Introduction

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Abstract

This introduction sets the scene for the special issue through an overview of extant anthropological approaches to witnessing and a discussion of the collection's three main themes: truths, technologies and transformations. It lays the groundwork for a distinctly anthropological approach to witnessing in three ways. First, by drawing together disparate ethnographic takes on witnessing, it expands the anthropological analysis of witnessing beyond its conventional foci (e.g. legal or media settings). Second, it makes a case for attending not only to witnessing's semantics and subjectivities but also to its structural, relational, performative and material dimensions. Finally, it puts ethnographic analyses of witnessing in dialogue with reflexive discussions of anthropological witnessing, asking what each can bring to the other. In a 'post-truth' moment, when our interlocutors are producing their own testimonies and representations, it is vital to rethink what it means for anthropologists to (bear) witness – and who/what we do it for.

Keywords: anthropological knowledge-practices, technologies, transformations, truths, witnessing

'My responsibility is to tell the truth'

On 27 September 2018, psychology professor Christine Blasey Ford stood before the United States Senate Judiciary Committee as a witness in a case that polarized the nation. Ford had alleged that President Donald Trump's nominee for the Supreme Court, Brett Kavanaugh, sexually assaulted her in 1982, when they were in high school. Amid increasing furore, her allegation resulted in a public hearing in which Ford and Kavanaugh were the only witnesses subject to questioning. In her testimony, Ford said:

> I am here today not because I want to be. I am terrified. I am here because I believe it is my civic duty to tell you what happened to me while Brett Kavanaugh and I were in high school. … I understand and appreciate the importance of your hearing from me directly about what happened…
>
> …

> My motivation in coming forward was to provide the facts about how Mr. Kavanaugh's actions have damaged my life, so that you can take that into serious consideration as you make your decision. … It is not my responsibility to determine whether Mr. Kavanaugh deserves to sit on the Supreme Court. My responsibility is to tell the truth.[1]

The many reactions to Ford's testimony centred on one question: was she a reliable witness? Debates about her credibility revolved not only around what she said, but *how* she said it: Ford's nervousness, cracking voice, closeness to tears, and 'unassuming' demeanour (Edwards 2018), which, for her supporters, further confirmed her status as a victim publicly reliving her trauma (e.g. Litman 2018). Even Trump conceded that Ford seemed a 'credible witness'.[2] Yet, at a later rally, he denigrated the supposed factual inconsistencies in Ford's testimony:

> How did you get home? I don't remember. How'd you get there? I don't remember. Where is the place? I don't remember. How many years ago was it? I don't know. (Malloy et al. 2018)

This scornful parody drew cheers from the audience but inflamed others, prompting the social media slogan, 'I believe Christine Blasey Ford' and fanning the #WhyIDidntReport [sexual assault] hashtag on Twitter – a response to Trump's earlier put-downs.[3]

Ford's testimony and the debates surrounding it offer a revealing glimpse into the culture and politics of the contemporary 'era of the witness' (Wieviorka 2006), in which witnessing is not confined to singular figures (e.g. survivors, observers) or sites (e.g. courtrooms, archives), but dispersed and multiplied (Fassin 2008: 552) across space, time, platforms and parties. Indeed, Ford herself spoke as and through various figures and modes of witnessing: at times, she was the *superstes* (the survivor), at times the *testis* (the third-party expert, as a psychologist and political activist), and at times a martyr-like figure sacrificing her well-being for a greater purpose (Givoni 2016: 29). Moreover, her testimony was not a bounded occurrence, but a mediatized performance (Paz 2018: 25n7): repeatedly fragmented, circulated, dissected, repackaged, and evaluated by those who witnessed it in person or remotely. While her account was personal and specific, it was thus not isolated. Instead, Ford's testimony precipitated testimonies from sexual assault survivors, who, by recounting their own experiences, bore empathetic witness in support. A networked, critical model of truth lies in these acts, radically different from the one Trump mockingly invoked. Rather than defining truth in terms of factuality, this emerging model affirmed the *truthfulness* of Ford's testimony – its rawness evidencing what she had undergone.

In this special issue, we contend that the time is riper than ever for a concerted anthropological engagement with witnessing as a theme, analytic and reflexive device. As the Ford/Kavanaugh case reveals, witnessing today is not a strictly legal or academic category, but increasingly a matter of public concern about which people think, talk, theorize and disagree. Conversations about witnessing – what

makes a witness 'credible'? How is a testimony's truth(fulness) evaluated? How do I/we bear witness from afar? – point to the evolution of witnessing as a meaningful yet contested 'folk' category, an exegetical mode tied up with wider social, cultural, political and moral concerns. For her supporters, Ford's testimony was not just about one person's trauma, but about institutionalized misogyny, women's rights, and a collective opportunity to redress historical wrongs. For anthropologists, this case served as a lens onto mounting conservatism in national public life, moral anxieties about 'fake news', and the potency of social media-fuelled movements such as #MeToo.

The growing prominence of witnessing in the contemporary world, however, does not itself reveal what *witnessing* – as act, discourse or theory – entails. Rather, the term has arguably become less decisive over the years (Givoni 2016: 2–4). If the capacity and right to witness were once confined to specific subjects, sites and/or mainstream media, they are now more accessible thanks to smartphones, social media and digital platforms. The ubiquity of such technologies has reconfigured what can be witnessed and who a witness can be. Witnessing today is increasingly 'mundane' (Ellis 2009) – undertaken by many, on an everyday basis, without pre-required knowledge and beyond particular sites and subject-positions.

One reason to pay anthropological attention to witnessing, then, is that witnessing provides a powerful vantage point onto current political, moral and social predicaments, as well as the relations and technologies through which they are encountered. Centring witnessing in this way raises thorny questions – salient to both the contemporary world and current anthropology – about the production, negotiation and contestation of truth, authority, agency and power. The developments that make witnessing such a topical concern today – surging authoritarianism, migrant crises, rampant inequality, planetary destruction, the COVID-19 pandemic – have also precipitated, and arguably revived, reflexive questions about anthropological (eye-)witnessing, and how bearing witness can be a form of scholarly engagement, activism or intervention (see, e.g., Bringa 2016; Guilhot 2012 Kirsch 2018; Marcus 2005; Reed-Danahay 2017; Rosas and Martínez-Cano 2018; Talebi 2019). Yet, like much anthropological writing on the topic (below), these discussions tend *not* to unpack the notion of witnessing, leaving it and the figure of the anthropologist-as-witness relatively under-theorized and insufficiently articulated.

In this special issue, we seek to develop a distinctively anthropological approach to witnessing: one that contends with its multifarious definitions and effects as well as its implications for anthropological knowledge-practices. Our main contributions are three-fold. First, this issue puts diverse theoretical, thematic and methodological takes on witnessing in dialogue through a collection of ethnographically informed analyses. Our six articles are connected by both theme and approach, sharing an interest in the grey areas and processes lying between witnessing's semantics and subjectivities. Some are located in familiar witnessing spaces, such as human rights NGOs (Grinberg), humanitarian and documentary media (Hänsch), and political theatres of protest (Fryer-Moreira); others extend witnessing as a descriptive and analytic into less familiar fields involving both humans and

nonhumans, such as bureaucratic deliberations (Douglas-Jones), public spaces and memorials (Çaylı), and biodiversity conservation and spirit relations (Chua). We thus highlight the multitudinous forms that witnessing can take, and the diverse ways it is conceived, articulated and evaluated in and across contexts.

Second, we seek to lay the groundwork for a distinctively anthropological approach to witnessing. As we suggest below, much current scholarship approaches witnessing through two main frameworks: semantics and subjectivities (e.g. testimonial content, figures of experts, eyewitnesses and martyrs). While also grappling with these, our collection aims to think beyond them by foregrounding the structural, relational, material and performative dimensions of witnessing. As the Ford/Kavanaugh case reveals, it is no longer sufficient (if it ever was) for scholars to frame witnessing as a triangle between 'the agent who bears witness', 'the utterance or text itself' and 'the audience who witnesses' (Peters 2009: 25). The lines between these points have always been fuzzy, growing increasingly so in digitally saturated 'post-truth'-scapes, where witnessing enactments are exponentially diffused, contested and (re)mediated (e.g. Çaylı, Douglas-Jones, Grinberg, this issue).

Third, we place ethnographic and conceptual analyses of witnessing in reflexive dialogue with debates about anthropological witnessing. These two conversations have largely unfolded in parallel, only intersecting infrequently (e.g. Talebi 2019). In this special issue, however, we ask what each can bring to the other. What, for example, might refigurations of the anthropologist-as-witness bring to ethnographies of expertise and intervention? What could truth-claims from protest frontlines bring to anthropological knowledge-practices? This move raises critical questions about what and how anthropologists study in the contemporary world, as well as our role in producing, determining and delimiting what is witness-able, true and authoritative (e.g. Chua, Fryer-Moreira, Hänsch, this issue). At a time when 'real' and 'fake' are increasingly blurred, and anthropologists' research subjects and other agents are producing their own testimonies and representations, it is vital to rethink what it means for anthropologists to (bear) witness in the present – and who/what we do it for.

The rest of this introduction sets the scene for these explorations. Following a brief discussion of extant anthropological approaches to witnessing, we introduce our collection through three key analytics: truths, technologies and transformations. These, we argue, can sustain productive dialogues between earlier anthropological takes on witnessing, contemporary ethnographies of witnessing, and reflexive discussions of anthropological witnessing practices. By drawing them together, we illustrate what a distinctly anthropological approach to witnessing as theme, analytic and reflexive device might entail.

Witnessing in anthropology: absences and presences

Whereas several disciplines have painstakingly historicized and theorized testimony and witnessing (e.g. Assmann 2006; Boltanski 1999; Chouliaraki 2015; Dean 2019; Frisch 2004; Welbourne and Coady 1994), anthropology has not sustained

a concerted conversation on this theme. It is striking, for example, that witnessing and its closely related term, testimony, have not been covered in the *Annual Review of Anthropology*. While the term is invoked in inquiries into such topics as evidence and authority (Kuipers 2013: 406), it is conspicuously absent from articles on, for example, voice (Weidman 2014) and archives (Zeitlyn 2012). In other instances, witnessing has been utilized as a crutch to discuss related themes, such as memory (French 2012: 344) and trauma (Pillen 2016). However, there has yet to emerge a distinctive sub-field that elucidates or theorizes what witnessing *is*, *from* an anthropological perspective.

A similar pattern is discernible across many ethnographic analyses of witnessing, which cover three main areas. Witnessing is a recurring theme in the anthropology of suffering (e.g. Bryant 2012; Das 2007) and humanitarianism (e.g. Can 2016; Feldman and Ticktin 2010; Malkki 1996; Ong 2019; Ticktin 2014), particularly through the influential work of Didier Fassin (2012) and Peter Redfield (2006), who explore different discourses and figures of witnessing in transnational humanitarian regimes. Witnessing is also discussed in anthropologies of rights-oriented media and activism, which trace how knowledges and representations (e.g. reports, testimonies, documentaries) morph and move across visual, cultural, digital and legal circuits (e.g. Gürsel 2016; McLagan 2005, 2006; McLagan and McKee 2012; Talebi 2019; Torchin 2006). These insights have recently been extended into the realm of social media activism, with anthropologists such as Patty Gray (2016) and John Postill (2014) exploring the modes of witnessing and being-there (or, to quote Gray, 'being-then') enabled by Web 2.0 platforms such as Twitter and YouTube (see also Fryer-Moreira, Hänsch, this issue). Finally, some anthropologists have approached witnessing as ritual and ethical practice. Susan Harding, for example, examines witnessing as a potent technique and ritual undertaken by fundamentalist Christians (1991: 34–38), while Naisargi Dave (2014) portrays witnessing – seeing injustice and violence through the suffering of others – as an ethically compelling event that transforms individuals into activists.

Although these studies coalesce around common themes and concerns, they have yet to be put into comparative dialogue or used to forge a broader anthropological approach to witnessing. A comparable lacuna exists in discussions of anthropological witnessing practices. Despite the many challenges to its authority, representational practices and post/neo/colonial politics, much anthropology remains built around a romanticized core of participant-observation – a paradigmatic sequence of witnessing (= seeing and experiencing) followed by the generation of ethnography as an annotated inscription of what has been witnessed. Conventional anthropological texts thus constitute a specific if diverse testimonial genre: an ethical and/or political engagement of watching + narrating (witnessing) and producing documentation (testimony), with these enunciations often claiming to speak truth to power (McLagan 2003: 607; Stephen 2013: 2).

This normative model of fieldwork-based, testimony-producing eye-witnessing has generated various ethico-political programmes. One, famously sketched by Nancy Scheper-Hughes, casts the anthropologist as 'a responsive, reflexive, and

morally committed being', who has an 'ethical obligation' (1995: 419) to reveal and challenge suffering, terror and injustice – to *bear witness* to what she has (eye-) witnessed through her work (see Behar 1996; Farmer 2003; Kleinman et al. 1997; Tourigny 2004). Here, participant-observation – already the privileged grounds of ethnographic veracity and authority – acquires new ethical significance as the grounds for anthropological witnessing as an empathetic, involved act.

Other anthropologists have outlined more detached models of witnessing that eschew (or problematize) identification with their research subjects. George Marcus, for example, describes 'disinterested' anthropological witnessing as a critical practice, 'a form of activism … ultimately in the interest of detachment and … independent voice' (2005: 45; see also Englund 2011). Conversely, Asale Angel-Ajani moves beyond a committed/detached binary, arguing that rather than authoritatively 'speaking, giving voice, reclaiming and reconstructing an event', anthropologists could learn to listen better, receive testimony, and 'assist in the witnessing process' – a commitment to 'critical reception [that] might just lead to ethical engagement' (2004: 142).

Ethnographies of witnessing and reflexive discussions of anthropological witnessing thus often grapple with similar concerns: what different ideals and modalities of witnessing exist; how truths are produced, articulated and evaluated; who/what gets recognized as a valid or reliable witness; how witnessing occurs across circuits of revelation and action; and how witnessing can transform the subjects and structures involved. By putting these disparate yet closely related fields of inquiry in dialogue, our collection seeks to generate a much-needed ethnographically, conceptually and ethically nuanced conversation about witnessing.

Truths, technologies and transformations

This special issue comprises six research articles, grounded in different geo-political and cultural contexts. These are linked by three analytics – truths, technologies and transformations – which, we argue, can undergird a distinctly anthropological approach to witnessing that attends as much to processes, relations and structures as to subject formation and testimony production. Importantly, we leave open the definition of witnessing and witnesses, allowing these to emerge out of our ethnographies and analyses rather than moulding them around a singular model. Here, witnessing variously features as an analytical category, a 'folk' concept embedded in or generative of specific socialities, imaginaries and politics – or a combination of both, or something in between.

The articles are complemented by two additional contributions. First, we feature curated excerpts from two virtual conversations between three scholars of witnessing – anthropologist, activist and writer Asale Angel-Ajani, cultural historian Carolyn Dean, and anthropologist and filmmaker Meg McLagan – who contemplate how witnessing has evolved, where to locate its politics, how to address its historical and cultural specificity, and what its 'dark sides' and limitations might be.

Second, we close with an afterword by Naisargi Dave, an anthropologist of queer and animal activism in India, who reflects on the possibilities posed by a synaesthetics of seeing.

Raffaella Fryer-Moreira opens the collection with her ethnography of the truth theories articulated by *midiativistas* – activists documenting police repression on the front line of protests in Brazil. She shows how *midiativistas* collectively produce avowedly partial and situated truths, in opposition to mainstream media's claims to disembodied 'objectivity', and considers how these prompt a reimagination of anthropology's own truth-claims and praxes. Anthropological knowledge-practices are also problematized by Valerie Hänsch, who discusses how her video camera was caught up in the efforts of forced displacement victims in Northern Sudan to draw global public attention to their predicament. Interestingly, these articles present contrasting views of anthropological witnessing via audio-visual media: whereas Fryer-Moreira's insights derive from her full immersion in the protests, Hänsch steps back to acknowledge her complicity in reproducing hegemonic norms of international 'crisis witnessing'. In this way, both lay bare and problematize anthropologists' entanglements with witnessing tropes and practices on the ground.

Implicit in Fryer-Moreira's and Hänsch's articles is the question of what collective and not just individual witnessing enables, entails or restricts. This is addressed most overtly in Rachel Douglas-Jones' exploration of the imaginaries, technologies and practices that make up the work of ethics committees – 'attestive groups' that, she argues, momentarily come together to make legitimate decisions and defensible statements. Eray Çaylı's article takes a longer view, examining the aesthetics of witnessing involved in the memorialization of a 1993 arson attack against a family of Turkish background in Germany. He develops a collective notion of 'architectural witnessing' that problematizes the idealization of 'citizen participation' in efforts to bear public witness to past atrocities. Both he and Douglas-Jones thus foreground the mechanisms and interactions through which collective witnessing occurs – an approach that, we argue below, can undergird a relational, processual understanding of the term.

Our final two articles focus on the transformative effects of witnessing as they play out over different interactions and timescales, with particular revelatory effects. Omri Grinberg explores how Israeli NGOs document Israel's violations of Palestinian rights by collecting testimonies in Palestinian witnesses' homes. He approaches these interactions through the mutually transformative dynamic of hospitality, treating testimony as an event in which the witness plays host to the documenter in the former's home, and the documenter plays host to the witness in the bureaucracy of human rights. Liana Chua's article explores how two unseen phenomena – orangutan extinction and Bidayuh spirits – are conjured through environmental visualizations and bodily states respectively. She suggests that these technologies of witnessing entail distinct temporalities and relational forms, the comparison of which raises reflexive questions about the practices, responsibilities and limits of anthropological witnessing.

Truths

As the Ford/Kavanaugh case powerfully demonstrated, the relations between truth and witnessing are anything but obvious. Here, we recall two major claims put forth by witnessing scholars. First, to testify – to *become* witness – is an event that is not necessarily about factuality, but which can still matter in terms of its historicity, that is, what it tells us about the past and its perduring inflictions (Felman and Laub 1992: 62). Second, a witness can and often does reveal the incommensurability of idioms and historiography, and hence of truth – particularly when witnessing speaks to (or is spoken as part of) radically uneven power relations (Lyotard 1988).

Rather than simply entail the revelation or recovery of *a* truth, witnessing thus contends with and/or produces specific *kind(s)* of truth: whether as veracity of experience (Scott 1991), forensic evidence established through specific technologies, observation and expertise (Herscher 2014; Keenan and Weizman 2012), or the synthesis of reason and sentiment that make up 'motivated truth' (Redfield 2006: 5). Witnessing's truths, in other words, are multiple and multiply constituted, not only through sight or in-person experience, but also via mediated encounters, incremental knowledge and analysis, and affective connections, among other things. These carry different weight and have different effects, depending on the socio-political contexts in which they exist. Our aim, then, is to highlight the structures, logics and relations that give rise to (or block) such truths, and that enable them to be claimed, appraised or ascribed by multiple parties. We are thus less concerned with *what* truths are invoked or produced in the witnessing process, and more with *how* they are generated, taken up and enacted – and how they may undergird or destabilize particular norms and structures.

This can be seen, for example, in Chua's article, which traces how the existence of a new orangutan species was established within scientific discourse, then progressively transformed into a global conservation problem bearing its own assumed certainties and demanding particular interventions. Fryer-Moreira's article, meanwhile, approaches truth as a contestable concept within a specific political context. Her ethnography reveals how *midiativistas* pit the trope of situated truth against the mainstream media's purportedly objective 'view from nowhere/no one'. In so doing, protestors establish a counter-hierarchy of truth*fulness*, privileging their diffuse capacities to bear witness through 'being there' over the media's supposed authority as detached witness.

Different regimes of witnessing are thus underpinned by different notions of truth, generating tensions when they collide. Such tensions, we argue, constitute an analytical opportunity, raising questions about where and how different actors and discourses locate the truth(s) of witnessing, how they conceive of such truths, and how these shift across temporal, spatial and scalar contexts. Hänsch's article, for example, examines how the truth-telling (eye/I-witnessing) affordances of the anthropologist's video camera were appropriated by her interlocutors to make their story resound with an international audience. The story's globally legible truthfulness, however, derived not only from its (assumed) indexical link to on-the-ground

truths, but also its appeal to a more capacious filmic genre of 'crisis witnessing', which bears its own markers of authenticity. Conversely, Grinberg's ethnography highlights how sites of testimonial text production can achieve their formal objectives in terms of the bureaucracy of human rights, while witnesses and documenters alike radically critique the political relevancy and ethical justification of testimony itself.

These examples pose an important question: what is the relation between truth and truthfulness? As the Ford/Kavanaugh case suggests, these do not always imply each other: truthfulness can be immanent in acts of witnessing regardless of whether they are moored to specific truths (factual or otherwise). At times, concerns over truthfulness can supplant other kinds of truths – referential, expert and so on – as happened when some of Ford's supporters drew on their own experiences of sexual assault to empathically attest to her credibility. To capture this complex and sometimes contradictory relation, we need to examine not only the content of truths, but also the technologies and processes through which truth and truthfulness are produced and evaluated.

Technologies

Comparing the intersections of media and witnessing after the Holocaust and during the events of 9/11, Frosh and Pinchevski note:

> Whereas in the former [the Holocaust], the ultimate, authoritative witnesses are generally understood to be those who were there, in the latter [9/11] we are haunted by the possibility that it is the distant television viewers – and not those at Ground Zero on the day – who were the event's true witnesses. (2009: 3)

9/11 thus marked the emergence of a new, 'radically inclusive' kind of media witnessing that 'interpellates its audiences as the ultimate witnesses' (2009: 9). This observation underscores a point of equal relevance to Holocaust testimony and more recent developments such as #MeToo: the fact that witnessing is inextricable from the technologies through which it occurs.

In this special issue, we take a broad view of 'technologies', defining them as the material, imaginative, structural and/or intersubjective mechanisms that enable witnessing. Technologies could include not only smartphones (Fryer-Moreira) and video cameras (Hänsch), but also bodies (Chua), architecture (Çaylı), rituals of narration, writing and hospitality (Grinberg), and bureaucratic processes and entities (Douglas-Jones). These nudge us beyond a restrictive view of witnessing as an individual or collective act of seeing, towards a more capacious acknowledgement of the different modalities of witnessing – sensory, affective, bureaucratic, ritual and so on – and their varied imbrications with truths and transformations. They also point to the agentive and causal variability of witnessing: to actively, deliberately bear witness (e.g. advocating, proselytizing) is quite different to inadvertently/passively witnessing something (e.g. a crime), for example, or bearing witness through one's

being (e.g. as damaged bodies or genocide survivors). More than querying who witnesses what, this processual, relational approach thus invites us to interrogate when, how, where and why witnessing occurs (or fails to).

The analytical purchase of thinking witnessing through its technologies is illustrated by Douglas-Jones, who asks: how do committees speak? Her article depicts the ethics review committee as a collective entity informed by a bureaucratic technology of witnessing that 'moralizes' the objective gaze by obscuring committee members' individual viewpoints. Ironically, this is enabled by a technology of secrecy, which allows committee discussions to take place freely, unwitnessed by outsiders. A different technology of witness formation is presented by Fryer-Moreira. She shows how, by extending the view of a faraway public and engulfing it within a viscerally affective encounter, *midiativistas*' individual, defiantly partial eyewitness accounts were drawn together via digital media into an assemblage that bore witness to state repression.

These articles fragment and reconfigure the notion of witnessing, prompting us to ask *where* witnessing happens (or doesn't), *how* witnesses are extended, fragmented or differentiated across space and time, *where* we locate the witnessing self – individual or collective – and its boundaries (see also Dave 2014; Redfield 2006), and *when* witnessing becomes impossible or reaches its limits (Chua, this issue). Such questions resonate with ongoing explorations of concepts such as 'vernacularization' (Gal et al. 2015; Merry 2006), 'publics' and 'counter-publics' (Hirschkind 2009; Warner 2010) and 'immediation' (Allen 2009; Mazzarella 2006). These reveal how truths are tensely negotiated through 'chain(s) of contributors', where different subjects acquire different witnessing roles that determine if and how testimonial texts travel across local and transnational contexts (Bishara 2013: 57; Giordano 2014). While giving anthropologists a toolbox for exploring the production and circulation of witness roles and practices, however, these studies rarely focus on witnessing itself. By taking witnessing as a thematic focus and analytical lens, our collection brings to these conversations a historically situated synthesis of technologies and moral, legal and political epistemics, examining how witnessing serves to convey or deny multiple truths.

Critically studying technologies of witnessing also means asking if and how witnessing can be divorced from specific subjects, such as eyewitnesses, experts and victims. By teasing apart witnesses and witnessing, we can apprehend the latter not as the privileged property of the former, but as a *capacity* – enabled by and manifested in different modalities – that can be diffused, acquired, extended, contested or blocked. Approaching witnessing as a contestable capacity, moreover, can lay bare its imbrication with power and politics. This becomes clear in Çaylı's ethnography, which thinks through contestations over the memorialization of an arson attack on a family of Turkish background to reveal the uneven, power-laden politics of citizenship in Germany.

These instances of distributed, aggregative and fragmented witnessing highlight witnessing's often unfinished, processual nature, and the ways in which witnesses and other subjects are continually made and un-made – not always of their own

accord. As we now suggest, attending to these processes also means unpacking and articulating the transformations that occur through, around and indeed *to* witnessing *in* anthropology and the worlds we live in and study.

Transformations

The capacity to witness is not innate or automatic, but often the outcome of one or more transformation(s). Witness personae may be 'proactively assumed' (Givoni 2014: 125) over time; alternatively, the burden of witnessing may be the sudden, rupturous outcome of 'one critical moment after which nothing can ever be the same' (Dave 2014: 434). Our special issue broadens this discussion by highlighting the *non*-inevitability of witnessing: the fact that being and becoming witness is contingent on varying contexts of the politics of truth/fulness and technological infrastructures.

This is suggested by Grinberg's ethnography, which considers the double transformation of narrator (witness/victim) and documenter (NGO/advocate) that occurs during the testimony event. But this transformation and the subject-positions it sustains are momentary – emergent in that event, and prone to disruption in and through its longer-lasting artefacts. Douglas-Jones' article highlights a parallel dynamic, whereby the members of an ethics committee momentarily transform into a collective witness whose judgements have transformative consequences. Through these cases, we can identify a bureaucratic form of testimony that may not effect political transformation (e.g. ending Israeli occupation), yet is central in framing the interactions that generate witnessing.

These ethnographies counter a marked tendency in influential studies of humanitarianism to take for granted the subsumption of the victim-witness by the humanitarian expert-witness (Dean 2017: 632–634). Instead, our collection shines a light on *how* witnesses testify, as well as *where* the transformations wrought by witnessing occur (if at all). In Bidayuhs' engagements with unseen beings, for example, transformations dwell *in the relations* between subjects rather than within the subjects themselves (Chua). Çaylı's article reveals how material transformations to public spaces and memorials instantiate different efforts to bear witness to or occlude past atrocities. In Hänsch's article, the transformation of one genre of witnessing (documentary eye-witnessing) into another ('crisis witnessing') is an aesthetic and politicized process that invokes different realities and audiences. And yet, as Meg McLagan's (virtual conversation) example of a former political prisoner's inability to become witness reminds us, such processes are often uneven and unpredictable, and can sometimes fail.

Anthropology is well placed to address such real-life complexities. Through its well-honed critical attentiveness to quotidian realities, localized concepts and practices, and hegemonic structures and epistemologies, the discipline can complicate what might otherwise be an abstract focus on the structures, ideals and imaginaries of witnessing. It can shed much-needed light on the often bumpy and unpredictable transformations – 'take-ups', failures and itineraries – involved in witnessing

processes, such as awkward negotiations over access to testimonial spaces and contestations over citizenship (Çaylı; Grinberg); enactments of counter-epistemologies of truth (Fryer-Moreira; Hänsch); and the obfuscating or silencing capacities of certain witnessing genres (Chua; Douglas-Jones). Importantly – as the virtual conversations also suggest – these tensions do not simply occur along cultural lines (e.g. 'Western' vs 'non-Western' witnessing), but cut across political, socio-economic, moral, epistemological and other boundaries.

Finally, our special issue explores one more transformative possibility: that of anthropologists and their practices. This theme is most directly addressed by Chua and Fryer-Moreira, who use their ethnographies to destabilize dominant disciplinary conventions of witnessing and truth production and management, and rethink the figure of the anthropological witness. Such a dialogue mandates constantly revisiting and reimagining what witnessing might mean – conceptually, theoretically, ethnographically, methodologically. Yet this is only possible if anthropologists remain open to the unexpected possibilities of such processes.

In this spirit, we might ask, for example: what ethnographic means can we deploy to produce a truth*ful* account of a situation containing many conflicting truths (Fryer-Moreira, Hänsch, this issue; Talebi 2019)? How can ethnographies of technologies, mechanisms and effects of witnessing inform anthropological conceptions of fieldwork and 'the field'? What might it mean for the anthropologist to witness *with* her interlocutors (Chua, this issue), not only in the flesh, but also remotely or at various removes (e.g. through live-streaming)? What are the transformative effects of anthropologists' witnessing acts and artefacts in/on the world (Çaylı, Fryer-Moreira, Grinberg, Hänsch, this issue) – and on anthropologists themselves? Such reflexive inquiries mandate an interrogation of anthropologists' own structural and political positions, our role in producing, assessing and contesting truth-claims, and our complicity (historical or current, deliberate or inadvertent) in sustaining hegemonic or counter-hegemonic projects of witnessing.

Conclusion

In closing, we return to two key questions: What can anthropology contribute to understandings of witnessing in the contemporary world, in which notions of truth, authority, culpability and agency are highly unsettled? And, relatedly, how might paying ethnographic and conceptual attention to witnessing inflect anthropology's own knowledge-practices?

Both questions, we suggest, can be productively addressed through an approach that foregrounds the structural, relational, material and performative dimensions of witnessing – that is, the diverse *technologies* through which *truths* are produced and negotiated, and the *transformations* that result. This approach looks beyond prevalent understandings of witnessing in terms of subjectivities and semantics, and beyond conventional sites of witnessing (e.g. courtrooms and archives), treating it instead as a multi-modal process as well as a site of and for ethnographic analysis and conceptual generation. Doing so enables us to parse the notion of wit-

nessing – to explore the multiple elements through which it occurs, interrogate the connections between them, and trace their effects in/on the world. It also invites us to unmoor witnessing from specific (usually human) witness-figures, and to explore alternative ways of articulating it – whether as a capacity, a relation, a technique or imaginary, a material form, a structural possibility or an accidental outcome.

Witnessing, we thus argue, is inescapably relational and processual: an ethnography of witnessing often consists of being an anthropological witness to others' witnessing tropes and practices. This potential mise-en-abyme highlights and problematizes the relations between seeing/being in the world, imagination, obligation, intervention and effect, as these play out over multiple forms and scales. Approaching witnessing in this way means both localizing witnessing and asking what makes it distinctive as a mobile, translatable form, and an analytic. At a time when witnessing and ideas about witnessing are being imbricated with both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces (Rae et al. 2018), challenging the opacity or apparent self-evidence of the term can itself be a critical anthropological intervention.

It is vital to remember, however, that anthropologists and other scholars are seldom removed from these forces and processes. We too are implicated in them – not as inherently noble witnesses, but as participants in relational networks and regimes that exceed our own understandings and truth-telling capacities. The witnessing dilemmas that anthropologists face – how involved or detached to be, how to deal with differential fieldwork privileges, how to witness for or with others – are thus not only analogous to those that we study, but can evolve symbiotically and contiguously with our interlocutors'. In a moment when anthropologists are seeking to 'decolonize' and rework the discipline from within, it is more urgent than ever that we both scrutinize and reimagine our own truth-claims, technologies and transformative efforts – and ask, whether alongside or with our interlocutors, what realities we produce when and as we witness.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1. https://edition.cnn.com/2018/09/26/politics/ford-testimony/index.html.
2. https://twitter.com/i/status/1045739827998732288.
3. http://time.com/5403523/trump-ford-tweet-sexual-assault/.

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