

Testifying to Auschwitz and Algeria:

Germaine Tillion, Charlotte Delbo, and Marguerite Duras

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2018 marks the seventieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The declaration promised all human beings equal dignity and rights, regardless of race, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.ⁱ Last year, 159 countries violated the agreement. Venezuela's economic collapse resulted in a food crisis and widespread starvation. Syria's civil war and the ethnic cleansing of Myanmar's Rohingya population displaced more than ten million people. Even the United States' "Muslim ban" defies the agreement by discriminating against individuals seeking asylum based on their religious affiliation.

If over 75% of all countries are flagrantly breaching the agreement, why is the declaration still important? The declaration represented a global response to fascist regimes like Nazi Germany. 9 representatives from 6 continents (including Eleanor Roosevelt) drafted the document. Ratified on December 10, 1948, the declaration signaled the members of the United Nations were willing to adhere to an international code of ethics that superseded national sovereignty. For the first time, governments agreed to hold each other responsible for infringing upon the rights of their people.

Although the Declaration of Human Rights did not explicitly mention the Holocaust, the emergence of "human rights" is often tied to the Jewish genocide. Scholars have argued that this connection is misleading, as a majority of early Holocaust literature does not overlap with human rights literature. My dissertation, however, argues that this is not the case. Literature that addresses both has been overlooked. Three French authors—Germaine Tillion, Charlotte Delbo, and Marguerite Duras—combine human rights and Holocaust literature through testimony.ⁱⁱ

During World War II, all three women actively resisted the Nazi Occupation of France. Tillion and Delbo were arrested as political prisoners and deported to concentration camps, while Duras continued to work with the French Resistance until Paris' liberation. After the war, they continued their political activism by protesting the Algerian War.ⁱⁱⁱ The guerilla warfare and internment of millions of Algerians by the French had created a humanitarian crisis—malnutrition, disease, and torture were rampant.

In their writing, Tillion, Delbo, Duras demand action against the human rights violations in Algeria. They address parallels between the Holocaust and Algeria, not to reduce the importance of either, but to instigate a response. By presenting a multiplicity of voices, they destabilize the idea that there can only be one history of an event. Testimonies are “reconstruction[s] of reality, instead of faithful reproduction[s] to which we have “equal and unbiased access.”^{iv} Testimonies compel readers to fight injustice— “histories of permissible violence”^v—emphasizing the importance of *kairos* (the opportune time to act).^{vi}

Explaining the relationship between testimonial literature and human rights activism requires a consideration of genre. Tillion uses ethnography (*Algeria in 1957* and *Ravensbrück*), as well as operetta (*The Verfügbar in Hell*); Delbo writes memoir (*Convoy of January 24*) and letters (*Beautiful Letters*); and Duras conducts interviews (“The Two Ghettos”), but also uses autofiction (*The War*). Each uniquely presents the relationships between victim, perpetrators, and bystanders of the atrocities. In doing so, they also model how testimonies are often gendered (e.g. ways of survival and resistance in the Nazi concentration camps differ for men and women).

My dissertation concludes with a discussion of how testimonial literature relates to current human rights violations. While numerous “solutions” to these issues—from apology, to reparation, and

prosecution of perpetrators—inevitably disappoint, I demonstrate how the commitment to educating future generations offers the possibility of transnational progress.

ⁱ It was ratified by forty-eight countries, including France.

ⁱⁱ Previous research has explored the relationships between the Holocaust and French colonial wars, beginning with their temporal proximity. ⁱⁱ World War II ends in 1945 and the Algerian War commences in 1954, though the Sétif massacre may be a more appropriate marker. In the decade between, France began yet another war. The First Indochina War lasted from December 19, 1946 to August 1, 1954. ⁱⁱ The French defeat at Dien Ben Phu emboldened members of Algeria's *Front de Libération nationale* (FLN) to launch their own battle for independence from the French. Within a year, France was battling two colonies as war had broken out again in Indochina; the Second Indochina War ("Vietnam") lasted until 1975.

ⁱⁱⁱ France captured Algiers in 1830, making Algeria a French colony. ⁱⁱⁱ For over a century, the French and Algerian populations co-existed, though not without tension. Algerians desired independence. French colonial rule led to a precipitous decline in the nation's welfare. By the end of World War II, tensions reached a tipping point. Within a decade, France and Algeria engaged in asymmetric warfare, neither side agreeing about the conflict or its causes.

^{iv} Moi, Toril. *Sexual/Textual Politics*. Methuen, 1985, p 45.

^v Leigh Gilmore. *Tainted Witness: Why We Doubt What Women Say about Their Lives*. New York: Columbia UP, 2017, 3.

^{vi} Aristotle's *Rhetoric* explains rhetoric as the intersection of *ethos*, *logos*, *pathos*, *telos* and *kairos*. Sophists believed *kairos* was crucial for a successful rhetor, as they had to quickly adapt to circumstances.