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“J’y étais”. On Continuing the Speaking of Testimonies from the Year 1892

Brigitta Kuster in Conversation with Stefan Nowotny

Brigitta Kuster

Translated by Aileen Derieg

Stefan Nowotny: *The question of testimony can hardly be regarded apart from the question of the relationship between authorized and non-authorized forms of the production, communication and the passing on of knowledge. Yet, political, social and also academic authorizations are not simply cemented and irrevocable “truths”, but are instead constituted specifically in distinction to the circulation of non-authorized modes of knowledge, speaking and narrative, which in turn sometimes condense into an objection, into a resistive speaking. In a text about the video “2006 – 1892 = 114 ans/jahre”[1], which you made together with Moise Merlin Mabouna, you refer to debates about* oralité, *which were conducted, not least of all, in conjunction with considerations on the possibility of a post-colonial historiography of the African continent that deviates from European history discourse. At the same time, the video deals with a testimony relating to Moise’s great-grandfather, a testimony*

that claims a living presence after 114 years, which reaches far beyond the lifetime of the witness through oral tradition. Which specific possibilities and which specific difficulties do you see in working with these kinds of testimonies?

Brigitta Kuster: In this specific case, it is perhaps not unimportant to start the story where news reached me of a possible testimony to events from the German colonial period in the late 19th century in present-day Camaroon. It reached me in the form of a memory that was carried along as baggage, so to speak, in a contemporary migration history. This was how it came about that the testimony to the murder of Moise Merlin Mabouna's great-grandfather was invoked, which you asked about. The testimony was there first, in a sense, and only shifted in time and in the process of deriving meaning and "truth" from it into a relationship to other forms of knowledge, such as those contained in a colonial archive. - Against this background, it seems to me that it is important to presume a case of dealing with testimony, where the testimony is not the means (that can be more or less suitable *for* something), but rather virtually the reason – and yet still seems to demand an investigation. The first verification by Moise and subsequently by me – in the sense of a listening, which first puts something into the status of testimony – was followed by a practice of deliberating and researching, a movement between possible suspicion on the one hand and trust on the other. – Does a testimony first become a testimony by being subjected to doubt in the confrontation with possible others? In the legal model, for instance, in a trial with living witnesses, these are frequently called upon to respond to something contradictory, and the more they are able to hold onto their original testimony in this trial, the more credible they are as a witness: there is apparently a question of the capability of a testimony to literally keep its word. And is this not the first point

where the capability of a testimony becomes manifest, the point of founding communality in the sense of consensuality – or better yet, agreement?

Most of all, though, there are numerous aspects that could be said to complicate the situation, under which words can be held. For instance, what are the requisite social, cultural, political practices that frame something as testimony, and how does this kind of framing participate in defining what a witness can refer to? The historian Marc Bloch, who became well known for his methodological considerations of the critical examination of witnesses and sources ("Le vrai historien doit détenir des qualités dont la première est la probité." / "A good historian must have certain qualities, the most important of which is integrity."), wrote both statements, "there is no reliable witness per se" and "there are only reliable or false witnesses", with only a small separation between them.[2] The gaze that he thus casts on the "witness with the best intentions" situates this witness in their momentary state as an observer, but also in that one can only properly see and hear what one was predisposed to perceive, as Bloch says.[3]

In our case, we naturally fell head over heels over the discipline of modern historiography and its constitutive entanglement with the colonial project (cf. for instance Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*[4], 1830/31, in which he denies the African continent all historicity, and which was directly referred to by the French President Sarkozy in his most recent "Address to the African Youth" on 26 July 2007 at the Université Cheikh Anta Diop in Dakar, where he made, among others, the incredible statement: "Le drame de l'Afrique, c'est que l'homme africain n'est pas assez entré dans l'histoire." / "The drama of Africa is that the African man has not sufficiently entered into history."). And in the same way, we fell over the various approaches since the 1950s and 1960s

to decolonize the history of "Africa". These also include the approaches that refer to the centrality of *oralité*, of oral tradition, and its various framings, specifications and handlings. One of the pioneers of this research, Jan Vansina, defined *oralité* as the ensemble of testimonies that are passed on orally from one generation to the next. – The call of the testimonies "j'y étais" / "I was there" echoes now in the framework of a form of knowledge and subjected to its – controversial – rules, which were authorized to a high degree to speak about what was past. And we have to answer a number of questions: Is it right to expose the testimony that we are starting from to doubt, based on the confrontation with files from the colonial archive – in other words possible other testimonies – and in this context to rely on it keeping its word? Or would it not be more appropriate, in light of the sources on this part of colonial history (which can be very different – and what has hardly been researched up to the present are the written Arabic sources, for example), to become representatives of this testimony, which has previously been regarded as insignificant by History with a capital H, as a pleader – The situation becomes even a bit more complicated, because today we also have to deal with post-colonial national historiography … But perhaps we can come back to that again later.

On the whole, I would say that we are fortunately not historians, and as cultural producers we can allow our gaze to wander eclectically through the landscapes of knowledge relationships between memory and history. Nevertheless, it must be conceded that the medium of video that we work with (the history of the assumption of the non-discussable reliability of the camera eye, in other words the recording paradigm of this technology), and the documentary tradition in which we move, are marked perhaps to an even greater or less questioned degree by exactly these modern

western epistemologies of truth, the linearity of chronological time and its evidence effects, in the sense that I have outlined for historiography. So if you ask me what I would hope for from the difficulties that go hand in hand with working with these kinds of testimonies, I would answer with Marc Bloch: it is a matter of letting the documents speak. At a very basic level, it is a matter of finding out (and at the same time finding out the mode of finding out, which is perhaps the most important point and can be formulated in reference to testimony as the framing of the articulations of doubting) which voice(s) this testimony raises – and this *after* its declaration has identified, sought or haunted us as listeners to this testimony, which seems to me to imply a kind of *promise*.

SN: *Since you mention the desire to let the documents speak, which was not coincidentally expressed by a historian: is this not exactly the point, which perhaps names a kind of intersection between testimony and document, where a certain break or at least a difference occurs, which makes the confrontation with testimonies a special challenge? In other words, doesn't Marc Bloch's statement articulate a desire to wrest an "event of speaking" from that which has always already been characterized through inscription in the logos ("logic") of some archive or another – or even an overlapping of archives –, an event that provides access to a different kind of presence, namely that of the "voice" or "voices", even if it is the voices of the dead? And conversely, isn't there always already in the act of witnessing a reliance that it might be possible to escape for a moment, perhaps not the archives as such, but certainly their implacability – which means finding listeners that do not immediately and not so much overwrite the testimony with the text of the archives, who suspend, in a way, the transformation of the testimony into a document? Consequently, the testimony would not necessarily be "genuine" (and perhaps not even "possible"), but it would be an*

investment in a different form of sociality than that which characterizes the sociality dominated by the archives, a sociality that always remains asymmetrical and asynchronous at the same time. On the other hand, though, it would remain inevitably exposed to various forms of overcoding, such as those you mention for the case of the national coding of post-colonial historiography – which poses the challenge to "listening" of simultaneously listening to and deconstructing the interference of this overcoding.

BK: I think that especially in the context of the "history of Africa"[5] there is a danger of appending to *oralité* the myth of being authentic to Africa and (pre-colonially) autarkic. It is not a matter of stories, of the remembering and forgetting of some event, but of the event of colonization, in other words a foundational event, the fixed idea of which is inscribed again and again in the knowledge order of a rigidified ethnocentricity. Nara, for instance, the protagonist in VY Mudimbe's novel *L'Écart*[6] (Paris 1979), who, consequent to his studies in Europe, wants to write the "real history of Africa" and refute the shameful lies of the Toubabs – including that of a "virgin Africa" without archives, which will find recognition from western sciences and offer them, as he says, a kind of free trade terrain – Nara notes that the field of knowledge which the norms of western science have accustomed him to, have granted him the right to demand something other than nice ornaments about civilizations that are allegedly grounded in oral tradition. In this sense, I think it would be just as inadvisable to posit a testimony like the one we start from overly hastily as a "different" form of knowledge or memory in difference to the archive and to the "document" (which can also be a testimony) – and thus to historiography, in other words overly hastily "in a separate challenge", as it would be inadvisable to continue to place it there without thinking.

For this reason, before I follow your thought, first I would like to stay with the establishment of sources: What you mention as intersection between testimony and document is what de Certeau, for instance, regards as a *spatial* operation. For de Certeau, history opens up what the present conceives as its own space. Marking a past means assigning the dead a place, but also reoccupying the space of the possible.[7] So first of all, I want to assume that every trace, every indication, every testimonial, every artifact can principally become a document. It seems to me there is nothing adhering to the testimony we listened to that would prohibit or make less worthy its entrance into the historical archive, for instance in contrast to a letter from a German officer that was received and read, just as there is consequently nothing that would stand in the way of the desire to make room for the life of this dead man in German/European (colonial) history.

With this operation, I want to emphasize less the contrast between (the seemingly non-mediatized) orality and textuality, but more the contrast between address and arbitrariness. A crucial point in the transfer of testimonies that address their narrative declaration into documents is probably that documents can be consulted by *anyone* doing *any kind of research*. In a footnote Ricœur refers to the definition of an archive that takes recourse to a state law, and which I find particularly illustrative in the context of an ensemble that surrenders itself to arbitrariness: according to a French law from 1979, the archive comprises the totality of all documents – regardless of their date, their form or their material constitution – that have been produced or received by any physical or moral person, by any public or private service or organization in the course of carrying out their activities.[8] The *space*, within which something is constituted as a document, is itself obviously neither arbitrary nor neutral, nor is it without history or memory.

Becoming the addressee of that testimony as a listener, which Moise Merlin Mabouna "brought along" possibly not even as a listener, which he therefore did not convey to me or even "share with me", but rather the confirmation of which constituted him as a witness himself through the chain of transmissions leading back to the eyewitnesses – in fact, all of this seems to raise a question of the *spatial* dimension of its resonance: the testimony does not testify to the memory of a family, nor to that of a region or that of nations. And yet, nor does it testify to their respective other, but to a dead man, who set out to poach in these spaces.

The other aspect that interests me here is that documents only then seem to begin speaking, when one meets them with a question, perhaps with a hypothesis. The document is not given, it is looked for, found, produced, consulted, constituted and instituted – the "archive" emerges (also as a place of what is not said or of what is said too much) through and in the consequently resultant difference. In contrast, the testimony must be *heard as a witness*. It is communication in the sense of an auto-referentiality performed for someone else. Including a listener in the narrative of a witness (most listeners will probably grasp their witnessing in the sense of a shared understanding), in which the What of a past event *returns*, so to speak, can certainly also fail. Specifically the contingency and the singularity of the referenced event are possibly what make not only the witness him or herself, but also their witnessing susceptible to errors or to the inability to "genuinely" be present at an event. – It seems to me that Ricœur mentions something similar when he speaks of the "sécurité langagière d'une société / the "linguistic certainty of a society", evoking the "loneliness of the historical witness": "Il est des témoins qui ne rencontrent jamais l'audience capable de les écouter et de les entendre." / "There are witnesses who never encounter an audience

capable of listening and perceiving them."[9] I refer to Ricœur because, starting from the aporia of the presence of one absent in memory, he pursues the aporia of historical representation, but at the same time insists on the happiness of recognition (of "reconnaissance", of the Ricœurian "little miracle of memory" or the "happy memory"), which would allow a witness to attest to the fact of an occurrence. In this way, he speaks against a kind of sociologization of historiography, which could obscure the ontological stakes of the witness. Perhaps the risk of the presence of voices about a past event could thus be thought as something stretched between three positions, first of all the text / narrative / rhetoric / imagination, secondly the enunciation of a fact, and thirdly the referrer, in other words the historian or indeed the witness, who is present at their own testimony with respect to someone else.

SN: *Ricœur's mention of the "loneliness of historical witnesses" is strongly reminiscent of Paul Celan's verse "No one testifies for the witness", which, among other things, has given rise to debates about "secondary", "tertiary" etc. testimony[10]. In this sense, my last question was less about the authenticity of the testimony or a non-mediatedness of* oralité *– although I think it is nevertheless important to explicitly reject the associations that occur all too quickly in this context – but rather about the specific sociality and thus the specific "mediatization" that is inscribed in the epistemic structure of testimony: from the side of the articulation of a testimony, this means addressing a listening other, whose presence remains uncertain. The meaning of the address, which you mention, seems to me to go in the same (or at least a similar) direction.*

At this point, however, I would like to come back to the position of "j'y étais" / "I was there", which you mentioned. If this statement is analysed specifically in terms of its enunciative character – which means as the act

of uttering a statement, which leaves its traces in the sentence that this enunciation produces – then it seems to me that it is almost saturated with subjective contextual markings: none of its elements can be lexically fixed, none can be reduced to a general meaning; instead, the sentence concatenates a singular instance of expression ("I") with a specific place ("there") and a specific temporality ("was"). It is as though the person who hears this sentence – as "secondary witness" – is posed with the task of a translation, which has to come to terms not only with the truth value, but also and no less with the "expression value", with the specific "presence" and inscription of a speaker in their statement, or – as Gayatri Spivak emphasized[11] – with the "rhetoricity of the original". I don't mean by this that the question of "truth" no longer has any place; but raising it would require specific procedures that do justice to what is singular and idiomatic, but also what is contextual about the statement and which are also aware at the same time that certain *idioms and contexts have been and are denied the capability of producing truth. Following Walter Benjamin, perhaps the task of translation is posed here, of which the criterion is not so much to render the "original", but rather to "continue its life"[12]. It is a translation, of which it would also have to be said, in one way or another, what Derrida said about the aforementioned poem by Paul Celan ("Aschenglorie"[13]): "Cet idiome est intraduisible, au fond, même si nous le traduisons." / "This idiom is, in principle, untranslatable, even if we translate it."[14] In any case, all of this only seems possible under the condition of a clear* situating *of the translation instance itself – and this necessity of situating would apply in this specific case equally to Moise Merlin Mabouna and to you. How do you see the status of the "j'y étais" and the possibilities of its translation?*

BK: To the first part of your question: yes! – I certainly didn't want to impute simply an invocation of *authenticity* or *non-mediatedness* to the perspective you have taken, but first of all really

to just hang out my thoughts to dry a bit … My problem with your question was somehow that it seemed to claim an abstract speaking too quickly in the simultaneity of a rejection *and* consciousness of a de-personalizing/dis-identifying universal – a *vocality beyond the epistemology of genuine and untrue, etc.*? – Isn't a whole architecture of response to alterity, so to speak, already constructed in this kind of abstract assertion?

In fact, I wanted to do a little epistemology myself, but without – well, what? – perhaps without explaining its basis (without thinking I am able to explain it or presuming to have explained it), and yet also without abandoning the unruliness of *possible* histories embodied in space-time … – because what is played out here is what I find most difficult in the tangible, the physical, the not-*knowing*-of-the-here-and-now-and-yet-*believing*-to-be-in-it … In this sense, I thought I could attempt to operate by minimizing the constructed opposition between "témoignage" and "document" (whereby these terms are much closer in French, also in terms of the linguistic use) and somehow attempting to grant a place to an epistemological paradox, from which the deployment, the potentiality of an incursion into an established order of knowledge, which additionally also marks my place in writing, could take place through a witness speaking in the text *here* – as "good fortune" (and it is interesting that I first "forget" specifically Moise Merlin Mabouna or my relationship to Moise as a relationship to a negotiated *something*, or do not include this in writing, not wanting to manage it, and at the same time perhaps even stop listening, and that I have subsequently written it into my last response to you – it seems to me this mode is symptomatic) or as a lacuna that is itself in its marking ability articulated/written as a *banality* or as *nonsense* (I will come back to that at the end).

I think it is both a central and an extremely sensitive point to say that it is not simply a matter of the "source value" of a testimony (if I may in this way "re-translate", so to speak, for myself what you mention with its "truth value", because I would like to try to keep tapping my finger on this confused, conflictual determination of a place of "truth" / "promise" ...). Undertaking this reduction would weaken exactly what makes up its potentiality as an incursion into epistemology! I would like to think about the "*continued life*", or what you invoke as "expression value", as "specific presence", by asking what kind of mode of *time* the immediate Now could be. In the differentiating naming of *y* – there (in other words, not here) – and *étais* – was (not am) – the rhetoric of testimony probably marks a claim to immediate evidence as body-I in the perception through an (its) other: in light of the fact that I am here, was there ... – But when *is* that, to which the confirmation of this evidence can *then* attempt to refer in the translating speaking or the desiring continuing writing of the listener in the sense of using the means of this other? In the tradition of "history", which deals with the past, the field of the present is generally assigned to politics and the future left up to the gods. So one could say that the idea of immediacy, which interlocks past, present and future, is completely left out of this division of labor. In historical epistemology, the temporality of the immediate Now is such a minimal, such a transient place that it is considered never to be glimpsed and always immediately vanishes as soon as it starts. Following Augustine ("If no one asks me, I know what it is. If I wish to explain it to him who asks me, I do not know."[15]), its presence could be thought of as eternity or as *forgetting* ... – or, more cautiously, initially as the moment in which the three elements of temporality are retained, but implode: the memory of past things (presence of the past), looking, observing, questioning (presence of the present in practices), waiting or anticipation (presence of the future). Where

all of this *is* simultaneously would be a mode of the temporal beyond continuities and ordered and ordering sequences between past, present and future. If this *is*, then it falls out of time – or confuses time: perhaps this can be designated as that which was *not* the future and as that which will *not* have been past? The elements of the temporal, on the other hand, which could be triggered in "j'y étais" as this immediacy, I presume are specifically different for Moise Merlin Mabouna and me, for instance. We do not share the same memories and orders that situate us in the presence in reference to the past; observing, we pass through different things and do not necessarily wait for the other's waiting. And yet – as I want to ask – was there / is there / will there be some moment facing this "j'y étais", in which these our time elements can meet?

I think, my wish is to reconstruct this *something* as *something potential* from these kinds of elements of temporality that are differently and diversely connected in each of us. Could it be that – perhaps different again from a kind of strategy of "translating" (and thus in a sense "actualizing") truth-speaking, which seems to me to play a role in your ideas and which particularly the "awareness taking into account" that you mention can never divest itself of – the attempt to *repeat* the *statement value* that is never secured lets the "j'y étais" happen, by and because of living on in differentiation in space and time, as what is perhaps too familiar, yet permanently elusive? At this point, it might be possible to follow the track that Ricœur laid through what he called the split field of hermeneutics by adding a hermeneutics of trust to the tendency of a hermeneutics of suspicion, which he characterized, not coincidentally, with hearing. In a letter from Taizé in 2000, he refers to this distinction in thinking about liturgy. He describes the liturgy – "the law of prayer" – as a process, in which "protesting" turns into "attesting" (whereby both terms contain the Latin word

testis, witness, as Ricœur emphasizes), into a "yes to yes", as he says, that passes by the road of "foi" (faith/trust)[16].

When we work specifically with a storage medium capable of depiction, which owes much of its attraction to the phantasm, the gap between the real-time of an event and its indexical trace as/in a document could be overcome, and as this is interwoven with a history of desire following the pattern of something like a spectacle of the real, we attempt to draw upon the moment of tension that it deploys vis-à-vis the narrative, which conventionally develops a temporal distance between the narrator in the now and the narrated in the past. Something similar applies to montage, in other words the sudden moments of aleatoric but evident connection, which are always past as soon as they are seen … – Because we not only start from a non-continuum between viewers and "reality", but also from a non-continuum between our respective elements of temporality as authors/speakers/filmmakers and try to count on something like a "media agency", which allows that which exists to happen *between* things, persons and signs. With the help of the notion of a multiple "authorship", perhaps in this way it might also be possible to use the overdetermination of the force of perspectivization of a medium like video: so that, in fact, not only the narrative, which aims at the truth of facts, but also the truth of the narrative itself is at stake – in other words, the simple fact of telling – in which the spatial/temporal in-between could be included in multiple ways, as well as synchronicity and diachrony as not necessarily opposites.

I think it is not unimportant to note at this point that we neither consider nor strive for the possibility of a "collective memory" of colonialism between "Europe" and "Africa" (and that, in addition, following the voice of the witnesses who set out from Balamba[17], we seek to traverse the respective "collective memories"

represented, for instance, by national archives). This is an aspect that brings me to a closing reference to what Homi Bhabha calls "colonial nonsense" and the potential of which, in my view, a necessarily "idiomatic" mis-speaking/promise [*Ver-sprechen*] with respect to a testimony also has to centrally take into account in our case. Bhabha speaks of the endless translation and textualization as truth of the cultures of "indigènes", which live on, as untranslatable parts – as follies, as he says – and through being ambivalently incorporated in colonial archives, in institutionalized expressions of the "discursive form of paranoia", which "emerges from culture's own structured demand for imitation and identification. It is the archaic survival of the 'text' of culture, that is the demand and desire of its translations [...]."[18] Using the example of what happens to Adela from E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* in the Marabar caves ("the beckoning of India to the conquerors: '[...] *Come!* … *But come to what?* She has never defined. She is not a promise, only an appeal.'"[19]), he describes cultural difference as a "momentous, if momentary, extinction of the recognizable object of culture in the disturbed artifice of its signification, at the edge of experience"[20], its articulated opening between cultural memory and colonial desire – as colonial nonsense, as the described sound of an eerie echo "O-u-bo-um".

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[1] Cf. Brigitta Kuster, "Note d'intention" zu „2006 – 1892 = 114 ans/jahre", video loop, 7 min., Brigitta Kuster & Moise Merlin Mabouna, 2006; at: http://translate.eipcp.net/strands/03/kuster-strands01de

[2] Marc Bloch, *Apologie der Geschichtswissenschaft oder Der Beruf des Historikers*, Stuttgart 1980/2000, p. 114.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte (Werke*, Vol. 12), Frankfurt/M. 1986. [Engl.: http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/hi/hiconten.htm]

[5] Cf. for instance, *L'histoire générale de l'Afrique*, with its eight volumes a monumental work published by the UNESCO. The first volume, *Méthodologie et préhistoire africaine*, is devoted solely to the sources and materials that have served the construction of the history of Africa. This volume was published in 1980 in French, 1981 in English and Japanese, 1982 in Arabic, Portuguese and Spanish, 1984 in Chinese, and 1987 in Italian.

[6] *Écart* means roughly "distance", "deviation", "scope", "disadvantage", "affair".

[7] Michel de Certeau, *L'écriture de l'histoire*, Paris 1975, p. 26.

[8] Paul Ricœur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, Paris 2000, p. 212.

[9] Ibid., p. 208.

[10] Cf. for instance: Ulrich Baer (Ed.), "*Niemand zeugt für den Zeugen" – Erinnerungskultur nach der Shoah*, Frankfurt/M. 2000.

[11] Cf. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "The Politics of Translation", in: *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, New York/London 1993, p. 179–200.

[12] Cf. Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator", in: *Illuminations*, Pimlico 1999, pp. 70-82, especially p. 72.

[13] In: Paul Celan, *Gesammelte Werke,* Vol. II, Frankfurt/M. 1986, p. 72.

[14] Jacques Derrida, *Poétique et politique du témoignage*, Paris 2005, p. 12.

[15] Augustine: Confessions, newly translated and edited by Albert C. Outler, Ph.D., D.D.: http://www.ccel.org/ccel/augustine/confessions.xiv.html

[16] "Liberating the Core of Goodness": http://www.taize.fr/en_article102.html

[17] Location of the testimony of the eyewitnesses to the events in Camaroon.

[18] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London and New York 1994, p. 138.

[19] Ibid., p. 124.

[20] Ibid., p. 126.