Image testimonies

Witnessing in times of social media

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The currency of image testimonies

Recent political conflicts have signaled an increased proliferation of image testimonies that are shared widely via social media. Although witnessing with and through images is not a phenomenon of the internet era (Zelizer 2007), image practices and politics in social media have significantly intensified the affective economies of image testimonies that are circulated in "real time" on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and other social media platforms. New technologies have enabled individuals to record, upload, and share images directly via mobile devices, which make nearly everyone a potential witness at any given time. Since the so-called Arab Spring, it has become evident that audiovisual accounts of witnessing are circulated under new conditions that fundamentally reshape not only the practices of witnessing and testifying with images but also the testimonies as such. The Egyptian Uprising 2011 has been called the "Facebook Revolution"—not without contestation (Lim 2012)—and the Syrian conflict, for example, was described as the "the first YouTube war" (cited in Al-Ghazzi 2014, p. 441). This already indicates the assumed privileged role of social media in political conflict today. At the same time, social media and digital communication networks are integral parts of our current visual culture, characterized by the ubiquity of digital photography and imaging (Hand 2012). This new dominance of the visual and visuality has significantly transformed practices of witnessing and therefore calls for a new theoretical approach to testimony as image testimony. The current volume traces the contours of these conditions and attempts to develop a concept of image testimony that contributes to the ongoing debate on witnessing and testifying as contemporary image practices in the context of social media.

Towards a concept of image testimony

Our notion of image testimonies draws from a variety of theoretical strands and positions that crystallize around the two terms under question: image and testimony. Combining the two into a compound term first of all underscores the fact

that testimony includes language-based as well as image-based exemplars and that their modulations oscillate between the registers of the verbal and the visual. Language-based testimonies on the one hand refer to scripted speech acts that were originally associated with either religious or legal contexts (such as giving a fervent expression of faith or making a solemn declaration in court). Image-based testimonies on the other hand show a less concise genealogy, though they have precursors in discursive practices that evolved in journalism (Zelizer 2007), as well as early visual anthropology using photographic images as an analytical tool and as evidence.[1] Testimonies, of course, have been recorded and transmitted in different and diverse media, embracing the media landscape as it developed. They have been communicated as spoken or written accounts, as literary texts,[2] illustrations, photographs or moving images. Regardless of modality, the social practice of testifying, in a basic understanding, includes the following parameters; a subject who acts as testifier, an event (or certain facts of this event) that form the content of the testimony, the testimony itself, as well as an audience to which the testimony is addressed, and, last but not least, a media infrastructure in which the testimony is articulated and circulated. As the chapters in our volume demonstrate, however, these parameters are not fixed entities but are constantly transformed and contested.

Through the proliferation of digital image technologies, growing transnational media connectivity and the increasing amount of images fluxing and refluxing around the globe, human experience has become much more visual (and visualized) than ever before. As a response, scholars in the 1990s made visual culture a new field of inquiry. Shifting their focus from the verbal to the visual, from text to image, they engaged in exploring how people seek information, meaning and pleasure in the interface with visual technologies and environments (Mirzoeff 1999, p. 3). Although images have thereby often been addressed as if they were texts, made up of discrete entities (signs, symbols), unfolding in a narrative plane, there are good reasons for trying to overcome such a textual bias. W.J.T. Mitchell (1986, p. 9) has stressed the agency of images that can make them grow into "actors on the historical stage," but he has also pointed to the difficulties of drawing neat demarcation lines between images and texts as they more often than not intermingle and interact. According to Mitchell (1994, p. 5),

> the "differences" between images and language are not merely formal matters; they are, in practice, linked to things like the difference between the (speaking) self and the (seen) other; between telling and showing, between "hearsay" and "eye-witness" testimony; between words (heard, quoted, inscribed) and objects, actions (seen, depicted, described); between sensory channels, traditions of representation, and modes of experience.

Current testimonial practices can mostly be described as a combination and interplay of image and text. This interplay shows considerable variations, from photographs that include written statements, audio-visual witnessing accounts and video footage to complexly layered multimedia contexts in the internet. Therefore, to speak of an image testimony does not proclaim the absence of language and text.

Witnessing and testimony have been theorized within a broad framework of epistemological, philosophical, ethical, and media-theoretical perspectives as well as in journalism and communication studies. Political scientist Michal Givoni (2011, p. 150) has observed: "Since the last third of the twentieth century, testimony has enjoyed unprecedented popularity as a philosophical theme, as an artistic gesture, and a political strategy." An important and influential body of literature on testimony has been developed in relation to the issue of trauma and the Holocaust (e.g. Felman & Laub 1992; Agamben 1999; Wieviorka 2006). While this strand of research focuses on the figure of the survivor-witness, other scholars aimed at expanding and differentiating a variety of witnessing figures, including the martyr, the juridical, historical or moral witness, and eyewitnessing versus fleshwitnessing (Fassin 2008; Assmann 2008; Harari 2009). The conceptual field of witnessing is characterized by a complex multiplicity of terms that are often not clearly distinguished and used synonymously, such as the witness, witnessing, bearing witness, to testify and testimony (Givoni 2011; Peters 2001; Tait 2011). John Durham Peters points to the double meaning of the verb *to witness*, "the passive one of seeing and the active one of saying" (Peters 2001, p. 709). Notions such as eyewitnessing or bearing witness seem to account for this ambiguity by differentiating between more passive and more active dimensions of witnessing. Understood as a social relational practice, witnessing always depends on its mediation through testimony (Frosh & Pinchevski 2009, p. 1). In our digital visual culture today, images have definitely become the dominant means of mediating witnessing. Our volume's focus on image testimonies acknowledges and highlights this central role of mediation, enabling witnessing accounts to move through space and time somewhat independently from the human witness.

In this context, it is worth noting that from early on, visuality and vision, image, and imaging technologies have shaped theories of testimony. In discourses of witnessing, seeing has been attributed a privileged role, compared with other senses of perception (Zelizer 2007, p. 410). Both in journalism and communication studies as well as in historical sciences, eyewitnessing gained importance as a key concept in relation to the account of events (Zelizer 2007; Burke 2001). In the most basic sense, eyewitnessing as "a social archetype" (Givoni 2011, p. 149) requires being physically present at an event, which unfolds before one's own eyes. According to John Durham Peters (2001, p. 720), "to be there, present at the event in space and time is the paradigm case [of witnessing]." This "being there" provides the legitimacy and reliability of the eyewitness. While the act of eyewitnessing is not detachable from the human body and its co-presence at the event, testimonies are mediations of this act, a result or product of eyewitnessing. Image testimonies, such as drawings, paintings or photographs were then valued analogously to archeological objects and artifacts

as historical sources, as "objets témoin" (Gabus 1975) or "mute witnesses" (Burke 2001, p. 14), whose evidential qualities were at the same time doubted, just as the eyewitnesses' claim to authority. This doubt accompanied most of the historical discourse around eyewitnessing and was dependent on developments of imaging techniques used as "eye-witnessing tools" (Zelizer 2007, p. 418). As Renaud Dulong observes in his book, *Le témoin oculaire*, it was the camera that played an especially significant role in shaping our modern understanding of the eyewitness. With the emergence of photography, the eyewitness as a central figure in testimony theory was confronted with the ideal and model of the camera to register reality in a seemingly objective way (Dulong 1998). In contrast, Dulong as well as other researchers elaborated a different understanding of the eyewitness as an ethical figure with the ability to judge. This gave way to conceptualizations of the witness beyond the paradigm of the eyewitness (Givoni 2011). In view of current image practices, the dilemma of the eyewitness presents itself in a new light. With the mobile phone camera always at hand, witnessing practices today often combine both the ethical position of the human and the recording techniques of the camera. The resulting images document the events as much as they mark subjective positions and ethical engagements.

The topic of visual media again became center stage in theories that analyze mass mediated forms of witnessing. Building on John Ellis' idea of second-hand witnessing, which assumes that distant viewers "are drawn into the position of being witnesses" themselves (Ellis 2000, p. 10), Paul Frosh and Amit Pinchevski have coined the term "media witnessing" (Frosh & Pinchevski 2009). They elaborated on the ubiquity of "media witnessing performed *in*, *by* and *through* the media" (Frosh & Pinchevski 2009, p. 1). Shifting the focus away from the eyewitness to "witnessing as receptivity," Paul Frosh reminds us that "'bearing witness,' ... is an act performed not by a witness but by a witnessing text" (Frosh 2006, p. 274). This shift makes it necessary to bring this witnessing text itself into focus. In light of the current primacy of the visual, it becomes obvious that the "witnessing text" today is predominantly image-based.

Although visuality and image practices represent a recurring theme in research on witnessing and testimony, the analysis of the images themselves has not been at the center of attention. Only a few publications, especially within art history and visual culture studies, have foregrounded the potential of images in bearing witness and addressed images as the subject of investigation (e.g., Guerin & Hallas 2007; Behrmann & Priedl 2014; Richardson 2016). Frances Guerin and Roger Hallas (2007, p. 4) insist on "the agency of the material image," which "is grounded in the performative (rather than constative) function of the act of bearing witness. Within the context of bearing witness, material images do not merely depict the historical world, they participate in its transformation." This body of literature does not yet account for witnessing in times of social media. Our volume therefore aims at expanding this discussion and at re-conceptualizing image testimony in the digital age.

Image testimony in the social media era

Research on witnessing and testimony has often revolved around turning points in history that have impacted practices of witnessing. Times of eminent crises have always given rise to a proliferation of testimonies. The Holocaust and 9/11 are two of the most prominent examples often referred to in testimony theory. A similar paradigm shift in witnessing practices can be attributed to a wave of new social movements that started only a decade after the terror attacks in New York and Washington with the uprisings in North Africa and the Arab World. These movements gained their paradigmatic status and momentum by the unprecedented use of mobile devices as tools of witnessing and social media networks, producing a hitherto unknown global visibility. This new visual culture of witnessing also spilled over to other parts of the globe—just think of the Occupy movement, the Gezi Park protests, Euromaidan, or ongoing activism such as #BlackLivesMatter. Many assumptions about witnessing and testimony need to be reconsidered in light of these recent developments, both in the political as well as in the media sphere of our networked world.

Works focusing on the digital turn and the creation of connectivity and connectedness via social media networks are particularly fruitful in this context. Several scholars (van Dyke 2008; Gunthert 2015; Gerling, Holschbach & Löffler 2018) emphasized the fact that digital photography has experienced a major change from its former memorial and commemorative functions to a more communication-oriented use. André Gunthert (2014) has introduced the concept of "conversational images," thus highlighting the new practices of photo sharing as a means to trigger conversations. Taking the events during the Egyptian revolution as their example, Florian Ebner and Constanze Wicke (2013) have suggested that the increasing connectedness of photographers, activists and citizen journalists with social media platforms has bestowed photography with a new testimonial layer and quality. This goes particularly for the unfolding of civic protest movements, when the digital devices connected to social media platforms, provide the witnesses, participating in the events on the ground, with a means for testifying. Kari Andén-Papadopoulos (2013), for example, has coined the term "citizen camera witnessing" in relation to embodied practices of witnessing in recent uprisings. Mette Mortensen (2015) has referred to this new condition as "connected witnessing," in which the former temporal and spatial division of witnessing and testifying increasingly dissolves. Mortensen (2015, p. 1403) explains:

> By placing emphasis on the participatory aspect, connective witnessing not only captures ongoing changes to acts of witnessing and political participation but also accentuates the increasing overlap between the two. Depending on focus, one may speak of witnessing as a personalized form of political participation or personalized political participation in the form of witnessing.

Considering the timeliness of the topic—with new technologies, practices and genres of image testimonies emerging as we write—our volume aims at laying the foundation for a relevant new field of research.

Pluralities of witnessing and evolving genres

The causes and motivations for producing image testimonies today are manifold and wide-ranging. Political activists and dissidents might use their mobile phone cameras as a means of resistance against oppressive regimes. Equally, regime loyalists, militant actors and terror groups employ digital media for their purposes (Al-Ghazzi 2014). Opposing actors often circulate their image testimonies with very different intentions on the same social media platforms. While some image testimonies are used as weapons with distinct aims, others seem to be recorded accidentally and without any clear intention by people who happen to be at the site of the witnessed event. Theorizing image testimonies in a globalized world needs to start by acknowledging the plurality of witnessing practices. While testimony theory has mostly emphasized the moral and ethical integrity of the witness, only recently have scholars challenged this conception in which "to witness means to be on the right side" (Peters 2001, p. 714) and instead highlighted the heterogeneity of witnessing agents. The field of perpetrator testimony has contributed to complicate the ethical position of the witness (Schmidt 2017). Likewise, Omar Al-Ghazzi (2014, p. 441) has criticized the often Eurocentric discourse around notions of citizen journalism for their "universalist assumptions about participation, democratization, and inclusion." Ideas of non-human witnessing (such as drone images) even more radically challenge the human and moral nature of the witness as such. With the broad spectrum of case studies and examples presented in this volume, we want to suggest that image practices of witnessing are not per se morally right or wrong, but can be employed for different political agendas and take on multiple forms of meaning depending on their specific context of production and reception. This becomes even more important in times of social media when it is almost impossible to trace and identify the intentions connected with image testimonies. Along with the heterogeneity of agents, social web image testimonies encompass a whole range of genres, such as images of protest, war, and human rights violations (see chapters by Simons, Bens, Schankweiler, Faulkner and the conversation between Liosi, Namer and Matar), selfies (chapter by Papailias), suicide bombers' video testimonies (chapter by Straub), or videos of the destruction of cultural goods (chapters by Günther & Bioly, and Wendl), and drone images (chapter by Richardson) and screenshots (chapter by Frosh).

Affective dimensions of image testimony

Besides their claim to "show the truth" or their aim to address political problems, the special efficacy of image testimonies seems to lie in their ability to affect, to move, or to mobilize. Especially in the context of social media, it becomes clear that image testimonies are embedded in a complex network of relationality that is characterized by processes of affecting and being affected. Our understanding of affect is grounded in the theoretical work carried out at the Collaborative Research Center Affective Societies at the Freie Universität Berlin, out of which this volume took shape. One of the main theoretical claims is

> that affect and emotion are relational phenomena unfolding in interaction and are not reducible to individual mental states or corporeal comportment. Even if viewed as a "bodily capacity" in a broad sense, affect can only be understood as a relational dynamic between actors and the complex socio-material environments in which they are embedded.
>
> (Röttger-Rössler & Kolesch 2018, p. xiii)

In a similar way, witnessing and testifying are necessarily relational acts that create ties between events, people and testimonies. Given the theoretical assumption that affectivity is the basis for the emergence of all social relations, it becomes obvious that affect needs to be conceptualized as a key concept for the understanding of the relationality of witnessing (Richardson & Schankweiler 2019). Our volume encompasses practices of image production, circulation and sharing as well as reception and appropriation, thereby underlining images as a focal point in the relational network of affective witnessing. The various case studies demonstrate that image testimonies not only serve as vectors of affectivity, but also play a major role in communicating affect and are therefore central for analyzing "affective societies" in our increasingly mobile and connected world today.

Temporalities of witnessing

The temporality of witnessing and testimony gains new relevance, given the infrastructure of social media networks. The digital cultural space is characterized by (the possibility of) processing in real time that coincides with an effect of actuality. This also provides a new framework for the specific temporalities that play out in image testimonies and that many chapters address. As the chapters by Schankweiler and Papailias show, for example, mobile phone witnessing in social media stand out due to a simultaneity of giving and seeing testimony. Other chapters question the conventional chronology of witnessing and testimony and provide examples where temporalities are reversed. Whereas in Frosh's case study, witnesses of the present become witnesses of the past (Yolocaust project), the suicide bombers that Straub discusses, are portrayed as witnesses of their own future martyrdom. The coexistence of images from all times and spaces on the internet and the possibility of seeing image testimonies again and again, increasingly complicates temporalities. When Paul Frosh and Amit

Pinchevski state that "space-time parameters have been utterly transformed" (Frosh & Pinchevski 2009, p. 8) in media witnessing, then the extension of space and time that accompanies image testimony is taken to the extreme in times of social media.

Analyzing image testimonies—structure of the volume

Part I—epistemologies of testimonies

The first part of the book sets the stage for some of the fundamental issues in relation to witnessing and image testimonies. In his contribution "Credibility in crisis: contradictions of web video witnessing," Sascha Simons provides a profound overview of the theoretical debates on the trustworthiness of testimonies, situating this within a "current crisis of media credibility." He shows how web videos intensify the epistemological and political contradictions inherent in media witnessing and tackles issues of reliability, politics, and aesthetics that prove highly relevant for the discussion of image testimonies as a whole. Revisiting John Fiske's aesthetic category of the "videolow" from 1996, Simons introduces the new term "datalow," thereby taking into account the "datafication" of video testimonies in the social media era.

The courtroom is the site par excellence when discussing the evidential potential of image testimonies. Jonas Bens' chapter "Affective images and the political trial" is based on courtroom ethnography at the International Criminal Court in The Hague and the trial against former LRA commander Dominic Ongwen, who was accused of committing war crimes in Northern Uganda. Bens examines the uses of images as evidence in court and argues that one needs to focus on their affective dimensions in order to understand the performative power these images hold. His analysis challenges established assumptions about the court's supposed objectivity and rationality and explores the role of non-humans giving testimony. By providing a bridge to Part II "Affective Witnessing," Bens' chapter exemplifies how image testimonies combine evidential qualities and the potential to create affective relationalities and emotional involvement.

In conversation

The interview "Fearless filming: video footage from Syria since 2011" captures the perspective of activists and practitioners and expands on the topics addressed in Part I. This chapter is based on a discussion between curator Marianna Liosi held with Syrian filmmakers Guevara Namer and Amer Matar, both living and working in exile in Berlin. Drawing on their experiences in Syria, Namer and Matar address the social and political conditions that filmmakers and citizen witnesses have been facing since the uprising in 2011. Their film projects and statements open up a number of questions concerning the expectations and frustrations of mobile phone witnessing in Syria: What is the efficacy of video testimonies in promoting actual political change? How have previously high expectations of video testimonies changed over the course of the Syrian conflict? From a personal point of view, Namer and Matar discuss to what extent video production works as an emancipatory gesture for Syrians—despite all fallen hopes and disappointments. Their perspectives also call into question a clear distinction between practices of citizen witnessing and artistic practices of filmmaking.

Part II—affective witnessing

Whereas affect surfaces throughout the volume, the chapters combined in Part II put special focus on an elaborated discussion of affect theory in relation to witnessing. Drawing from a case example from Morocco, Kerstin Schankweiler reads media witnessing of police violence as a practice and a politics of affecting. In her chapter "'Moroccan Lives Matter': practices and politics of affecting" she focuses on the aesthetic quality of videos testifying to police brutality, arguing that what is witnessed is mainly the videographer and other eyewitnesses being affected. Schankweiler describes this as a specific mode of "affective media witnessing" that is powerful in mobilizing a community of solidarity, political protest and dissent. By focusing on mobile phone image practices in which seeing and testifying happens at the same time and place, the dilemma of the "veracity gap" (Peters 2001, p. 711) presents itself in a new light.

Like Schankweiler, Michael Richardson elucidates the central relevance of affectivity to processes of witnessing and testifying. In his chapter "Drone's-eye view: affective witnessing and technicities of perception," he discusses drone images as a form of non-human testimony, that is closely tied to digital mediations of social media and its currency: affect. Extending the human perception, the apparatus of the drone with its iconic view from above brings into being an entirely new form of affective witnessing. This is not only used for military purposes but also by activists and artists alike, portraying drone witnessing as ambivalent, oscillating between weapons of death and means of resistance.

Part III—social media practices

The question of how social media technologies shape and, in turn, are shaped by image testimonies is the focus of Part III. Simon Faulkner's text "Photographic witnessing, the occupation and Palestinian politics" revolves around a specific genre of social media images: Facebook Cover Photos. He analyzes how Palestinian photographers and photojournalists portray themselves as activists putting their lives at risk to document the Israeli occupation. The (photo)journalist has been a key figure in testimony theory and has often been discussed as a supposedly impartial eyewitness. His position was recently challenged by new practices

of citizen journalism and video activism. Faulkner's close-readings of photographs from Palestine expose this blurred distinction between professional journalism and politically and emotionally involved activism. He makes an argument for an approach to photography that focuses on the cultural meaning and value of these witnessing practices.

In her contribution "Witnessing to survive: selfie videos, live mobile witnessing and black necropolitics," Penelope Papailias focuses on yet another social media tool gaining relevance in practices of witnessing. She analyzes the Facebook Live video of Philando Castile's shooting by police. Besides an exploration of the specific temporalities and potentials of live mobile witnessing, her chapter refers to practices of visualization associated with the Black Lives Matter movement and problematizes colorblind theorizing of mobile citizen witnessing.

As an important expansion of witnessing in times of social media, Paul Frosh shifts the perspective from witnessing *in* social media to witnessing *of* social media. His chapter "Eye, flesh, world: three modes of digital witnessing" looks at social media not as a means for circulating testimonies but as image testimonies in and of themselves. Based on three case studies—the "Yolocaust" website by Israeli artist Shahak Shapira, Noa Jansma's Instagram account called #dearcatcallers, and a screenshot from WhatsApp used in a newspaper to report on the death of an Israeli soldier—Frosh maps out three modes of witnessing. He shows how the established modes of eye-witnessing and flesh-witnessing are reshaped in the context of social media. In addition, he introduces the new mode of world-witnessing, arguing that "digital networks themselves constitute witnessable worlds."

Part IV—witnessing destruction

To provide a more differentiated take on witnessing in its plurality, Part IV looks at image testimony at the intersection of creation and destruction, taking into account the perspectives of different actors and their contrary moral positions. As a special genre of perpetrator testimony, Verena Straub discusses the videotaped messages of suicide bombers in which various modes of witnessing are at play. Her chapter "'Living martyrs': testifying what is to come" foregrounds the unique temporality of these testimonies, which—instead of providing evidence for a past incident—anticipate the future suicide attack and set the stage for it to happen. Since the temporalities of testimony play out in reverse, Straub suggests considering these types of videos as forms of "anticipatory image testimony."

The intricate relationship between idolatry and iconoclasm is central to the final two chapters of the volume. In their contribution "Testimonies for a new social order: the Islamic State's iconic iconoclasm," Christoph Günther and Tom Bioly demonstrate how the so-called Islamic State uses videos and photographs testifying to the destruction of cultural goods as a means to promote social change. The authors highlight the violent quality of these image testimonies by framing them as instances of "enforced witnessing" that make it almost impossible for viewers to take a neutral position. By turning the iconoclastic acts into iconic images themselves, the Islamic State attempts to stabilize its claim to power as sanctioned by divine ordinances.

In his chapter "From Cape Town to Timbuktu: iconoclastic testimonies in the age of social media," Tobias Wendl presents three case studies of recent political and religious iconoclasm in South Africa and Mali (the #RhodesMustFall campaign, the vandalizing of Brett Murray's painting "The Spear" and the destruction of Sufi mausoleums in Timbuktu). He argues that the destruction of images simultaneously unmasks and enhances the power of images and that the very act of destruction in itself provides a testimony to antecedent conflict. Particular emphasis is given to the analysis of subsequent secondary image testimonies and re-enactments in which after-images of the iconoclastic defacement and annihilation have emerged and were widely shared, heavily fueled by the immediacy promise of the social media and their potential to communicate a multiplicity of voices and viewpoints.

Although dealing with a variety of case studies and perspectives, the geographical scope throughout this volume is somewhat biased on the MENA region and sub-Saharan Africa. Yet we do not see this as a limitation. In light of political conflicts and the relevance of citizen media witnessing in these regions we argue that a special focus on the economy of image testimonies originating in countries such as Syria, Iraq, Israel and Palestine, or Morocco, Mali, Uganda and South Africa, is highly appropriate and topical. A geographical focus also fosters the coherence and dialogue between the individual chapters. However, as many chapters show, a discussion of image testimony in social media does by no means confine itself to any regional context. Rather, the scope of case studies demonstrate that image testimony is a global phenomenon characterized by transnational entanglements and a variety of local appropriations that need to be contextualized respectively.

The lines of thought that we outlined as key elements of image testimony, cut across the different sections and chapters of this volume and work as common threads. The guiding themes of plurality, affectivity and temporality shape a new approach on testimony theory. Together, the contributions create a kind of mosaic that provides a more nuanced picture of what we conceptualize as image testimony in times of social media.

Notes

1 Connections can be established to social documentary photography as it evolved in the depression-era of the 1930s in the US, patronized by the Farm Security Administration (FSA) and associated with the names of Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange and Gordon Parks. Another precursor is the photography-based research monograph *Balinese Character: A Photographic Analysis* by Gregory Bateson and Margret Mead 1942).
2 A special case of literary testimony is the genre of *testimonio* in Latin America, see Beverley (2004).

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