

PREFACE

There is a fundamental difference between words spoken into a microphone and those shared off-stage, such as across a kitchen table. Microphones imply an audience, a judgmental futurity. We say that words are “captured,” suggesting their imprisonment in the medium. They may be “played,” listened to at a later time, but once spoken there is no going back. There is something performative about any recorded testimony, something pre-redacted, with deference toward listeners, present or imagined.

Kitchen tables are something else altogether. They are the quintessential site of intimacy. In the absence of a public, one can reveal more of oneself, without the sense that what one says will be subjected to judgment. There is a greater indulgence toward time, more room for silences, moments for reflection. There is also a sense that whomever one is talking to can be somehow included in a social world. There is an “ingroupness” to kitchen conversations. Whether or not complete trust is there, some security can be found in the absence of direct accountability. Even if one’s words are later reported, there may be no direct attribution to the speaker. Experienced interviewers know to be ready, pen in hand, when the recording function is turned off. When this happens, the interviewee will relax and be more forthright. “What I really meant to say was . . .,” and the secrets and discomfiting opinions unfold. The combination of intimacy and unaccountability produces greater honesty – maybe not a complete absence of performance, but a greater correspondence with convictions. Long meandering conversations, replete with pauses and breaks, also create opportunities for self-reflection and to share stories that show multiple sides of an important moment. At a microphone, the gaze is rarely inward.

There is something else that each of us noticed during our fieldwork as we moved between microphones and kitchen tables: The relative absence of binary thinking in the kitchen and its erection and patrol before microphones, in formal spaces. The recorded statement seemed to

produce stories in which the characters formed into stereotypes, pure victims, evil perpetrators, spotless heroes; but told from behind the rising steam of a warm cup of coffee the categories broke down. Victims also caused harm. Perpetrators were motivated in ways we could understand. Heroes had their impure motives, their dark sides. And the boundaries shifted. Corruption and falls from grace made storylines more complex and, dare we say it, more interesting for their complexity.

Ron followed a pathway that went from a truth commission through digital justice campaigns to digital witnessing and archiving platforms. His starting point in a truth commission – published in *Truth and Indignation: Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission on Indian Residential Schools* (Niezen, 2017) – made clear the blind spots of “victim centrism” through truth telling in the absence of close attention to perpetrators; or rather, in the absence of their visibility, other than in what was said *about* them. In this Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), sexual abuse became the dominant testimonial subject matter, taking hold of the audience’s emotions and capturing their sympathetic attentions in ways that abstract claims about treaty rights and sovereignty could never do. In the process, the commission elaborated simplified, stereotypical qualities of victim and perpetrator. The public statements that Survivors (with a capital “S”) offered in the Commissioner’s Sharing Circles were overwhelmingly about the worst conceivable experiences of abuse, focusing on the sexual sadism and cruelty perpetrated in “total” institutions with unchecked control over children. But with a mandate that explicitly and intentionally gave it no judicial authority, including no powers to compel testimony, the commission learned little about the motivations of perpetrators. It heard neither from the priests, brothers, and nuns who ran the schools (who boycotted the commission events *en masse*), nor from ordinary representatives of the government of Canada, the ultimate implementers and overseers of a cruel policy of forced assimilation. With sympathetic attention focused on the Survivors, and with indignation concentrated toward the clergy, the state escaped the spotlight.

Ron’s work took a different turn when he turned his attention more fully to the digital campaigning and outreach made possible by new information technologies (ITs). The work of Syrian Archive, described in Chapter 9 included here, involves an entirely different kind of witnessing, one that relies more heavily on digital recording and forensics than public statements.

Sarah’s study of the French National Railways’ (SNCF) overlapping roles in World War II and its post-war journey to make amends, brought

her into the homes of dozens of Holocaust survivors. These ninety interviews with survivors revealed complex feelings about the trains and many remaining questions about their pasts. Informal interviews with historians, archivists, lobbyists, legislators, lawyers, SNCF executives, Jewish leaders, and others revealed more complexity than she heard during legislative hearings, in media reports, and in press releases. She mapped the discursive landscape in *Last Train to Auschwitz: The French National Railways and the Journey to Accountability* (Federman, 2021), recounting the history and atonement efforts while noting the differing reactions to these events.

Yet she was haunted throughout her research by a recurrent question of “why trains” and “why French trains?” Of all the individuals and groups who have (and continue) to cause harm, how did this French railroad conflict keep making the news? France was not an instigator of World War II or an enthusiastic supporter of the Nazi regime. The train company participated in the murder of 75,000 but what about the millions of others? She began exploring how publics respond to various victim and perpetrator groups. Certain groups have more traction.

When Harvard University’s Weatherhead Center invited Ron as a visiting professor and requested that he organize a workshop, Sarah swept in. This workshop enabled her to invite scholars studying complex actors in mass atrocity and examining public response to these parties. In April 2019, the Victims and Perpetrators in the Aftermath of Mass Atrocity workshop met over several days. Together, we considered the ways in which discourses about violence frame how we understand, story, and then respond to mass atrocity. All the papers included in this volume (with the exception of Samantha Lakin’s, which we solicited later) were first presented at this workshop. What emerged from this meeting was a surprising thematic unity, centered on the unintended consequences of binary responses to mass atrocity. Our colleagues, coming at the topic from different places and routes of exploration, found significance in the stories told about violence and their related perpetrators, victims, heroes, and bystanders. We wish to thank them for engaging in what is sometimes an uncomfortable inquiry.

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to thank the reviewers and editors at Cambridge University Press who saw this as an important and unique contribution to the study of mass harm.

Collectively we and our contributors wish to thank those hundreds of individuals with whom we met during our respective fieldwork. We met with them at their kitchen tables and in various other informal settings, while also listening whenever they offered official testimony. In these settings, they shared with us some of the most painful moments, not only of their own lives, but for humanity more generally. Their openness helps us better understand our greatest failings as a species. Some revealed sorrows and lingering confusion about moments many had not spoken of in decades, if they had spoken of them at all. Their trust in us as listeners allows us to carry some of the weight of what they suffered while we seek ways to prevent its reoccurrence.

References

- Federman, S. *Last Train to Auschwitz: The French National Railways and the Journey to Accountability*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2021.
- Niezen, R. *Truth and Indignation: Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission on Indian Residential Schools*. Toronto, Ontario: University of Toronto Press, 2017.