

# Book Reviews

## *Postcolonial Life Narratives: Testimonial Transactions*



Gillian Whitlock

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, pp. 242

Gillian Whitlock's new book, *Postcolonial Life Narratives: Testimonial Transactions*, is a remarkable contribution to burgeoning interdisciplinary work on narrative, human rights, refugees, and trauma. Written in crisp, lucid prose, Whitlock's work introduces readers to a full range of theoretical and archival approaches to postcolonial life-writing, tracking memoir, and testimony from the eighteenth to the twenty-first century. Whitlock begins in the eighteenth century because, as she and others have argued, the self as author of the individualist life narrative was an Enlightenment invention, inaugurated by the *Confessions* of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. But Whitlock sidelines Rousseau to focus instead upon the life narratives of Rousseau's less canonical contemporaries, Olaudah Equiano and Watkin Tench (both 1789), the former a freed slave who participated in the movement to abolish the slave trade and the latter a Marine officer best known for his first-hand account of the new penal settlement at Port Jackson, New South Wales. Whitlock portrays Equiano's and Tench's narratives as alternative starting points for conceptualizing the history of life-writing, emphasizing their seminal importance as texts that participate in what Lynn Hunt has characterized as the "invention of human rights" through literature. However, while the missions of Equiano's and Tench's narratives are similar—essentially, soliciting "benevolent witness" (22)—Whitlock is more interested in their critical differences. Indeed, the contrast Whitlock draws between the two narratives structures the ethical binary that defines Whitlock's study: namely, the difference between Tench's "detached" role as spectator of suffering (which she models upon the moral philosophy of Adam Smith) and the "anguished" spectatorship that Equiano invokes (which she models upon the aesthetics of Edmund Burke). As Whitlock explains, humanitarian narratives have for more than two centuries been haunted by these unstable borders between

compassion and voyeurism, between giving voice and taking voice.

In case studies ranging from biographies of Saartjie Baartman, known as the Hottentot Venus, to Dave Eggers's novelization of Achak Deng's testimony as a Lost Boy in *What Is the What*, Whitlock details the ethical double binds that beset rights writing. She explains, "Humanitarian storytelling has the power to create spectators of suffering who engage empathetically with terrible events. It generates compassion and benevolence, and elicits donor support. At the same time, it can be called to account for the part it plays in representing communities and people as inhabitants of a 'developing world,' and as subjects of 'distant suffering' offered for Western benevolence and spectatorship" (110).

Spanning the globe and the centuries, Whitlock discovers example after painful example of the way acts of rescue and care are converted into harm. Discussing the writings of journalist and anti-apartheid activist Antjie Krog, Whitlock explains that the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) worked to defend the integrity of survivor and cultural memory but also inflicted new forms of injury, particularly insofar as it pressured survivors to forgive in the name of national unity. As Whitlock demonstrates with the case of survivor Notrose Nobomvu Konile, who refused "to forgive and adopt the reconciliatory politics of the TRC" (90), the TRC quite literally erased testimony that was not easily assimilable into narratives of cultural healing. While the TRC's final report on its activities frequently described the therapeutic value of giving survivors a chance to tell their stories, many involved in the process insisted that it also reopened old wounds.

Discussing Sally Morgan's *My Place*, an autobiography of the Stolen Generations in Australia, Whitlock explains how attempts to memorialize trauma to indigenous children

created a discourse that ultimately reproduced it. She cites a 2007 report on the welfare of children in the Northern Territory, “Little Children Are Sacred,” which prompted forceful intervention and policing of indigenous communities. “The trope of the suffering child,” she writes, functioned “to legitimate intervention as well as reconciliation” and was readily appropriated into Australia’s neo-colonialist “campaigns to ‘manage’ indigeneity” (164). Discussing biographies of Dian Fossey alongside accounts of conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Whitlock exposes the historical failure of humanitarian campaigns to address rape and rape warfare: in the history of humanitarian work, some things have been speakable and others have not. Just so, in her concluding studies focusing upon refugee narratives, Whitlock uses the work of Edwidge Danticat and others to dramatize how the global infrastructure of human rights and humanitarianism has turned the refugee into a narratable identity only through restrictions and exclusions. “Asylum-seekers must master the codes and conventions of the acceptable narrative in the performance of their testimony,” she explains. “They are required to match their subjective life experiences to the objective parameters of asylum policy to

achieve credibility within the asylum determination procedure” (182).

As Whitlock emphasizes, the work of rights writing is the work of exposure. We shine a light on atrocities when they are happening to motivate international actors to intervene. We detail and record atrocities from the near past to aid the work of truth and reconciliation, and from the deeper past to defend the integrity of survivor and cultural memory. Silence, as it has been argued in genocide studies, is a kind of second death. But if trauma demands representation in this way, it also resists representation. It is difficult to tell stories of sensational atrocities without crossing the line into sensationalism. And if survivors of atrocity are injured by denial and silence, they are also injured by being turned into commodity artifacts for a global emotional market of human rights voyeurs. Whitlock’s new study is an important contribution to scholarly and activist work that seeks to guard against the harms that come from blindness to these moral risks.

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### *Refugees of the Revolution: Experiences of Palestinian Exile*



Diana Allan

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In 2002, anthropologist Diana Allan embarked upon a project to establish an archive of filmed testimonies of first-generation Palestinian refugees living in the Shatila refugee camp in Lebanon. However, during the recording of the stories another narrative emerged, which changed the course of her research and led to *Refugees of the Revolution: Experiences of Palestinian Exile*. Allan identified a stark discrepancy between the nationalist meta-narratives of belonging and return being produced in formal interviews for the archive, and the micro-narratives of daily struggle and resistance that emerged in casual, everyday exchanges. After three years in the camp, she arrived at her core assertion: that refugees in Shatila should not be seen primarily as living symbols of the Palestinian struggle, nor should their experiences be understood solely through the lens of national attachment. Rather, their identity is constituted daily through the local, material worlds they inhabit.

Allan’s phenomenological study contributes to the narrative turn in forced migration research, placing refugee narratives at its heart. By combining ethnographic observations

with quotations from informal interactions and formal narrative interviews, she reveals that daily life in the camp constitutes a struggle that is economic and existential, as well as political. The ten photographs included in the book, by Shatila photographer Hisham Ghuzlan, offer further insight into camp life through visual narrative. Allan brings the book to life with narrative extracts, which provide a window on poignant dramas unfolding daily in the camp. As a result, the fates of individual characters—such as businesswoman Fatima, who lives alone and wears short skirts in defiance of convention, or teacher Fatih, who leaves the camp to seek asylum in the United Kingdom and suffers the dehumanizing indignity of X-rays and fingerprinting at Heathrow—matter to the reader.

Rather than the meta-narratives of homeland, al Nakba, and the right of return that have emerged in previous research into Palestinian experience, the central chapters of this book focus on pragmatic responses to the challenges of camp life. These are the quotidian issues of immediate and pressing concern, what Ulrich Beck (1994) calls “sub