

# The signature of the disaster: Witness-ness in death camp and tsunami survivor testimony

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**Abstract:** The prominence of witness testimony in a range of contemporary political events is reflected in interdisciplinary efforts to theorize the act and genre of witnessing. Notably, this literature has framed the occurrence of errors, contradictions and other instances of ‘problematic’ speech in testimony as attesting to the traumatic quality of disastrous events. In this paper we extend this line of reasoning by recasting the fundamental quality or ‘witness-ness’ of disaster survivor testimony outside a logic of representational

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correspondence. Instead, drawing on the philosophy of Maurice Blanchot, we suggest that the disorienting features of testimony can be interpreted as the disruptive influence or inscription of the disaster itself upon the recollections of survivors; a certain 'writing of the disaster'. Furthermore, we suggest that different disasters disrupt the testimonies of its survivors in unique ways, thus imprinting a signature that betrays the material and psychological character of the event. The 'witness-ness' of survivor testimony is therefore argued to dwell not in its representational accuracy, but in the distinctive, signature ways that it disorients the search for a coherent accounting of the disaster. We explore this proposition first in relation to Nazi death camp survivor testimony, before exploring this approach in the very different testimonial context of the 2011 tsunami in Tohoku, Japan. In the wake of these readings, we argue that the concept of the signature has potential not only for broadening the repertoire of testimonies admissible in the study of disaster, but also for investigating the societal impacts and 'countersignatures' of disasters more generally.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Witnessing has returned to prominence, from survivor testimonies of #MeToo (Gilmore, 2019) and digital witnessing of racialized police violence (Richardson, 2020) to social media testimony of asylum seekers held in spaces of exception (Rae et al., 2018), critical witnessing of COVID-19 (Browne et al., 2020), and the ‘geological self-witnessing’ of the so-called Anthropocene (Yusoff, 2016, p. 5). Meanwhile, an interdisciplinary body of literature has theorized the complexities of the act and genre of witnessing (e.g. Givoni, 2016; Pollin-Galay, 2018; Trezise, 2014), which belie the seemingly straightforward representational logic of bringing something absent back to presence: as if witnessing were no more than memory retrieval. The inadequacy of conceptualizing witnessing through a representational framework has been laid bare by longstanding interdisciplinary efforts to engage with the testimony of those who have undergone traumatic experiences, particularly Holocaust survivors (LaCapra, 2014). The realization that their narratives are beset by an epistemological paradox – wherein the physical and emotional proximity of witnesses to appalling violence and suffering simultaneously grants them a unique authority to bear witness but also compromises their ability to recall and convey events in a clear and coherent way – has led witnessing theorists to understand ‘testimony as bearing a vexed and sometimes tenuous relationship with the events it tries to tell’ (Bernard-Donals, 2000, p. 566).

Advances in witnessing theory have been incorporated into geographical literature in two main ways. First, over the past two decades geographers have drawn on a vocabulary of witnessing to articulate nonrepresentational approaches to geographical research, largely prompted by Dewsbury (2003). Here, the double-bind of bearing witness (Agamben, 1999), where it is the singular truthfulness of an experience that exposes the limits of representation (Anderson, 2019; Carter-White, 2012), has provided a means of discussing research into affective (McCormack, 2003; Wilson, 2016), performative (Patchett, 2016; Somdahl-Sands, 2011), and more-than-human (Bell et al., 2018; Lorimer, 2010) geographies. Second, and more recently, a growing body of geographical research has acknowledged the fraught nature of *bearing* witness by theorizing specific acts of witness testimony as entailing more than the passive and untroubled reportage of past events, through concepts such as ‘active witnessing’ (Gill and Hynes, 2021), ‘embodied witnessing’ (Senanayake, 2020), and ‘witness talk’ (Parr and Stevenson, 2015). Particularly noteworthy within this literature is a concerted effort to transpose instances of testimonial ‘failure’ into a positive register, as both an indexical trace of the extreme experiences undergone by the witness and an ‘incitement’, in Rose’s (2016) terms, to investigate the material places and conditions that gave rise to them (Carter-White, 2016, 2018, 2021; Harrison, 2007, 2010, 2015; Pratt, 2009; outside of geography: Felman and Laub, 1992; Rothberg, 2000). Here as elsewhere, failure often speaks volumes by letting slip what would otherwise remain concealed, betraying its truth in the process (Derrida, 2002). Heeding such disclosures is therefore as much an epistemological imperative as an ethical responsibility.

In this paper we draw these strands of geographical witnessing together by developing a specifically nonrepresentational approach to the witness testimony of disaster survivors. Both the necessity and the means of developing this approach can be understood in relation to Harvey’s (2010) philosophical analysis of the fundamental quality of witnessing: what he terms ‘witness-ness’. In common with recent geographical insights into the relational, dispersed, and thus, in a certain sense, unexceptional nature of trauma (Bondi, 2013; Coddington and Miceili-Voutsinas, 2017), Harvey (2010) cautions against an individualizing, subject-centred perspective that emphasizes ‘exceptional’ witnesses to atrocity. His argument centres on a mystery borne by the word ‘witness’ itself: what capacity, what ‘-ness’, is designated by the ‘wit-’ in question? ‘Wit’ can refer to the sharpness of mind needed to provide reliable testimony, or the canniness that enables one to survive and testify to an event that has claimed the lives and the wits of others. ‘Wit-ness’ would then denote an exceptional

*excess and overflowing* of wit, a certain ‘wit-full-ness’ that ‘wit-less’ folk evidently lack. Levi’s (2004) *The Drowned and the Saved* might be re-read with this distinction in mind. Yet the antagonistic casting of the ‘witful’ and the ‘witless’ cannot account for the hollowing out of consciousness – the ‘witlessness’ (Harvey, 2010, p. 96) – that enables one to put oneself in the place of another – including one’s past or future selves (Derrida, 2000) – and not so much speak in their stead as allow them to speak through you. Harvey explores ‘witnessness’ through an examination of ‘numbskulls’ (Harvey, 2010, p. 90) in the oeuvre of Samuel Beckett, and in so doing establishes the *absence* of ‘wit’ as integral to the very possibility of testimony. Witnessness is thereby distanced from the celebration of exceptional individuals whose superior qualities enable them to bear full and accurate witness, and shifts towards an innate and irreducible ‘-ness’ common to the imaginative (in)capacity of all humanity that discloses itself most profoundly – and perhaps most eloquently – when words fail.

Inspired by Harvey’s analysis this paper seeks to advance geography’s contribution to witnessing theory by developing a framework for heeding and interpreting disaster testimony that breaks from any concern with the representational veracity of individual accounts, and instead locates the ‘witness-ness’ of testimony in the performative, relational, and material dimensions that have become prominent in geography’s burgeoning imaginary of witnessing. If the valorization of ‘witlessness’ within Harvey’s conceptualization gestures towards a certain *democratization* of witnessing (which, incidentally, may extend into the realm of the nonhuman: e.g. Weizman et al., 2014), we seek to build on this promise by offering a theory of witnessing wherein *every* act of testimony, no matter how traumatized, erroneous, dubious, mistaken, faulty, or in Harvey’s terms ‘wit-less’, provides insight into the material unfolding of disaster. Our aim is thus to provide a specific conceptual framework for the ongoing effort, within and beyond geography, to broaden the repertoire of testimonies deemed admissible in the study of disaster (Keenan and Weizman, 2012). We proceed in three steps. In section 2, we develop this theory of witnessing via the concept of *signature*. Through an engagement with the philosophy of Blanchot on the one hand, and diverse literatures related to disaster on the other, we claim that not only do individual disasters profoundly impact and ‘inscribe’ themselves upon landscapes, populations, and societies in unique, *signature* ways; but that these signature inscriptions are imprinted on the memories, consciousness, and recollections of survivors, and are made legible through instances of error, disruption or disorientation in testimony, instances of testimonial failure that can therefore be read symptomatically (i.e. as manifest evidence of latent trauma). In this framework, the witness-ness of testimony is thus

firmly located not in the representational success or expressive skill of individual survivors with acute wits, but in the ‘witless’ iteration of disastrous signatures: those inscribed in the text, those inscribed upon the world, and how the former ‘incites’ or ‘solicits’ us to search for the latter. This twofold speculation is then explored in two very different contexts: the written testimonies of Nazi death camp survivors (section 3); and the oral testimonies of survivors of the 11 March 2011 – hereafter ‘3.11’ (Maly and Yamazaki, 2021) – earthquake and tsunami in Tohoku, Japan (section 4). In each case a signature disorienting dynamic is identified in testimony before investigating whether an iteration of this signature can be discerned in the material unfolding of the disaster itself. The paper concludes by reflecting on the implications of this analysis, both for spatially sensitive theories of witness testimony and for the wider study of an age regarded as increasingly disaster-prone and catastrophic.

## 2 DISASTROUS SIGNATURES

The concept of the signature may seem an incongruous choice for theorizing disaster testimony outside of a representational register given its obvious association with writing and thus, implicitly, representation. We arrive at this position by way of Blanchot’s reflections on the radical otherness (alterity) of disaster and Derrida’s (1988, 2004) deconstruction of the signature. In his genre-defying *The Writing of the Disaster* (1995), Blanchot characterizes ‘disaster’ as an experience of profound existential disorientation, as revealed in its etymology: the loss (*dis*) of a guiding star (*astro*). The ‘writing’ that Blanchot attributes to disaster is to be understood not in a representational register (a play of *mirrors* and correspondence) but in the Derridean sense of a material inscription or impression upon a surface (a play of *forces* and transformation); and specifically an inscription that does not produce a meaningful composition, but on the contrary interrupts the sense of the world, disastrously, leaving de-composition in its wake. Accordingly, Blanchot (1995, p. 7) claims that ‘the disaster de-scribes’ – every disaster leaves a unique mark upon the flesh of the world (landscapes, populations, psyches, etc.), but this mark is one of subtraction, excision, and *de*-description. The disaster writes chaos upon the face of the Earth, leaving those left in its wake to navigate by way of a dis-astrous constellation of black holes and fallen stars. The disaster is a Malevichean canvas of black on black.

Instances of Blanchot’s disastrous de-descriptions can be identified in various extant literatures on disaster. ‘The writing of the disaster’ might be discerned, for example, in the transformative capacities of disasters, particularly how they ‘make visible and rupture the

material, institutional and political structures that configure reality and normality' (Dickinson, 2018, p. 624; Cretney, 2017). These disorientations reveal discriminatory socio-political structures while creating opportunities for new arrangements (Cloke and Conradson, 2018). In so doing the disaster inflicts subtractive inscriptions upon socio-technical landscapes: de-scribing the existing order of things before the traces of disaster are themselves de-scribed through processes of reconstruction and renewal (Doel, 2019). Alternatively, the disorienting inscriptions of disaster can be identified in the academic literature on trauma, whereby the overwhelming experience of disaster is partially withheld from the conscious knowledge of those who live through it. In such cases, disasters are 'known' and 'felt' through their damaging inscriptions on the minds and bodies of witnesses, in the form of hallucinations, flashbacks, and other symptoms that appear to the survivor unbidden (Felman and Laub, 1992; Caruth, 2016). Evident in both of these cases is a specific form of (disastrous) writing; one that, without representational content, functions purely as a marker of the disaster's absent presence. In short, the disaster testifies to itself through the disruptions it inflicts.

The inherently *testamentary* dynamics of this conceptualization of disaster provides an opportunity to rethink the witnessness of disaster testimony. Rather than prioritizing the representational 'success' of individual witnesses we might ask instead how instances of disruption, disorientation or error in testimonial accounts betray the authorship of the disaster itself and its inexhaustibly de-descriptive force. However, in order to apply this philosophical idea in the study of actual disasters a level of specificity is required in how we conceive the 'writing' of the disaster, and this is where the concept of the *signature* is crucial. In common with the examples of disastrous de-descriptions above, signatures function less as a representation than a marker and guarantee of the signer's 'having-been present in a past *now* or present which will remain a future *now* or present' (Derrida, 1988, p. 20, original emphasis). The barely legible 'X' of an illiterate hand is sufficient to mark that spot. A signature is a promise; a promise to the future; a promise to attest that the signer was once present in a particular (con)text. What makes the idea of a signature apt for our analysis is that it is a type of writing that is *uniquely* bound to an event and a context (Derrida, 1988). Revealingly, the notion of a disastrous 'signature' already has currency in the field of disaster risk reduction: Shultz and Neria (2013, p. 4) employ this term in their 'Trauma Signature Analysis' in order to convey the 'novel pattern of traumatizing hazards, loss and change' that disasters imprint on a population's psyche (see Hamburger (2021) for an overview of multi-

disciplinary perspectives on social trauma). Specifically, Shultz and Neria (2012, 2013) suggest that each disaster impresses a unique pattern of traumatic ‘stressors’ upon affected populations, such that the ‘signatures’ of, say, the Haitian earthquake (2010), Hurricane Sandy (2012), West African Ebola outbreak (2014) or COVID-19 (2020) are inscribed on people’s psyche through the idiosyncratic characteristics of their respective hazard profiles. Once again, the notion of a disorienting inscription – a de-scription – is employed to convey the enduring impact of disaster, but now in conjunction with the proposition that such inscriptions are *singular*, expressing the uniqueness of each disaster.

While Shultz and Neria’s approach demonstrates the relevance of signatures for understanding disasters, theirs remains a limited engagement with the complexity of the ‘signature’ concept. *Uniqueness* is only one of its aspects. *Repeatability* and *iterability* are equally important, and they have a bearing on the *performative* and *promissory* functions of signatures. Signatures, after all, only exist to be removed and exiled from their original contexts, and repeated and reissued again and again (they are promised to the future); indeed, these marks only function as signatures by way of repetition and recitation (an unreproducible signature would not be a signature), often at a distance from but in conformity with a specimen signature that serves as a simulacrum and prototype for serial reproduction (Deleuze, 1990; Derrida, 1988). It is the paradoxical association of the signature with *both* singularity *and* repeatability that we argue has significant implications for disaster testimony. It has already been established in the literature on witnessing that survivor testimony tends to include a certain ‘writing of the disaster’, in the form of errors, contradictions, slips, and absences that ought to be read not as evidence of the inadequacy or unreliability of the witness but as the legible impact of the disaster itself upon the capacity of the survivor to bear witness (carry and convey), and to bear with witnessing (endure and suffer) (Derrida, 2005). Consequently, it is through the ‘failure’ to communicate that the disaster as a force of traumatic disorientation ‘writes’ (inscribes and de-scribes) and expresses itself (LaCapra, 2014; Roseman, 1999). The speculation that drives this paper is to ask whether this reasoning might be productively extended by apprehending such ‘writing’ as a *signature* – that is, as an iteration of the unique worldly impact inscribed by the specific disaster in question. We thus propose a framework for engaging with disaster testimony that looks not to the representational content of the survivor’s recollections, but rather to those instances of disorientation that throw the reader into doubt, and how those instances might have come into being as an iteration of the singular im/material disorientations inflicted by the disaster. This



would constitute an approach to witness-ness that not only accepts but actively depends upon the tendency of testimony to generate doubt, and works by reading backwards from these moments of doubt to identify the signature features of the disaster that they bear and betray.

In the next section the possibility that survivor testimonies are inscribed with a disorienting signature of the disaster that is independent of the ‘wit’ of the witness is explored in relation to Nazi camp testimony. This case is selected because there is an established literature that calls attention to both the disorienting dynamics of a delimited ‘canonic’ set of camp-survivor testimonies and the unique features of the historical event. It is therefore ideal for an initial exploration of whether testimonial de-scriptions iterate the signature characteristics of the material disaster itself.

### 3 THE SIGNATURE OF THE CAMP

Today, at this very moment as I sit writing at a table, I myself am not convinced that these things really happened. (Levi, 2005, p. 109)

This section offers an initial exploration of our approach with respect to the witness testimony of survivors of Nazi camps and historiographical debates on the ‘uniqueness’ of the Holocaust and its camp system. Within the vast literature on these camps there exists a canon of survivor testimonies that has shaped public understanding and generated considerable academic commentary (Markle et al., 1992; Rosen and Apfelbaum, 2002; Vice, 2005). The disproportionate focus on this canon has been the subject of critique (Kushner, 2006), but for our purposes the testimonies of Jean Améry, Charlotte Delbo, Primo Levi, and Elie Wiesel provide an appropriately limited set for analysis. In addition, the fact that these testimonies have been collectively celebrated as exemplary works of witnessing – the epitome of the *wit*-ness – makes any instances of witlessness therein all the more striking and noteworthy.

One reason why this canon attained such prominence is that, using very different styles of composition and storytelling, each testimony provides lucid descriptions not only of the process of dehumanization and mass murder for which the camps are infamous, but also the diverse spaces and specific ethical dilemmas that underpinned the daily experiences of long-term camp prisoners. The Auschwitz of Delbo’s recollections, for example, is a landscape of marshes, streams, and icy plains, in contrast to its well-documented geometric military

spatialities (Charlesworth, 2004; Gutman and Berenbaum, 1994), while Améry pinpoints the distinctive intellectual torture of the camp's irrational logics and absurd routines (Giaccaria and Minca, 2011; Sofsky, 1997). By offering a geographical imagination that exceeds the murder apparatus of the camps, combined with narratives and ethical and philosophical reflections that place their extraordinary experiences in a recognizably human context, these witnesses strive to make the camp universe relatable to audiences for whom the word 'Auschwitz' evokes an entirely otherworldly evil. Levi's (2005) analysis of the ethical compromises necessary for survival in the camps is exemplary since it provides profound insight into the insidious power dynamics of the camps whilst reminding readers of the range of human responses to dehumanizing violence. Indeed, it is significant that the canonic witnesses named above survived the camps with minimal ethical compromise, in contrast to less celebrated survivor-witnesses (e.g. Steinberg, 1999).

Their diverse storytelling styles notwithstanding, the witnesses named above have become collectively renowned as reliable and insightful guides to the Nazi camp universe. Yet they also share a distinctive tendency towards de-description; specifically, a tendency for 'the addressor [to tell] you, and often ... with somewhat alarming frankness, that they cannot tell you what they are about to tell you, or having just told you of their experiences, that the account you have just been given is deficient and that, in fact, they have not told you anything yet' (Harrison, 2010, p. 162). In his analysis of the genre of testimony within the context of non-representational geographies, Harrison gathers several instances of these celebrated witnesses undermining their own testimony:

For example, Wiesel writes that he 'knew that he must bear witness', however 'while I had many things to say, I did not have the words to say them. Painfully aware of my limitations, I watched as language became an obstacle' ... . Or, when Levi writes; 'our way of being cold requires a new word. We say 'hunger', we say 'tiredness', 'fear', 'pain', we say 'winter' and they are different things' ... . Or, when Delbo writes ... ; '*Today, I am not sure that what I wrote is true. I am certain that it is truthful.*' (Harrison, 2010, p. 162, original emphasis)

While Harrison suggests these self-contradictions are 'constitutive of testimony as such' (Harrison, 2010, p. 162), we wish to ascertain whether the distinctive disorientation they share reveals something specific about the particular disaster they survived. The peculiar de-

scription in Holocaust testimony is the witness's act of putting witnessing under erasure, and we suggest this paradoxical act reflects the distinctive ideological and material qualities of the camp system itself.

A central and distinctive feature of the Nazi camp system is the implementation of a murder apparatus of *total erasure* (Katz, 2020). The literature articulates this in terms of the *comprehensive scope* of the intended genocide of European Jews, and the *totality of process* implemented in the camps' methods of killing (Berenbaum, 1981). The preeminent historian of the Holocaust, Raul Hilberg, stresses the historical precedents that informed the Nazi genocide, yet states that '[t]he destruction of the European Jews between 1933 and 1945 appears to us now as an unprecedented event in history. Indeed, in its dimensions and total configuration, nothing like it had ever happened before' (Hilberg, 2003, p. 5). It was partly due to the scale of the planned genocide that the camp system was deemed necessary: although face-to-face murder by mobile killing units (*Einsatzgruppen*) killed over 1.4 million people (Hilberg, 2003), the death-camp system was considered a 'final solution' to both the inefficiencies of decentralized killing and the emotional toll experienced by those undertaking close-quarter mass murder (Arad, 1999). The extermination camps (Auschwitz-Birkenau, Belzec, Chelmno, Majdanek, Sobibor, and Treblinka) murdered approximately 3 million Jews, and, as Wachsmann writes, the most advanced camp, Auschwitz-Birkenau, enabled the Nazi regime to 'systematically kill Jews from all across the continent, deported to their deaths from Hungary, Poland, France, the Netherlands, Greece, Czechoslovakia, Belgium, Germany, Austria, Croatia, Italy, and Norway' (Wachsmann, 2015, p. 291). It was while being transported within the wider camp system that individuals were exposed to the scale of the Nazi's genocidal ambition, due to the extended duration, and lethally crowded conditions, of train journeys to the camps (Browning, 2001; Gigliotti, 2009).

It was in the death camps – and particularly in Auschwitz-Birkenau – that totality of scale met with totality of process (Gutman and Berenbaum, 1994; Wachsmann, 2015). The camp regime entailed not just the murder of its victims but their systematic demolition (Doel, 2017), in a manner that enabled annihilation through lethal labour, the industrial murder of staggering numbers of people, and an ostensibly 'perpetrator-less' and, crucially, 'witness-less' form of killing (Lyotard, 1990). Upon arrival, people were divided into those to be immediately killed and those to be worked to death. The former were shorn of their belongings, hair, and clothing, murdered in gas chambers, and incinerated in crematoria.

Those reserved for extermination through labour (Doel, 2017) were, for the most part (allowing for many social variations, see Carter-White and Minca, 2020), reduced to ‘living skeletons’ (Sofsky, 1997, p. 25) by brutal work, squalid barracks, and starvation diets (Fleischmann et al., 2013), and repeatedly subjected to ‘selections’ overseen by SS doctors that ‘determine[d] who would live and who would die. ... The inmate who survived the first selection lived in constant fear of future selections’ (Berenbaum, 1993, p. 127).

The extensive process of prisoners being systematically demolished and reduced to ash enabled the partial removal of the perpetrators from the scene of killing (Bauman, 1989). The technical and spatial division of labour among the perpetrators – from managing arrivals and conducting roll calls to selecting people for gassing or lethal labour – ensured that no individual perpetrator was involved in the entire process of killing, with responsibility instead dispersed across a system designed to rest on the labour and energies of its victims. Wherever possible, the operation of the machinery of genocide was delegated to prisoners (Wolf, 2007), including overseeing work groups, preparing those selected for gassing, and looting and burning corpses (Levi, 2004). Additional techniques used by the camp SS to avoid implicating themselves in the killing included sealing off the gas-chamber area and its prisoner-functionaries from the general prisoner population and developing innocuous-sounding euphemisms (such as ‘selection’ and ‘special treatment’). Integral and distinctive to the camp system was not only killing the targeted groups, but also, by removing the perpetrators, witnesses, and language, to *kill the killing itself* and thereby accomplish ‘the perfect crime’ (Baudrillard, 1996; Derrida, 2014). ‘Such [was] the break-point time-space of the Final Solution: it will never have been’ (Clarke et al., 1996, p. 480).

If Auschwitz-Birkenau constituted a model of mass murder from which both perpetrators and witnesses were largely removed, it depended upon a biopolitical transformation of those consumed by the camp complex and its forty-plus sub-camps. The violent erasure of individuals’ belongings, clothes, hair, and names, the division of the prisoner body into hierarchical ethnic, social, and work groups, the punishment of minor or non-existent infractions of the unfathomable morass of camp rules, and the brutal management of prisoners’ mobility and biology, all amounted to a ‘regime of terror’ designed to reduce individuals to a state of utter isolation, deprivation, and demolition (Sofsky, 1997). The only reprieve from this terroristic assault was acquiescence with the system of forced and competitive labour. This was a ‘choiceless choice’ (Langer, 1991, p. 26) deliberately imposed

on prisoners by way of the ‘horrorism’ (Cavarero, 2011) of the camp to ensure the functioning of its desired ‘perpetrator-less’ system. The total erasure that distinguishes the Holocaust within the wider historical geography of genocide rested on the destruction of language, community, and identity: it was this transformation in prisoner subjectivity that enabled the camp to render its crimes, in a sense, witnessless:

The Nazi system turned out therefore to be foolproof, not only in the sense that there were in theory no witnesses but also in the sense that it convinced its victims, the potential witnesses from the inside, that what was affirmed about their ‘otherness’ and their inhumanity was correct and that their experiences were no longer communicable even to themselves. (Felman and Laub, 1992, p. 82)

The *total* erasure planned by the Nazi regime incorporated a totality of scope which in turn, with the institution of the extermination camp, required a totality of process. This process rested on the destruction of the prisoners’ capacity to relate their experiences to others; hence the recurrent nightmare of many survivors that their accounts would be neither heard nor understood nor believed (Levi, 2005). If a defining feature of the camps was the destruction of the victims’ capacity to communicate, it is telling that survivor testimonies disrupt themselves through a gesture of self-erasure. Indeed, this micro-logical instance of testimonial de-scription encapsulates the core dynamic of the Nazi camps. They were designed to enact a form of murder that would erase itself – a forced self-annihilation – and the signature of this disaster is legible in those jarring instances of self-negation that give pause when reading the accounts of survivors. The specific nature of the Holocaust as a disaster is inscribed upon these testimonies due to the precise way in which they are described. They are signed with the form of destruction characteristic of the event.

The Holocaust appears to support our theoretical proposition that survivor testimonies are marked with a distinctive form of disorientation that iterates the signature features of the specific disaster in question. However, it also highlights an objection that might be levelled at an approach to testimony that searches for insight in instances of confusion or error on the part of witnesses. Given the fraught politics of memory and representation that often accompany disastrous events – exemplified, in this case, by Holocaust denial (Lipstadt, 1994) – the question arises as to whether our valorization of ‘witlessness’ effectively disqualifies critical readings of survivor testimony that defend historical records and established truths

from defective, deficient, deceptive or even malicious witnessing and false testimony (Vice, 2014). The question of deceptive speech is a deeply complex one, which turns on the *intention* to betray (sic) the truth at *someone else's expense*; a harmful act of ill-will that may exploit veracity, doubt, and reason no less than errors, falsehoods, and lies (Derrida, 2002; Wiese, 2014). Nonetheless, for the purposes of this paper it is important to clarify that we do not aim to diminish or problematize methodological approaches to disaster testimony that focus upon verifiable facts, and indeed our analysis of the camp system of mass murder depends upon them. However, we also insist on the value of traumatized testimonies irrespective of whether they measure up to the standard of historical evidence – a transvaluation that concerns the *saying* (performative utterance) as much as the *said* (constative utterance) – and so what we aim to develop is a supplementary framework that can derive insight from those instances of witlessness that might be marginalized, neglected or even dismissed by an inflexible criterion of representation (Eaglestone, 2002; Lyotard, 1990). Importantly, such a transvaluation does not negate the capacity of fact-driven approaches to identify the signs of deceptive or malicious witnesses bearing false testimony, at least along the axis of what is said (Carter-White, 2009; Derrida, 2002).

Having advanced and illustrated the logic of our proposed conceptualization of disaster testimony, the next section further examines the utility of this approach by considering a disaster that is very different in terms of its characteristics, historical context, and mode of bearing witness: the tsunami that struck north-east Japan in March 2011, and which precipitated the infamous Fukushima nuclear meltdown.

#### 4 THE SIGNATURE OF THE TSUNAMI

All the chaos within me, in the days following 3.11, could be written chaotically.  
(Furukawa, 2011, p. 29)

The previous section drew on canonic Holocaust testimonies. No such canon yet exists for the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disasters that struck Tohoku, Japan, in March 2011, and so we focus on oral testimonies translated into English held in an online archive curated by the Japanese news broadcaster NHK, and several television documentaries composed of eyewitness footage and testimonies. This material is undoubtedly fragmented, heterogeneous, and partial, given the many production processes that will have shaped it. However, the important question for this paper is not the character of the corpus per se, but whether a

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signature disorientation – one that is different to that identified in Nazi camp testimony – is both discernible within tsunami survivor testimonies and reiterated in academic accounts of the disaster. We pose three questions: whether the testimony of tsunami survivors reiterates the tendency towards self-effacement identified in Holocaust testimony; whether it bears its own distinctive signature of the disaster; and what insights the disorientations of tsunami testimony might provide for the signature features of the tsunami disaster itself.

#### 4.1 Self-erasure in tsunami testimony

To substantiate our proposition that survivor testimonies are inscribed with the unique signatures of their respective disasters, a key question is whether this deformation is uniform or varies between disasters. If the accounts of disaster survivors *generally* tend to express their own impossibility, then the signature iterations drawn in the previous section between the character of the Holocaust and the de-scriptions of its survivors may be merely poetic coincidence. Yet it is noticeable that 3.11 testimonies neither dwell on their own impossibility nor exhibit the urgency to be believed that is redolent of Holocaust testimony.

There are several explanations for why 3.11 survivors might not feel the same compulsion as camp survivors to place their own testimony under erasure. One is the extensive witnessing of the tsunami. Whereas only four photographs of gas chamber killing emerged from the Nazi camps (Didi-Huberman, 2008), the tsunami was witnessed around the world through online and television coverage. Additionally, the visceral bodily witnessing of the earthquake and tsunami, which were widely felt across Japan, leads to another possible explanation: while these disasters' *magnitudes* were extraordinary (9.0–9.1  $M_w$  earthquake, and up to 40.5 metre and 700 km/h tsunami), their *occurrence* in Japan was not. By contrast, the Nazi camp was a space of exception (Agamben, 1998), irreconcilable with everyday existence, including the grotesque everyday life of the ghettos (Michman, 2014). Finally, the 3.11 disaster lacked the kind of genocidal agency that sought to make testimony impossible, and that thereby made it all the more urgent and difficult to bear. Consequently, the worldwide witnessing of the 3.11 triple disaster, the long-standing embedment of earthquakes and tsunami within the fabric of Japanese life, and the absence of a malevolent agent seeking to suppress knowledge of the disaster mitigated against casting testimony as an urgent imperative in the face of incredulity and disavowal. Although ostensibly 'impossible' (Lochbaum, Lyman, and Stranahan, 2014), the disaster *itself* was not unfathomable in the way that the Nazi's 'Final Solution' of their deranged 'Jewish Question' was intended to be. It is therefore necessary to look elsewhere in

the 3.11 testimony for any telltale signs of disorientation and deformation, and thus potentially for a *signature of the 3.11 disaster* that is legible and distinct from that in/described upon other disaster testimonies; a signature that can aid in understanding the unfolding of this particular disaster, irrespective of the representational strengths and weaknesses of individual witness accounts.

#### **4.2 The signature of the tsunami: Decisiveness without decision**

Testimonies in the NHK archive and television documentaries cover the entire timeline of the tsunami, including experiences of the initial earthquake and subsequent anticipation of a tsunami; recollections of the tsunami's impending arrival; evasive actions as the tsunami struck, whether individual or collective; and the aftermath of the disaster. Witnesses include children, elderly people, commuters, workers, teachers, and local government officials. Their testimonies offer a range of narratives, including those describing the witness's own survival and stories of assisting others, often in vain.

A common feature of these testimonies is a tendency to isolate a single decision that had a central and determining impact upon the witness's survival: what might be called a 'decisive decision' that binds the future to a certain outcome (for a philosophical survey of futurity with respect to decision-making, see Lampert, 2018). Jinichi Sasaki, for example, is a government official of Minamisanriku city in Miyagi Prefecture, which was struck by a 15-metre tsunami (NHK, 2017). His testimony is framed as an improbable story of survival, with the video title focusing on how Sasaki's survival was secured by clinging to a fallen telephone line; the decisive moment, however, occurs when he recounts his car being caught by the tsunami and he decided to exit the vehicle rather than stay inside. This decision enabled him to find safety via the telephone line. Similarly, Yuko Tanno in Yuriage village, Miyagi Prefecture, was in a two-story community centre when the earthquake struck (NHK, 2017). Afterwards she was urged along with other parents to move to a four-story school five-minutes' walk away, but because she was with her young daughter and did not believe the tsunami could reach as far inland as the community centre she decided to stay. The tsunami only reached the second story and Tanno and her daughter survived, but her son was among those who died en route to the school. And a single decision was again decisive in the case of Captain Koichi Nakamura, a member of the coastguard off the coast of Hakodate fishing port in Hokkaido (Bradburn, 2011). Nakamura decided to sail out to meet the tsunami directly rather than return to port and risk being wrecked upon the shore, and this decision



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resulted in his ship passing over the ten-metre tsunami without incident. Over and over again, the testimonies boil their recollections down to one decision that with hindsight became their guiding star: whether to keep driving or abandon the car; whether to go left or turn right; whether to stay put or risk moving to higher ground. This pattern is encapsulated by firefighter Yuichi Owada of Rikuzentakata, Iwate Prefecture, reflecting on his reaction to seeing the approaching tsunami shortly after closing the city's seawall gate: 'If I got on the truck 20 seconds later, I don't think I'd be here today' (Nicholson, 2011, unpaginated).

Decisions, therefore, loom large in these testimonies, with a seemingly straightforward causal relationship between wise decision-making and survival. This relationship, which binds the future with certainty and finality, is most tellingly encapsulated in eyewitness commentary on the (in)actions of others, for instance in amateur footage of the 30 seconds that it took Kesenuma Port, Miyagi Prefecture, to be completely submerged. As the tsunami overwhelmed the port's defences, a witness commented from an elevated position on the individuals below as they remained seemingly unconcerned in the face of impending disaster: 'Why did they wait so long to run? How foolish. What are they doing? Why don't they run faster? ... Run! ... What foolish idiots' (Nicholson, 2011, unpaginated). This testimony, which equates decision-making with survival, echoes Harvey's (2010) etymological exploration of 'wit-ness'. The *witness* is endowed with a certain quick-wittedness or instinctive knowhow, a capacity to keep one's wits, and by so doing live to tell the tale of outwitting the disaster. In this reading, the apparent 'witlessness' of those 'idiots' who failed to run even as the disaster approached contrasts with the 'witfulness' of the coastguard who decided to head for the tsunami to avoid being shipwrecked on the shore. As such, while an emphasis upon a single decisive decision may constitute a common feature across the 3.11 testimonies, it seemingly betrays neither disorientation nor de-scription of the kind evident in camp testimony. Indeed, it would seem logical that tsunami survivors would be adept decision-makers, employing their wits and preparedness training to bind themselves to a favourable fate. Yet the emphasis in these testimonies on acts of decisiveness gives pause for thought, because while the identification of a single decision may function as an effective narrative device, the informational contents relayed therein tend toward *passivity* and *arbitrariness* rather than the calculation and determination of actions according to a desired outcome that would amount to a *decision*. This inconsistency opens onto broader debates about the very (im)possibility of a 'decision', given that any decision requires a degree of undecidability, incalculability, and indetermination without which the outcome would be

programmed in advance rather than decided (Derrida, 1988; Hill, 2010). It is only with the benefit of hindsight that the accomplished fate is retrospectively recast as a *fait accompli*. But even this reverse engineering is ruined in advance, since the place from where one would finally look back on one's accomplishments is itself always on the move and still yet to come.

Indecision is not the negative pole belonging to a simple binary opposition. ... On the contrary, ... it names at one and the same time the possibility and necessity of making critical decisions *and* the impossibility of finally ever having done with those decisions. Indecision, in other words, is both the condition and the limit of any decision whatsoever. (Hill, 2010, p. 334, original emphasis)

The recollections of Yu Muroga exemplify the decisive (in)decision of tsunami testimony. Muroga was driving on a commercial street in Tagajo City, Miyagi Prefecture, when the cars in front of him started to reverse:

I looked in my rear-view mirror and saw an even larger wave than the one in front of me. I didn't know what to do ... . People were running out of their cars. It was incredibly quick. It probably took only ten or 20 seconds from the moment when the water hit my car to the car getting washed away. I decided just to sit inside and wait. (Nicholson, 2011, unpaginated)

Muroga ultimately survived because his car was washed away to safety, in contrast to Jinichi Sasaki, who survived because he exited his car. The decision to *sit still and wait* was decisive, but based on Muroga's testimony this was not a decision deriving from any kind of wit, calculation, or expectation of a specific positive outcome, so much as the arbitrary product of an impossible situation; an acquiescence to passivity in the face of one huge wave approaching from the front and an even bigger one from behind. The decision could have proved deadly (Murakami et al., 2012), but *it happened* to save Muroga's life; just as Yuko Tanno's decision to remain in the two-story community centre would have been deadly if the water had risen slightly higher, but it spared her from the fate of those who possessed the apparent wit-ness to assume the worst and seek higher ground.

The de-scription in tsunami testimonies constituted by this recurrent emphasis on decisive decision-making suggests that rather than pinpointing the specific moment when the witfulness of the survivor revealed itself, these instances attest instead to the fundamental witlessness of rational decision-making when faced with disaster: decisions and actions that proved life-saving for some were a death sentence for others. The (over)emphasis on decisions in these accounts reveals that there ‘is’ no decision in the lived present of the tsunami, only actions that, in retrospect, *came to have been decisive*. In Harvey’s terms, there ‘is’ no wit in the present tense of these recollections, only an ‘after-wit’ that betrays the witlessness of the witness to disaster; and it is the insistence on isolating the life-saving decisiveness of a single decision that serves to highlight the essential emptiness of decision-making amidst the chaos of the tsunami. The de-scription characteristic of tsunami testimony is summarized in an oft-quoted line from Blanchot: ‘*I don’t know, but I have the feeling that I’m going to have known*’ (Blanchot, 1992, p. 112, original emphasis). Since many tsunami witnesses were radically dispossessed of their capacity to make a decision during the time of the disaster, decision-making now haunts their testimony. The signature of the tsunami is therefore a sense of *decisiveness without decision*, of actions presented as decisive but which were guided not by calculation or wit but by passivity and impossibility – truly dis-astrous decision-making.

In the previous section we argued that de-scriptions characteristic of camp testimonies iterated the historical character and material unfolding of the Nazi genocide. The next subsection investigates how the signature of the tsunami – an emphasis on singular decisions that ultimately evokes the radical passivity of the witness’s survival – might iterate the historical character and material unfolding of the tsunami.

### **4.3 Witnessing the tsunami**

There are two fundamental characteristics of the 3.11 tsunami that are attested to by the signature de-scriptions in survivor testimony identified in the previous subsection: the temporal dynamics that are inherent to the tsunami; and the boundaries between safe and unsafe locations in the face of disaster.

Tsunami have a distinctive temporality consisting of a period of quietude in between the catalyzing earthquake and the subsequent arrival of tsunami waves. The period of quietude is

a vital time for action, and residents in Japan are trained to respond to it through consciousness-raising evacuation drills (Aldrich and Sawada, 2015) and unconscious exposure to concealed technologies of preparedness such as networks of sensors and alarms (Sayre, 2011). Murakami et al.'s (2012) study of pre-tsunami evacuation during the 3.11 disaster outlines the vital decisions that people faced during the time between the earthquake and the tsunami, including deciding which signs of an impending disaster to act upon (including a quaking earth; a major tsunami warning; unusual sights and sounds); whether and when to evacuate; and the means of evacuation (vehicle, bicycle, on foot, etc.). It therefore appears inherent to tsunami as a category of disaster that survivors would reflect on their decision-making, because integral to this disaster is a demarcated period of uncertainty and anxiety during which individuals develop a heightened consciousness of the need to take action, with potentially life-changing consequences, even if that action is to remain in situ and do nothing. This consciousness would likely be even more acute in the case of the 3.11 tsunami, given the extensive efforts towards earthquake and tsunami preparation and resilience in Japan.

In turn, one reason why there is a plethora of eyewitness footage of this disaster is that, even considering the exceptional magnitude of the tsunami, the Tohoku landscape was extensively marked by clearly defined boundaries between safe and unsafe locations, meaning that those who reached safety could witness and reflect upon the decisions of others still in danger. Typically, safe locations are determined by height. In Japanese Disaster Management terminology they are divided into natural high-ground areas (e.g. hills and mountains), purpose-built 'tsunami shelters', and tall buildings that serve as 'evacuation buildings' (Shibayama et al., 2013, p. 371). It is again arguably specific to the tsunami as a disaster, and to disaster preparedness in Japan, that individuals could evacuate to sites of almost guaranteed safety while remaining sufficiently proximate to the disaster to contemplate the decision-making of those still at risk and dwell upon the absurd proportions of the situation that they were embroiled in, as cars and houses swept past them like toys in a drain, thus potentially causing decisions that may have led to their own safety to weigh even more heavily on their minds.

These two characteristics create a highly demarcated space-time of pressurized and self-conscious decision-making. Its distinctiveness can again be highlighted in comparison with the experiences of Nazi camp prisoners. Although strategic thinking and wit were essential

for survival in the camps, as exemplified in Levi's (2005) testimony, the horrific conditions precluded any delimited periods of watchfulness and self-conscious decision-making, because turmoil and arbitrariness were existential states. Similarly, while there were significant socio-spatial variations within and between camps, it was rarely, if ever, the case that a prisoner could dwell upon camp violence from a position of safety; even prisoners who had attained seniority in the camp hierarchy could still succumb to violence (Wolf, 2007), and there was no equivalent of tsunami shelters and evacuation buildings to allow proximate-yet-safe witnessing. It is therefore consistent with the socio-spatial unfolding of the respective disasters that camp testimony does not linger on instances of decision-making like tsunami testimony does. Each bears the signature of its own unique disaster.

The signature of the tsunami that de-scribes survivor testimony bears witness not only to the past unfolding of the disaster, but also to its ongoing existential aftershocks. In the wake of 3.11, questions of decision-making and decisiveness continue to resound. From feelings of guilt and helplessness among survivors (Kotani et al., 2013), especially for not having decided *well enough* to save others, to the tragedy of Okawa Junior High School, the subject of a highly publicized legal battle over the government's decision-making frameworks and actions that resulted in the deaths of 74 children and ten teachers (Parry, 2017), the collective trauma of post-3.11 Tohoku once again reiterates the signature visible in those disorienting instances of survivor testimony. Perhaps the most disquieting of these instances are the 440 newly built seawalls snaking along the coast of Iwate, Miyagi, and Fukushima Prefectures: 394.2 km of concrete, rising in places to 12.5 metres in height (Metanle et al., 2019). The immense presence of the Tohoku seawalls serves as a monument both to the scale of the tsunami and the absurd task of seeking to outwit and outpace the disaster; that which, by definition, exceeds every attempt to manage and control it. But it is also a gigantic iteration of that same signature that is legible at the micro-scale of eyewitness testimonies. In one sense, the seawalls constitute a dramatic performance of decisiveness, a hugely expensive and spectacular intervention that casts a literal and psychological shadow over local residents' lives and livelihoods (Aldrich, 2017; Uehara and Yan, 2017). But this show of decisiveness also betrays the profound undecidability of the effectiveness of the seawalls in the event of future tsunami: their towering presence may lead to complacency and a reluctance to evacuate (Koshimura and Shuto, 2015). Thus, whether these barriers will succeed in protecting coastal communities or merely instill a false sense of security – an ever-

more dizzying *indecisiveness* that will exacerbate their vulnerability – their onerous presence and indeterminate outcome reiterate the signature of the tsunami on a staggering scale.

## 5 CONCLUSION: COUNTERSIGNING THE DISASTER

[T]he writing-of-disaster ... destines writing for disaster and disaster for writing.

(Derrida, 2000, p. 51)

In his discussion of the fraught relationship of Holocaust testimony with conventional notions of truth-telling, Bernard-Donals advances a model of truth that would depend on ‘the discourse’s ability to move an audience to ‘see’ an issue or an event that exceeds language’s ability to narrate it’ (Bernard-Donals, 2000, p. 566). The motivation for this paper was to develop a specific way of responding to disaster testimony in precisely these terms. In order to rethink the ‘witnessness’ of survivor accounts outside of an incongruous economy of reason and representation we have explored the possibility of treating disruptive, confusing, or otherwise disorienting instances in disaster testimonial texts – which might ordinarily be viewed as grounds for incredulity – as instead offering an insight into the unique features of the disaster in question. Given the distinctive signatures issuing from the Nazi camps and Japan’s 3.11, there is evidence to suggest that the concept of the ‘signature of the disaster’ that we have begun to develop here is worthy of further exploration in the context of disaster testimony, and we outline two possible paths below.

There is no suggestion that the analysis in this paper provides a comprehensive review of testimonial accounts from either the Nazi camps or 3.11 tsunami. Nonetheless, our readings indicate that survivor testimonies about them challenge the interpretive work of readers in quite different ways, and that these challenges can be seen as resonating with the signature disruptions (material, socio-political, and emotional) wrought by the respective disasters as they unfolded. One benefit of utilizing this form of ‘witnessness’ to study disasters is a broadening of admissible data for research into this sensitive and difficult topic. By treating disorientations in the text as integral to the genre of disaster testimony, and using these as the *starting point* for analysis, no distinction is drawn between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ witnesses (in both the performative and ethical sense), between the testimony of the witness and of the witless, because each is a valid response to the traumatic experience of living through disaster. Instead of asking how accurately a given testimony re-presents the facticity of the event, the orienting question becomes: how does the testimony function and malfunction, and

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what does that reveal about the witness's lived experience of the disaster? In turn, this form of 'witnessness' is specifically attuned to revealing those signature elements of the disaster that continue to resound in the psyche of its survivors, both consciously and unconsciously, with important implications for post-disaster interventions. There is, however, a need for further empirical research into other disastrous contexts before it can be generalized with more confidence that a 'signature of the disaster' is indeed a characteristic feature of survivor testimony.

An additional rationale for this paper was that the use of 'signatures' in existing research on disasters hardly begins to explore the complexity of this exilic concept, particularly in terms of its inherent iterability, repeatability, and replaceability, and its performative and promissory dimensions. While we have taken a significant step towards expanding on this theoretical richness by investigating the iteration of disastrous signatures across two radically different contexts of material irruption and discursive recollection, it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine the profound implications of 'countersigning' as a fundamental yet disturbing element of the signature concept: a 'counter' (*contra*) signature *both* affirms *and* opposes (Derrida, 2004). Doing so may provide a means of expanding the theoretical framework developed here, by exploring witness testimony not simply as the passive matter upon which the disaster signs itself, but as a 'dangerous supplement' whose witnessness actively countersigns, underwrites, and betrays the enduring legacy of the disaster. Moreover, beyond the immediate context of testimony, the undecidable concept of a 'countersignature' broaches the broader question of how humanity might respond to an age often regarded as being increasingly disaster-prone; how we countersign the disaster and how the disaster countersigns us. It may well be that countersigning the disaster entails recognizing it, advocating for its specificity in the manner enabled by Trauma Signature Analysis, accommodating it within our strategies and tactics for survival and becoming response-able for it and to it. But equally, and given the increasing tendency of capitalism and the State to exploit the upheavals of disasters that leave populations traumatized (Klein, 2007), countersigning the disaster may also betray the possibility of *resisting* it, refusing to endorse cultivated or counterfeited shocks and the 'therapy' of population displacement and profiteering that States and corporations bring in their wake.

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