next artist or academic who comes along. Why should a participant bother to help anyone again if the last person to come calling vanished as soon as the work was done?

*Phil Holyman*



*Carmen-Francesca Banciu at our final project event in February 2020*