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Old Questions in New Boxes: Mia Kirshner's I Live Here and the Problematics of Transnational Witnessing

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of Transnational Witnessing

Symbolized in Amnesty International's candle illuminating the darkness, the rhetoric of exposure has long been a central trope of humanitarian discourse: the promise of revelation presumes that egregious violations are otherwise secret and that, in Thomas Keenan's words, "those agents whose behavior it wishes to affect—governments, armies, businesses, and militias—are exposed in some significant way to the force of public opinion, and that they are (psychically or emotionally) structured like individuals in a strong social or cultural context that renders them vulnerable to feelings of dishonor, embarrassment, disgrace, or ignominy."¹ Despite the implausibility of these conditions, as well as the dangers of oversaturation, "mass and especially the image-based media" have only accentuated the ostensible self-evidence of this approach.² The rhetoric of exposure posits a liberal subject as its addressee who is ready and willing to respond to humanitarian appeals constructed through an "aesthetics of suffering," particularly in the form of indignation-inducing shock or the representation of victims who are "deserving" of aid or assistance.³ Such familiar humanitarian narratives comprise, as Lilie Chouliaraki writes, "rhetorical practices of transnational actors that engage with universal ethical claims, such as common humanity or global civil society, to mobilize action on human suffering."⁴

In her recent scholarship, Chouliaraki traces the contemporary movement from these rhetorical practices to a new "post-humanitarian sensibility"—one she locates explicitly in mixed-media humanitarian appeals—that "breaks with [the emotional repertoire of] pity and privileges a short-term and low-intensity form of agency, which is no longer inspired by an intellectual agenda but momentarily engages us in practices of playful consumerism."⁵ The humanitarian rhetorics she identifies at both poles, whether based on shared sentiment "in a moral economy of abundance, an economy where everyone can, in principle, feel for and act on distant suffering in an unrestricted manner" or appeals operating in an "economy of scarcity" and through the "individual judgment" of the consumer, pose particular challenges for a transnational feminist approach to gender-based rights violations.⁶

We turn to a case study of the Canadian actress and self-styled activist Mia Kirshner's multimedia project *I Live Here* to illuminate both the contradictions and the potential embedded in its construction of transnational subjects and addressees, as well as to resist the collapse of "transnational" into a presumed universalism of either

capitalist or post-Enlightenment humanitarian sensibilities. Executed with support from Amnesty International and linked to a website featuring book sales, short videos, fan art, and descriptions of ongoing projects, *I Live Here* encourages consumption of its diverse texts “revealing secret lives” as a means of raising awareness and mobilizing public opinion against the violations it chronicles.⁷ The project is presented in a white-washed box which folds out to reveal one eighty-four-page “notebook” in each of its four pockets, each claiming to bear witness to the experiences of people living in a distinct region in the grip of a distinct human rights or humanitarian crisis. The goal of our inquiry into *I Live Here* is to further ongoing intellectual conversations about the potential for literary and cultural texts to ethically advance the emancipatory and progressive aspects of global human rights claims and cultures—and about the risks that they may instead remain aestheticized commodities, nourishing the neo-imperialist global capitalism that is so profoundly implicated in conditions enabling both civil and political rights violations and economic deprivations and abuses.

In an essay on the “geopolitical rhetorics” of human rights responses to the global sex trade, Wendy Hesford examines the trope of exposure and argues that campaigns based on that trope “overlook the rhetorical-geopolitical dimensions of identity and identification practices produced by the contradictions of *transnationality*.”⁸ We extend Hesford’s argument in order to decipher the transnational address of *I Live Here* at our particular historical moment. The text, which depicts women’s vulnerability, sexual abuses, and sex work in Chechnya/Ingushetia, Burma, Ciudad Juárez, and Malawi, begins with the statement “There are too many untold stories” and further announces itself in its content as well as its publicity materials as a project dedicated to telling the stories (to quote the back cover) of “displaced women and children in their own words or in stories told in text and images by noted writers and artists.” Constructed through texts written by multiple authors, *I Live Here* also comprises many genres. Indeed, taken as a whole, arguments may be made for classifying the project as reportage, memoir, *testimonio*, story, witness literature, metatext; however, counterarguments could as easily undo the explanatory value of each of these generic categories. In addition, each notebook is composed of mixed media (graphic novel, painting, drawing, photography, collage, fabric art, diorama) and multiple genres (personal journal, witness testimony, letter, short story, poetry, news report, police document, folktale).

Considering Kirshner’s objectives and the text’s formal complexity, we question how exposure is gendered in our post-9/11 moment, especially given the way gendered human rights discourse was mobilized as a rationale for the “war on terror.”⁹ What logics or aesthetics bind the disparate authors and locations of the text(s)? How are gendered claims in *I Live Here* constructed and framed? How are they composed and translated, linguistically and culturally, and to whom and for what are they made? We take up these questions of framing (in terms of both the structuring gaze and historical context) and of translation in our analysis of four distinct aspects of the text: genre, authorship, human rights claims, and audience.

Throughout we are mindful of space between transnational feminism(s) and women’s (human) rights. Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan have suggested that a transnational feminist analytic must attend to local, gendered material conditions as

well as their relationships with “international economic hegemonies.”¹⁰ While resisting the universalization of women as a category, transnational feminism must recognize and respond to the combined local and global conditions that, in positioning women “for men,” increase their vulnerability to violence, exploitation, and abandonment.¹¹ Kirshner’s *I Live Here* underscores the need to attend to transnationalism as a fraught concept, containing the potential for silencing its subjects as well as for building alliances.

Genre

Publicists for the project (and Kirshner, its author-producer) call *I Live Here* a “paper documentary,” which raises the specter of cinematic conventions and the ethical struggles around the point of view, objectivity, and selectivity associated with film. Specifically, what is the role of the “maker” of the documentary in selecting, framing, presenting, and excising material? What is the relationship of the eyes behind the camera—which may or may not coincide with the “I” of the author/director—to the subjects of the documentary? How much should the author/director reveal her presence, her motives, her desires, and her identifications with her subjects?

These questions, of course, cut both ways: if Kirshner attempts to remove herself from the story, she can be taken to task for invoking a false neutrality or claim to objectivity—the same universalizing gesture which has been vigorously discredited since the onset of the postmodern era in most every discipline concerned with representation and cross-cultural interaction (including, most emphatically, various strains of feminism). On the other hand, should she expose herself, revealing her attempts at or methods of connection and identification, she risks appearing to erase the other whose story she claims to represent, while she herself becomes the extraordinary, self-congratulatory, virtuous, and sympathetic spectator. As James Dawes has noted, “To narrate one’s ethical self-examination is a necessary act of responsibility. It is also a narcissistic reflex, a way of restoring one’s own emotional reactions to their familiar, central place—but avoidance of this narcissism is itself a luxurious moral narcissism.”¹²

The triple bind described by Dawes has a long history in the sentimental tradition, as Karen Haltunnen, among others, has shown. Haltunnen notes that in the eighteenth century, John Keats and William Hazlitt charged “that the poetry of sensibility actually explored not the feelings of the imagined sufferer but the feelings of the spectator watching that sufferer and was geared toward demonstrating the reader/spectator’s own exquisite sensibility.”¹³ Interestingly, while Kirshner’s text demonstrates commitment to an ethical sharing of vulnerability that includes her own exposure in relation to the stories of the others she chronicles in *I Live Here*, she expressly rejects any gesture toward sentimentality in the self-reflexive or metanarrative portions of the texts. Instead, she foregrounds the powerful sense of alienation both from herself and from the others she meets in the course of her journeys, as well as the obstacles to understanding or comprehension in a cross-cultural context based on the highly uneven distribution of power and privilege that marks her encounters across the divide between the “secure world” and the “vulnerable world.”

Indeed, rather than embellishing the engagements she describes with the golden halo of the savior meeting those-who-need-saving, or with the depiction of herself as

a hyperevolved witness capable of spectatorial sympathy, Kirshner confesses her blunt desire to disengage: “Tamara wants to give me this photo album to take home with me. What would I do with it? Most people I know are like me and would prefer to look away. I tell her that I can’t take the album. That it’s too precious. I can feel my brutality and dismissiveness disgusting both her and myself.”¹⁴ Like many of the reflexive passages in the text, this one betrays a certain self-recrimination that may read as disingenuous. Kirshner associates herself with a majority of people in their preference to look away: “most people I know,” she says, are “like me.” (Note that this allocates ethical responsibility for such putatively negative behavior to Kirshner, who is set up as the paradigmatic case of a refusal to witness—“looking away”—to which these others simply attach themselves.) But the narrative persona that readers meet is in fact, and seemingly in spite of her own desire, explicitly engaged with the objects of a purposeful gaze.

Kirshner’s *desire* to look away paradoxically coincides with a *refusal* to look away, a refusal which not only means that she will read or watch texts about a faraway place where people are suffering, as “most people I know” might do, but which also involves the near superhuman effort of a seven-year journey that took her to four such places, putting herself at considerable risk, spending her own money to fund the project, and devoting substantial time and energy to making the artifact. The text works here in a typically postmodern sense to highlight the instability of meaning and signification (the acknowledgment of the desire to look away undercut by the fact that one did not look away). Yet at the same time it cannily presents an option to the reader caught in the bind of the distanced witness who may be aroused affectively and politically by the stories of suffering she encounters, but who may neither want nor know how to engage: in spite of preferring to look away, the text directs without declaring that one need not look away. In this way, the problem of the project’s genre also has an ethical dimension, for the range of formal addresses made by the text may offer the reader a sampling of abuses in different “styles” as opposed to calling for a particular response (in the sense that “evidence,” for instance, may demand acknowledgment of abuses, while fiction may ask for imaginative identification). No single narrative line runs clearly through the project, and the spaces between genres and where genres overlap provide simultaneously an opportunity for spectacular consumption and/or for the reader to reassess her own responsibility toward what she sees.

The same deconstructive strategy can be seen in the final line of the Ingushetia portion of the project: “What do I do,” Kirshner writes, “about the fact that I’m going home to try to forget what I have seen? I want to worry about my hair turning gray, or if the blue of my bedroom is really the perfect shade in north-facing light.”¹⁵ The use of the interrogative invites reader identification with this perhaps foundational dilemma of witnessing, the one that revolves around the central characteristic of human agency: mobility. The question evokes the ethically disturbing image of the Western witness able to leave, to go home, even to forget, all the while creating a marketable product based on the journey—while those she has come to witness remain stuck in the geographic and psychological danger zones. This is the central problematic of humanitarian witnessing, as opposed to aid, and it is one that Kirshner acknowledges throughout all four of the notebooks: that she has not come to help but

simply to observe, interact, and learn so that she can return home to share the stories she has gathered with an international public garnered through a sophisticated, highly stylized commodity-object, the *text*.¹⁶

Kirshner's formulation also reveals the cynical contours of the concerns with which a stereotypically conceived first-world woman might ordinarily be occupied: personal and domestic beauty. Yet again, however, the reality of the text and the work, even the conditions Kirshner has revealed as informing her journeying (her grandparents' escape from the Holocaust and especially the loss of her grandmother's son, Izhou, in the process), give the lie to these apparently hollow concerns. This may be what Kirshner *wants* to worry about, but the artifact we hold in our hands is evidence that the subjects of her concern live beyond these traditionally gendered and classed "issues" (gray hair, shades of blue, north-facing windows). The project as artifact, then, leaves readers with a choice. Without the appeal to "grand emotion" and moral certainty, the artifact may provide an instance "where the de-emotionalization of the suffering of the distant other goes hand-in-hand with the over-emotionalization of our safe everyday life." Or else it may remind readers of the difficulty and necessity of forging one's own moral relationship to the suffering of others *within* our (differentially) shared terms of neoliberal capitalist production and consumption.¹⁷

The multimodal form and conflicted emotional repertoire of Kirshner's witnessing, in other words, highlight the problematics of representing human sufferings—and humans suffering—rather than the "truth" of suffering. This approach potentially invites readers to consider the ethical stakes of the aesthetic representation of suffering, atrocity, and violence, and thus the responsibilities, if any, which accompany readerly consumption of the text. However, engaging the "reflexivity of the spectator," as Chouliaraki notes, "offers an alternative vision of agency . . . whose political implications are deeply ambivalent . . . This focus on individual judgment . . . foregrounds the power of personal rather than collective action in making a difference in the lives of vulnerable others. What this form of agency asserts, in particular, is the capacity of popular culture to expand the domain of politics towards mundane tactics of subversion, such as momentary estrangement and playful self-reflection."¹⁸

For all its deconstructive textual maneuvers, finally, the text *I Live Here* begs concrete questions of time and action. As Richard Ashby Wilson and Richard D. Brown have noted, humanitarianism differs from human rights in its temporality of immediacy: humanitarian work wants to do something *now* to alleviate suffering, while human rights, which constitute the institutional-legal framework for such alleviation, may enable such intervention at the much slower pace of institutional machinery.¹⁹ The humanitarian thrust of Kirshner's project is one of delayed gratification. The proceeds are to be donated to Amnesty International, while the I Live Here Foundation is established to promote further witnessing journeys and to set up creative writing workshops in the places she has visited. More intangibly, the project is supposed to prompt something called "awareness" or "consciousness" in reader/spectators who engage with the *I Live Here* phenomenon (although as one reviewer aptly noted, "Those most likely to read it are already persuaded something should be done about these perils"). And perhaps most remotely, reader/spectators are imagined

as turning to “explore these kinds of stories in their own communities . . . [and] take some form of action to stop these things.”²⁰ In addition, the seemingly random nature of the four places chosen as subjects of the notebooks (Ingushetia, Burma, Ciudad Juárez, Malawi) underscores the lack of definition of the form that “action” might take in relation to the stories narrated in the text.

Temporality in relation to action has a distinctly aesthetic (as opposed to pragmatic or ethical) cast in *I Live Here*. More than one review refers to the “immediacy” of the collection, but always in relation to the text’s “unusual” form, its “vibrant, collage-like approach to the subject matter,” as *Publisher’s Weekly* puts it. The *Oxford English Dictionary* is instructive in reminding us that the quality of immediacy refers not only to time but also to person and place: “Said of a person or thing in its relation to another: that has no intermediary or intervening member, medium, or agent; that is in actual contact or direct personal relation; in reference to place: often used loosely of a distance which is treated as of no account; of time, occurring, accomplished, or taking effect without delay or lapse of time; done at once; instant.” Each of these senses of the term is relevant to Kirshner’s project, which, through the metanarrative of its producer and the blurring of genre and media, collapses time, place, and person even as it records stories that are distinct in setting, character, and plot. The portions of the text composed of Kirshner’s journals often collapse time and place in musings about what Kirshner was doing at the time the story she writes about was happening, or what the subject of one of the stories or testimonials “would have been like” in a different place or time, a strategy that operates as part of the metanarrative search for identification, if not understanding.

Even the title, *I Live Here*, makes a claim to readers based on shared temporal immediacy and geographic distance. Our sense as readers is that we bear an ethical duty to respond because we share the same historical moment, coupled with the sense that we are able to respond even though we live in different places or contexts (the implication of “I live here” is “You live there”). The graphic narrative’s form—its play with sequentiality, juxtaposition and overlay, and the space of the white gutters between frames—encourages its specific engagement with the problems of representing historical trauma. As Hillary Chute has commented, the “formal grammar” of graphic narrative “rejects transparency and renders textualization conspicuous, inscribing the context in its graphic presentation.”²¹ This attention to the problematics of representing human rights violations in historical context can also be found in recent books such as Marjana Satrapi’s *Complete Persepolis*, Joe Sacco’s *Palestine*, and Emmanuel Guibert et al.’s *The Photographer*, all of which include a sometimes ironic or poignant commentary on the author-artist’s aesthetic-political position toward the violence at hand and clear attention to the challenge of rendering the violent ruptures of history as visual-textual object.

I Live Here is distinct from these related graphic narratives, however, in its depiction of multiple locations, predominantly heartfelt tone, and collage of media, genre, and points of view. As opposed to the (often interrupted) sequentiality of “comics,” *I Live Here*’s collage implies simultaneity in two registers. On one level, collage provides a rich textual flow that refuses a simple narrative of the causes, implications, and effects of suffering. With only the barest historical context provided on

the box shell of the collection or within each notebook, and the difficulty of locating authorial/artistic perspective, collage also confounds our desire for a feminist standpoint—“derived from political practice,” collective without being essentializing, and imbued with political agency—from which to consider the framing conventions that govern the text.²² On another level, the simultaneity and multiplicity of perspectives in collage, which are quite apparent in each notebook, work against the public-private distinction which has historically relegated violations of women’s rights to the domestic sphere and therefore outside the purview of human rights. The roving eye moves from interior (both domestic and psychological) to public spaces in *Ingushetia*, from the Don Ban Yong Refugee Camp to a woman’s abortion performed in an unnamed space on the Thai/Burmese border, from a mother’s memories to the public notice of her daughter’s disappearance in Ciudad Juárez and from Miriam’s story of passing AIDS on to her daughter at birth to a boys’ prison in Malawi. As Donna Sullivan writes, in order to incorporate gender-based violence and the vulnerability of women into human rights discourse, “there is a critical need to place gender-based violence within the context of women’s structural inequality.”²³ Yet that context—and the radical gestures toward social justice it makes possible—remain largely buried behind the layered revelations of unanchored individual stories in *I Live Here*.

Significantly, then, the most relevant aspect of the dictionary definition of immediacy is not its object (person, place, or time) but rather its promise to collapse barriers, to achieve a condition with “no intermediary or intervening member, medium, or agent; [being] in actual contact or direct personal relation.” Paradoxically, perhaps the most stable characteristic of *I Live Here* is in fact its status as a highly mediated object, an artifact deeply conscious of its status as a commodity. The notebooks are stylized, colorful, multimedia combinations of text and image: beautiful and disturbing to look at, to pore over.²⁴ In this sense, the term “immediacy” offered as praise from otherwise ambivalent reviewers refers more appropriately to the attractiveness of the text itself, which Kirshner describes as an attempt to engage her friends and community, to create a “visual language” that would entice such people to read—in contrast to the news accounts which, she claims, do not invite interest in or identification with the hitherto unknown stories of unknown people. This is a very different turn on the term “immediacy,” and one that warrants a good deal of critical attention in terms of long-standing debates about the aestheticization of other people’s experiences of pain, terror, and atrocity. Of particular concern here is the way in which the *logic* of the text, of linking an aesthetics of immediacy with the rhetoric of humanitarian crisis, reasserts the prerogatives of the liberal-capitalist state rather than critiquing its constitutive structural conditions. As Peter Nyers has noted, “To speak of emergencies is to at once enter into a dualistic dance with all that which is taken to constitute a normal and ordered state of affairs . . . A crisis and an ordered existence constitute separate and distinct worlds; their relationship is one of strict difference.”²⁵ The rhetorics and aesthetics of immediacy confound attempts to reread the historical conditions of suffering against the priorities of the state and in light of the long duration of these “crises,” as well as to foreground the possibility of transnational feminist alliances as opposed to humanitarian intervention.

In this context, then, is the term “paper documentary” meant to capture some-

thing about the production technique of this artifact, as opposed to the form of its content? Or is it to call attention to its use of postmodern cinematic framing and temporality to invite the reader's engagement with its stories? For *I Live Here* does employ a range of techniques applicable to both cinematic and written narrative: jump-cuts in time and space; "shot-reverse shot" or "dialogic" narrative construction; metanarrative "voice-overs" that reflect upon the production of the story and the position of its "author" in relation to those who are the objects of her inquiry and gaze. Visually stimulating, the multimodal representations can muddle the human rights stakes of the stories, stakes articulated through rhetorical devices and narrative strategies tied to genre, context, and identifiable claimants. Chouliaraki, for instance, analyzes the preference for photorealism of the "distant sufferer" in mass-media humanitarian campaigns based on what she calls the "shock effect." Establishing a "social relationship anchored in the colonial gaze and premised on maximal distance between spectator and suffering other," this form of photorealism, often by anonymous photographers, offers documentary "proof" of abuse as an emotional catalyst to move spectators from shock to indignation.²⁶ Other photorealist campaigns work through processes of the spectator's sympathetic identification with the innocent, virtuous, or dignified sufferer, as opposed to any recognition of complicity in the structural conditions of violence. Both approaches rely on "the power of grand emotions," as well as on a conception of spectator-as-liberal-subject responsive to universalized images of injustice, to motivate a response.

I Live Here avoids these visual rhetorics and their associative emotions in favor of close-up, grainy, and gritty images (photorealist, abstract, conceptual), not only of the sufferers of violations but of their most immediate metaphoric and literal contexts: photographs of the empty room of the disappeared girl in Ciudad Juárez, the silhouette of the baby born in a graveyard in Banda's fable in the Malawi notebook, the red-filtered images of a woman's painted fingernails and upturned, half-open mouth in "Mae Sot. Thailand. Hotel Room. Night." As an example of "post-humanitarian communication," this style "foreground[s] the act of representation rather than emotional affiliation towards suffering," thereby acknowledging "that compassion fatigue lies not so much in the excess of human suffering that transcends our individual capacity to feel for or act on it, but rather in the excess of discourses of morality around which we are called to organize our feelings and action toward suffering."²⁷ In the "hotel room" photos described above, for instance, the questions of why the photographer chose to take these suggestive photos of herself and why the "authors" chose to include them are both open to speculation. Once we remove the humanitarian gesture toward grand emotions and limit our address of the text to its representations of structural conditions of violence, we are left with either a post-modern pastiche of suffering or a space in which the spectator must complete the terms—political, moral, and emotional—of the engagement.

In this way, the artifact presumes a highly active reader who will not only engage with the texts in all their complexities and multiplicities but also return frequently while reading to the white box containing the scant contextual information about each location along with a set of minimalist credits (in font and content), and potentially even supplement that material on her own. While we do not assume that an

uncontested context exists for any of the “crises” depicted in *I Live Here*, we nonetheless find their radical decontextualization and dehistoricization troubling in terms of the potential for political action the text may (want to) generate. Because the text already privileges a self-reflexive turn on the reader’s part, the lack of context further directs her attention away from either the need or potential for collective political action. If she does *not* perform supplementary contextual work while reading (which might initially take the form of Google searches and Wikipedia hits), then the transcendent, transnational, identificatory aspects of the project remain limited, and the texts themselves end up being simply patchwork quilts of suffering. This image, interestingly, is used on the website itself, in which viewers must click on one of the “patches” of a virtual “quilt” to glimpse the sights and sounds of one of the spaces represented in the text—a trailer, or teaser, in cinematic and consumer terms.

Authorship

This brings us to the extremely fraught questions of authorship and, by extension, authenticity as they have informed the genres of *testimonio* and witness literature to which this collection may belong. For example, if one reads *Ingushetia* without glancing back to the credits on the box, one could easily assume that the third narrative in the notebook, titled “Hedda,” is a testimonial: the direct experience of a girl as told to the narrator we have come so tenuously to know in the notebook’s introductory pages, Mia Kirshner. Hedda is a fifteen-year-old refugee from the Russian-Chechen war in Grozny, and we meet her in her apartment in nearby Ingushetia, surrounded by her family. The occasion is a visit from a Western woman who is never identified: “Two people start up the concrete stairs. One looks younger than her years, the other more weathered. They are the woman from the West, and her translator.”²⁸ Shortly after, readers witness as the family turns their gaze upon the “Western woman”: “From their vantage points they examine the visitors, especially the woman; her long shiny dark hair, her clothes, her graceful gestures. She is from a place where streets are not punctuated by craters; where people don’t live in basements open to the sky; where soldiers don’t come in the middle of the night.”²⁹

A celebrity starring most famously in the HBO series *The L Word*, Kirshner is a beautiful, waif-like woman with long dark hair; so readers may automatically believe that the long shiny dark hair described in the story is Kirshner’s own—and why not? The journals that begin the notebook (and, by extension, the entire project) are Kirshner’s, reflexively locating her and sharing some personal narrative reflecting on the reasons for her journey. What would possess a reader to think that this story about a “Western woman”—who is just a woman, neither journalist nor writer nor human rights observer nor aid worker—is fictional? That Hedda is a made-up character and the set-up of a refugee family encountering a Western witness for no apparent reason is just that: a set-up? What is the effect of this mix of fiction and nonfiction, and what are the risks and rewards of presenting testimony and story as indistinguishable within the text? In the context of debates best exemplified in the case of Rigoberta Menchú Tum’s *testimonio I, Rigoberta Menchú*, we are interested in the textual effects of such seeming sleights of hand, moving from eyewitness accounts and testimonials to fictions—often crafted by highly acclaimed writers and artists—with attribution of

the shift easily missed. Particularly in the context of a text that includes realist photographic images and descriptions of extreme and extremely intimate experience, how does the blurring of boundaries between “truth” and “fiction,” between testimony and story, affect the cultural work of the text as ethical witness literature?³⁰

Further, in terms of the fictional portions of the text, what is the effect of celebrity culture on this production? There are two ways in which we might consider the function of the celebrity in *I Live Here*. First, several of the “authors” of the text are “celebrities” in the sense of being highly acclaimed artists and writers, intellectuals who have earned serious credibility in the work of human rights culture: Chris Abani, Karen Connelly, Phoebe Gloeckner, Kamel Khélif, and Joe Sacco. These contributors bring unassailable intellectual and human rights credentials to the project, and many readers, not to mention scholars and teachers, will be drawn to the work on the basis of their legitimacy. And we find reading those contributions is enhanced through intertextual dialogue with the authors’ and artists’ other work. For instance, Abani’s short story, “This Red String Is for You, Mama,” in the Burma notebook, extends in a new genre and location the questions with which he frames his poetry collection, *Dog Woman*, in the opening “Author’s note”: “An exploration of the patriarchal attempts to contain women and the failure of that containment? An attempt to come to the truth of women, an attempt that must fail. One poet’s journey into the dark haunting of his own masculinity?”³¹ Unbelievable, yet wholly compelling (like the spectral voice that animates Abani’s novella *Song for Night*), the young Karen, speaker of “This Red String,” takes us far from Abani’s more typical geopolitical and cultural references (his Catholic and Igbo upbringing, political persecution in Nigeria, emigrant experience in England and the United States, and dialogue with other poets and authors).

Abani draws attention to the terms of this journey through the epistolary form. Although the story comprises letters the speaker composes to her mother, to a Burmese soldier, and to her rapist, the addressee can only be the reader. The play with voice and form, written in Abani’s typically visual, lyrical language, works with the collage-effect of the notebook as a whole to call attention to the politics of global knowledge production constituted by what Idelber Avelar describes as “the international division of intellectual labor [which] produces certain real effects: a hierarchy of worldviews, the presumption of universality of certain concepts, the reification and naturalization of certain categories.”³² In other words, Abani’s explicit attention to form and voice resists unquestioning universalization of categories and ideas, insisting instead that human rights claims and actions always emerge out of and work within ever-shifting systems of power and governance.

The voices of sufferers, witnesses, perpetrators, bystanders, and respondents are never self-evident but instead are always subject to the conditions of their embodiment, situatedness, and circulation. We see a parallel project in the novella *Becoming Abigail*, Abani’s story of the sexual abuse and sex trafficking of a Nigerian teenager brought to London by her cousin. As in *Song for Night*, the novella form—appropriate to the young protagonists’ short lives—highlights and exemplifies the failure of *Bildungsroman* narrative encapsulated in the novel and dominant human rights discourse.³³ As with the other contributors to *I Live Here*, recognition of Abani’s

emphasis on denaturalizing the gaze and discourses that frame human rights violations, *without* dismissing the violations themselves or the suffering they cause, can emerge only out of a deeper understanding of his *oeuvre*. But *I Live Here* instead provides only the reductive obfuscation created by the brief caption on the story's first page that "This Red String" was "inspired by the people of Tham Hin and Don Bow Yong."³⁴

In bringing together these diverse authors who draw on their own human rights experiences, Kirshner is, of course, also fighting against the most cynical readings of her own cliché: the Western celebrity nourishing herself on the deprivations of the global south. In interviews, Kirshner freely acknowledges this problem. When asked in an interview about "the idea of going out and doing humanitarian work," Kirshner replies: "I think there is something really cheesy about . . . an actor going out and doing this kind of work. And in a way it has become cliché. A positive cliché, but a cliché. I just am very careful in the way in which I speak about it, because I think often it's exploited for [their] careers."³⁵ More significantly, Kirshner acknowledges the motivation for her journey as a kind of stimulation or enlivening of the self: "I was very comfortable but I felt dead inside, creatively disconnected."³⁶ This, along with a realization of her own "ignorance of the world" in the aftermath of 9/11, prompted Kirshner to embark upon her journeys.

As a way of activating a potentially ethical act of transnational witnessing, Kirshner's honest acknowledgment again cuts two ways. On the one hand, the act of refueling one's self through contact with extremity can be read as the mirror image of mass publics gorging themselves on the images and narratives attached to celebrities. In this sense, traveling to "crisis zones" confirms the absolute difference between the first-world witness and those whom she has come to see. This difference is both physical and systemic, affirmed in a statement that may be read as a preposterous oxymoron to those who are chronically unsafe: to be comfortable *and* simultaneously dead inside? The people whose stories are told in *I Live Here* implicitly search for the simple "comfort" of a place to lay one's head without violation or deprivation, and so the inner numbing described by Kirshner evokes the alienation and ennui of the overdeveloped world, an escapist narrative with a long history behind it in which drinking at the well of others' "primitivism," suffering, fortitude, and grace is imagined as a cure for the decadence of civilization.

At the same time, however, Kirshner's work undeniably evokes the ethical project delineated by Judith Butler in *Precarious Life*. In that rich, complex text, Butler works to identify some ways in which shared vulnerability can inform global politics and, more specifically, international feminist coalition. This latter is Kirshner's specific project, beyond and beneath its impetus to connect to contemporary humanitarian or human rights agendas. Each of the four notebooks addresses the profound vulnerability of women and girls in the global landscape, and in each, Kirshner shares something of her own vulnerability in an ongoing metanarrative that takes multiple generic forms. Butler asks: "What allows us to encounter one another? What are the conditions of possibility for an international feminist coalition?"³⁷

These are precisely the questions that Kirshner takes up in *I Live Here* and in its marketing apparatus: the multitude of interviews, videos, reviews, and blurbs that

have accompanied its release as a commodity. The gestures made by Kirshner toward “encountering,” or finding shared ground for comprehension or connection, with the women and girls she meets (or, in the case of Ciudad Juárez, those disappeared and dead girls and women she learns about) leave her exposed and vulnerable. Kirshner has shared her own intimate experiences of wounding but also opened herself to the imperialism of comparison in a global hierarchy of pain. Yet the creation of a continuum of suffering in many “first-world” or white liberal feminist accounts of women’s experience in a global context have been subject to forceful criticism.³⁸ It resonates, especially, with Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s discussion of the Western feminist tendency to prioritize gender as a decontextualized category, anterior to and outside of culture-history-politics-economics: “The problem with this analytical strategy is that it assumes men and women are already constituted as sexual-political subjects prior to their entry into the arena of social relations . . . Women are produced through these very relations as well as being implicated in forming these relations.”³⁹

Human Rights Claims

The questions surrounding the subjects of the disparate stories of *I Live Here* also apply to the violations they represent in the two senses of speaking for and showing again that Gayatri Spivak so carefully defines in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Who are the claimants and what are they claiming? What is the specific nature of the address being made to readers? We approach these questions through a look at the ways in which the human rights claims are framed in the volume as a whole, as well as the links the various authors make between their own positions and those of their subjects.

As noted above, the common thread that binds the project is the vulnerability of women and children, connected to their status as stateless persons or refugees, in worlds marked by civil war, the pains of economic globalization, and the spread of HIV/AIDS. In keeping with the aesthetic of immediacy, each situation is a contemporary example of the tug between national and transnational forces of protection and exploitation. If citizens and noncitizens alike are subject to the rules of the states in which they live, and what separates them is “entitlement to protection,” then women and children in these stories exist as what Ariella Azoulay terms “flawed citizens . . . more exposed than ‘proper’ citizens to hazards and risks.”⁴⁰ Moreover, the examples in *I Live Here* are presented in the contextual notes as long-term disasters, rather than new crises that demand quick response: Chechnya, 1994; Burma, 1962; Ciudad Juárez, 1993; Malawi, no date given. We might reread the aesthetics of immediacy in these narratives of abandonment, then, as the artists’ representation of untenable conditions that have nevertheless become routinized.

Despite the contemporaneity of both the aesthetic forms and the violations they represent, each pointing to the need for new human rights discourses to better address current conditions, the project is framed in the familiar terms of the preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the suffering of the (relatively) safe. Kirshner begins the first notebook and ends the last by situating herself as the granddaughter of Holocaust survivors who lost a child at Auschwitz. The opening appeals to memories of the historical context of the Universal Declaration itself, while the ending, when Kirshner stops believing in the possibility that her uncle miraculously

survived the camps and “no longer ha[s] any trouble understanding that a person can disappear completely,” offers closure to her own family history.⁴¹ The arrangement of the notebooks moves from contemporary rights violations, starting with Sacco’s tracing of the Chechen independence movement in the 1990s, to historical ones, such as the Stalinist purges in 1937, and back to the more recent effects of economic globalization and the devastations of HIV/ AIDS. This recursive narrative offers an implied connection between the contemporary concerns of the project and older human rights discourses.

However, it also renders its own human rights discourse incoherent. On the one hand, it invokes the Universal Declaration, articulated largely in response to the devastations of World War II and Nazi horror, and the normative response of citizenship and protection from the violence of the state. On the other hand, it presents suffering and abuses—from HIV/AIDS to economic globalization—as illegible in those dominant terms. The multifaceted and heteroglossic portrayal of unheard stories in *I Live Here* could potentially be read as a critique of and response to the limitations of the univocal and ostensibly universal register of the Universal Declaration; however, that potential is compromised by framing the project in those very terms of that document, without any commentary on the ways in which they fail to speak to other kinds of suffering.

The claims articulated through the project are thus contradictory. They are seemingly presented by the presumed speaker of the Universal Declaration whom Azoulay imagines—“the governed citizen who understands that he or she is the inverted reflection of the noncitizen, of the residue left between citizenship and territory, to whose defense the citizen has come”—who nonetheless is cognizant of her own privilege and seeks aesthetically and politically to forge other connections with those she represents.⁴² Kirshner (or sometimes one of the writers/artists/contributors, who is often indistinguishable without careful reference to the credits from the persona we have come to know as Kirshner’s) confesses something in each of the notebooks of her own wounds—familial, historical, interpersonal, and always gendered—as a way of comprehending the violent stories she is telling. In notebook 3, *Ciudad Juárez*, contributor Lauren Kirshner, Mia’s sister, writes a metanarrative in call and response form in which she narrates her encounter with a box of artifacts from the life of Claudia Ivette Gonzalez, one of four hundred disappeared women from the area. This set of “Twenty Poems for Claudia” (which, to further muddle generic categories, is termed “non-fiction” in the credits) begins with a direct address: “Claudia, I don’t want to presume. I’m only trying to understand you, imagining the things we might have shared.”⁴³ The set of prose poems goes on to speculate on the things a girl from Ciudad Juárez destined to start work in the *maquiladora* at age fifteen might have shared with an unnamed narrator from somewhere in the “first world,” an imaginative project that builds on Kirshner’s acknowledgment in her journals that the missing and murdered girls “look like girls who might have had their lockers next to mine at Oakwood Collegiate. The ones who shared Finesse hair spray as they teased their bangs in a mirror, talking about their first kiss in the basement at a house party, trading secrets about the boy they had a huge crush on OH MY GOD THERE HE IS HE’S WALKING PAST YOUR LOCKER DID HE LOOK AT ME?”⁴⁴

Throughout this notebook, girls emerging into womanhood are constructed through the capitalist-heterosexist narrative of teenage love-lust, learning to be an object of beauty through the commodity culture that seems to traverse both worlds via references to products such as Coca-Cola, Finesse, Guess sneakers, Big Macs, *Cosmopolitan*, and shimmering opal lipstick. Hints at differential contexts for this journey are there in the descriptions of Claudia's work assembling cables and circuits at Lear Corporation's Factory 173. But the act of translation focuses specifically on the way in which girls the world over are purportedly interpellated into the world of grown-up (heterosexual) sex/love with its accompanying social and moral systems: "Claudia, I once loved a man who was married. I was nineteen, the same age you were when you did the same thing."⁴⁵

The question that hovers over such confessions by the speakers of the journals, stories, poems, testimonies, or nonfictions that constitute *I Live Here* is this: if the shared ground that links the narratives is the littered pathway into heterosexual desirability, why is the girl from the "third world" sold, exploited, brutalized, displaced, or dead, while the girl from the "first world" is alive and apparently well, narrating the stories? However inadvertently, the text confirms that serious bodily harm is a likely outcome for girls in those other places, while the first-world girl narrator escapes from her scrapes with sexual assault and exploitation relatively unscathed. In addition to confirming this injurious stereotype about the correspondence of first-world and third-world identities to a predictable distribution of safety and harm, this construction also belies the realities of sexual violence in "first-world" contexts. As with most human rights stories, unfortunately, the text reifies this significant cultural stereotype over and above the individual stories and testimonies shared within its pages; the fact that the stories themselves are "true" and accurately reflect material-historical conditions does not cancel the pernicious effects of their formulaic presentation in perpetuating structural imbalances between gendered citizens of the safe and vulnerable worlds.

In spite of the textual attempts at transnational feminist solidarity, this representational imbalance is rooted in the flip approach to "first-world" as compared with "third-world" experiences of sexual violence by women. The most intimate of the textual confessions meant to set up a shared imagined experience in *I Live Here* comes from Kirshner herself in notebook 2, *Burma*. This notebook focuses on the sex trade across the Burmese-Thai border, as well as the trafficking in child soldiers to fuel Burma's war against its Karen people. In one of her journal entries, situated between a "collage of interviews with and writing by former child soldiers" by J. B. MacKinnon and a "graphic novella" about a Burmese "sex worker" in Thailand by Kamel Khélif, Kirshner announces: "Memory has caught me by the throat."⁴⁶ Describing her passage on a road in the midst of a Thai red-light district, the narrator "can't help but recall my own first encounters with a sexual underworld. The illicit thrill of going to the sex shows and the strip clubs. Sitting in the porn arcade giving a hand-job to the guy who sat in the back of my Russian lit class."⁴⁷

The narrative is an account of one woman's discovery: first, of her ability to reject the puritanical mores designed to police her sexuality as a good (first-world) girl, and then, much later, of the presence of the women in the porn videos: "Why were they

there? Where did they come from? Did they come from a family like mine?”⁴⁸ The facing page features a close-up headshot taken by a sex worker in Thailand during her shift. Couched in the language of rights, the accompanying text reads, “I am frightened. I have dignity.” But it also admonishes the reader to “examine this life carefully. Beauty is in cracks and broken corners.”⁴⁹ And on the next page, the description of an encounter between Kirshner and a seventeen-year-old sex worker occurs. Looking into the girl’s eyes, narrating the experience of recognition, Kirshner reveals her sexual assault at the age of seventeen, which she immediately downplays: “There is nothing unusual about my story.”⁵⁰

In both cases, the experience of the narrator that provides a point of connection with the wounded woman from elsewhere can be read through the systematic sexualization and exploitation of women under capitalist patriarchy. In this way, grounding one’s attempt to understand another from a different cultural context does not fall into the common trap of conflating an individual wound with a systemic cultural one. Still—and just as readers of Mohanty would predict—the emphasis on a shared experience of gender and sex elides the dramatically different ways that patriarchal prescriptions around women’s sexuality, the violation of women’s bodies, and the sex industry that capitalizes on them operate in the cultural and economic contexts of the geopolitical spaces constructed in the text.

Even at the level of terminology, contextual differences are erased: the story of Mi-Su is introduced as “the words of a sex worker in Mae Sot, who was interviewed using questions provided by a sex worker in Vancouver.”⁵¹ Perhaps Kirshner chose the term “sex work” as a neutral descriptor (similar to “genital cutting” as opposed to “female genital mutilation” or “circumcision”). But this choice also risks erasing the differential experiences of coercion marking the performance of this “work” in these contexts. Beyond debates about language and terminology, however, we would argue that the real issue in this case is one of textual indeterminacy in a circumstance that demands more contextual specificity: for instance, the Vancouver “sex worker” could be a trafficked woman just as the Thai “sex worker” is, except that Kirshner only reveals the status and context of the latter.

Audience, Spectatorship, and Transnational Witnessing

The work that Kirshner undertakes and the text she produced as a result gesture toward the process of seeking feminist solidarity outlined by Butler, a process that Butler recognizes as an act of cultural translation in which one’s own language “must break up and yield if I am to know you. You are what I gain through this disorientation and loss. This is how the human comes into being, again and again, as that which we have yet to know.”⁵² Despite the indeterminacy in terms of voice, testimony, and authorship in *I Live Here*, Kirshner has captured in her metanarrative something of the epistemological disorientation described by Butler as necessary to bear global feminist witness, the recognition that she cannot fully know the other, that her attempts are limited by her distance in time, place, and experience—what Butler might call her “first-worldism”—and that this *not fully knowing* is an essential component of any possible gesture toward solidarity.

Ultimately, however, the gesture remains just that—a gesture, which originates

etymologically as a “movement of the body used to give effect to oratory.” In other words, inasmuch as the aesthetic parameters of the project are driven by the demands of capitalist commodity culture, the attempted expression of solidarity remains compromised in relation to the political work it approaches, ultimately unable to advance beyond the limits of rhetorical strategy. Lauren Berlant has coined the notion of an “intimate public” to describe a “place of recognition and reflection” that “flourishes as a porous, affective scene of identification among strangers that promises a certain experience of belonging and provides a complex of consolation, confirmation, discipline, and discussion about how to live as an *x*,” in which “*x*” refers to the identity position that anchors the intimate public: women, minority, gay, and so forth.⁵³ Berlant’s concept is useful in considering the rhetorical limitations of *I Live Here*, not only because it captures the kind of cultural work the text performs in gendered terms but also for its description of the role of consumer culture that regulates the text’s relationship to the political.

In the case of *I Live Here*, three spheres of identity, identification, and desire for recognition (or three “*x*’s”) operate to situate our responses to it in an intimate public sphere:

- the desire to be recognized as a person who is aware of and cares about global human rights, and who envisions a different, more just world;
- the desire to be recognized and to participate in a global community of women familiar with the shared exigencies (and brutalities) of gendered experience; and
- the desire to recognize and to identify with the pain of others around the world, a pain that may either affirm or minimize one’s own sense of experiencing emotional or physical pain.

Each of these spheres of identification carries political implications along with the nodes of desire, fantasy, projection, and narcissism that are the hallmarks of intimate publics. Berlant calls such publics “juxtapolitical,” to get at the way in which they operate in proximity to the political. But, inasmuch as they are mediated through a capitalist consumer culture that ensures recognition and gratification through the unchanging same of the commodity object, these spaces are ultimately detached from real political praxis or collective action. In spite of the postmodern critique of global human rights violations advanced in *I Live Here*, as Berlant notes of the texts of intimate publics in general, “the cohabitation of critique, conventionality, and the commodity produces more movement *within* a space than toward being or wanting to be *beyond* it.”⁵⁴

Locating ourselves as well as the text within spheres of commodity production and consumption also calls for reflection on how we imagine our responsibilities within a given intimate public. Azoulay’s reformulation of citizenship in response to images “on the verge of catastrophe,” one she draws explicitly from the conditions of political abandonment shared by women and noncitizens (stateless persons and refugees), is helpful in this regard. Her reformulation emphasizes the ethical and civic duty of the spectator, rather than the guarantees of the sovereign, whose catalyst is the shared photograph (an argument that also applies to *I Live Here*, a multimodal work).⁵⁵ Acknowledging such citizenship as a “social fiction,” Azoulay nonetheless offers it as

a way of reconceptualizing our responsibilities to one another. This citizenship, inaugurated by the circulating photograph, forms a contingent community of the photographer, subject, and spectator whose duties are not directed toward the nation-state (and the unequal protection it affords) but toward one another. The social fiction of expanded citizenship spurs the imaginative possibility of a rights claim whose interested parties are not delimited by the sovereignty of the abusive state. In contradistinction to arguments on behalf of the power of narrative and photography to cultivate sympathetic identifications, Azoulay asks us to consider our participation in the “civil contract of photography”—a condition or sphere in which “the citizen . . . enjoys the right to see because she has a responsibility toward what she sees.”⁵⁶ With the knowledge that the process of exposure always contains elements of violence and always incorporates different degrees of mediation and consent, such citizenship points toward “the contours of the spectator’s responsibility toward what is visible.”⁵⁷

Azoulay’s concept of the civil contract of photography resonates with Mohanty’s evolving work on responsibility across the difference that constitutes “first” and “third” world spaces. In 2003, twenty years after her initial reflections, Mohanty emphasized anticapitalist struggle as a promising mode for authentic transnational feminist solidarity:

We need an anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist, and contextualized feminist project to expose and make visible the various, overlapping forms of subjugation of women’s lives. Activists and scholars must also identify and re-envision forms of collective resistance that women, especially, in their different communities enact in their everyday lives. It is their particular exploitation at this time, their potential epistemic privilege, as well as their particular forms of solidarity that can be the basis for reimagining a liberatory politics for the start of this century.⁵⁸

As Mohanty rightly notes, capitalism and globalization in the neo-imperial millennial era have created increasingly brutal forms of oppression based on race and gender divisions, and a global feminist project that truly wants to hear, share, and respond to the stories of the world’s most marginalized women and children must understand and criticize these capitalist underpinnings.

Ultimately, Kirshner orchestrates just such a sharp—if not quite ironic—criticism of the commodification of women and of women’s life experiences in the context of global capitalism, and of the range of violences that accompany that commodification, across the variegated texts that make up *I Live Here*. But moving beyond the overarching stories of displacement, exploitation, loss, suffering, and death characterizing the “third-world” end of the global capitalist spectrum will require more than articulating the shifting degrees of alienation or connection one feels as a privileged observer, more than creating a text whose “immediacy” rests in its “vibrant” visual language. Instead, it demands a political project that seeks to unsettle not only the language and conventions used to tell human rights stories but also its own position within the global capitalist system that informs them.

Indeed, one wonders how, for all of Kirshner’s self-conscious reflexivity about differences in gender norms and privileges marking “first” and “third” worlds, the project could refrain from offering the same kind of metanarrative reflection on its

own production as a relatively high-end commodity implicated in the global capitalist system. A visit to the “I Live Here” website is illustrative of this curious lack of reflection and critique. Audiences will find a home page designed as a kind of quilt or collage of images, too small, colorful, and abstract to be fully made out. Pass the cursor over random images and they will pop forward so that you can click to read part of a story from one of the notebooks, or see a video taken in one of the locations, or learn more about the I Live Here Foundation or Kirshner’s blog. Another random click and one finds oneself at the site of web design company Imagined Creative, reading the following text: “We create results by: taking time to understand your target market and getting familiar with your strategy; identifying your needs and expectations; and providing useful and creative suggestions that compliment [*sic*] your vision.”⁵⁹

From the sounds and sights of the streets of Juárez in grainy videoscape to the glossy, high-concept home page of the creative designer used to make the *I Live Here* site—it is a flash journey for consuming members of this hip, cosmopolitan, intimate human rights public. A flash journey across the compressed space and time of global capital that has helped create the conditions for gender violence in Ciudad Juárez: its story decontextualized, unremarked, not yet unsettled enough. The greatest potential of the text in terms of both transnational feminist praxis and women’s human rights, then, may rest in its possible invocation of a reader or spectator who is unsatisfied by the text’s stated aims of exposure and unmasking, by the gap between its critique of capitalism and its performance of a capitalist status quo, and who may then be moved through the process of consumption to a space beyond consumption, to an active re-engagement with the shared conditions through which the encounter with—and, thus, the responsibility to—suffering emerges.

NOTES

1. Thomas Keenan, “Mobilizing Shame,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 103, no. 2/3 (2004): 435–36.
2. *Ibid.*, 348. See also Stanley Cohen and Bruna Seu, “Knowing Enough Not to Feel Too Much: Emotional Thinking about Human Rights Appeals,” in *Truth Claims: Representation and Human Rights*, ed. Mark Philip Bradley and Patrice Petro (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 187–201.
3. Lilie Chouliaraki, “Post-Humanitarianism: Humanitarian Communication beyond a Politics of Pity,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 13, no. 2 (2010): 108.
4. *Ibid.*, 108.
5. *Ibid.*, 110.
6. *Ibid.*, 120–21.
7. Mia Kirshner et al., *I Live Here* (New York: Pantheon, 2008); see <http://web.mit.edu/ilivehere> (accessed March 2, 2011).
8. Wendy S. Hesford, “*Kairos* and the Geopolitical Rhetorics of Global Sex Work and Video Advocacy,” in *Just Advocacy? Women’s Human Rights, Transnational Feminisms, and the Politics of Representation*, ed. Hesford and Wendy Kozol (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 149; emphasis in original.
9. See, for example, Leela Fernandes, “The Boundaries of Terror: Feminism, Human Rights, and the Politics of Global Crisis,” in *ibid.*, 56–74.

10. Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, "Introduction: Transnational Feminist Practices and Questions of Postmodernity," in *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices*, ed. Grewal and Kaplan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 17.
11. Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, trans. Relä Mazali and Ruvik Daniele (New York: Zone Books, 2008), 265, 267.
12. James Dawes, "Human Rights and the Desire for the Real" (unpublished).
13. Karen Haltunnen, "Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture," *American Historical Review* 100, no. 2 (1995), 308. See also Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), for an exploration of this problem in the context of the U.S. abolitionist movement.
14. Kirshner et al., *I Live Here*, 1:83.
15. Ibid.
16. See *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 2, no. 2 (2010), especially Paul Gready, "Introduction: 'Responsibility to the Story,'" 177–90, for an extensive consideration of the ethics of production, circulation, and use of human rights stories.
17. Chouliaraki, "Post-Humanitarianism," 122. The concept of *témoignage* coined and invoked by the humanitarian aid organization Médecins sans frontières (MSF) is useful in thinking about the distinction between humanitarian aid and witnessing. As the MSF website articulates, the organization itself was born from the frustration of doctors who returned from working with the International Committee of the Red Cross during the Biafran war unable to speak about what they had witnessed under Red Cross policy: "They joined journalists from a French medical journal to create an association, Médecins sans frontières, which would provide aid in war zones, but also talk about what they saw. They hoped that by bringing abuses to light they could bring them to an end . . . Acting and speaking, treating and witnessing were the key words used during the creation of MSF. Today, these are still valid." See <http://www.msf.org.uk/advocacy.aspx>. Of course, Kirshner's approach takes "acting" and "treating" out of the equation, at least in the near-term, focusing on "speaking" and "witnessing"—although the *I Live Here* website does have links to ongoing projects started in Malawi, for instance, as a result of her visits there. See Peter Redfield, "A Less Modest Witness: Collective Advocacy and Motivated Truth in a Medical Humanitarian Movement," *American Ethnologist* 33, no. 1 (2006): 3–26, for more on the concept of *témoignage*.
18. Chouliaraki, "Post-Humanitarianism," 115, 121.
19. Richard Ashby Wilson and Richard D. Brown, "Introduction," in *Humanitarianism and Suffering: The Mobilization of Empathy*, ed. Brown and Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
20. Laura Hudson, "Global Voices: Mia Kirshner's *I Live Here*," *Publisher's Weekly*, September 2008, <http://www.publishersweekly.com/article/CA6598254.html>; Mia Kirshner quoted in *ibid.*
21. Hillary Chute, "Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative," *PMLA* 123, no. 2 (2008): 457.
22. Kathi Weeks, *Constituting Feminist Subjects* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 136–38, and chap. 4, "Labor, Standpoint, and Feminist Subjects."
23. Donna Sullivan, "The Public/Private Distinction in International Human Rights Law," in *Women's Rights/Human Rights: International Feminist Perspectives*, ed. Julie Peters and Andrea Wolper (London: Routledge, 1995), 133.

24. They are reminiscent of the photojournalist Dan Eldon's war journals, although as opposed to the immediacy of Eldon's scrapbook collages, Kirshner's project reflects her substantial and long-term collaboration with other writers, artists, and producers. Dan Eldon, *The Journey Is the Destination* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1997).

25. Peter Nyers, *Rethinking Refugees: Beyond States of Emergency* (London: Routledge, 2006), 7–8.

26. Chouliaraki, "Post-Humanitarianism," 110.

27. *Ibid.*, 120.

28. Kirshner et al., *I Live Here*, 1:17.

29. *Ibid.*, 1:18.

30. In this context, consider the disclaimer from Amnesty International printed on the box containing the notebooks: "Amnesty International USA is proud to be associated with I LIVE HERE and welcomes its release during the celebration of the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The text, testimonies, opinions and artwork included in I LIVE HERE are the work of the individual authors and artists who collaborated on this project, and none of the people interviewed or the material derived was corroborated by AIUSA research. While AIUSA strongly supports freedom of expression, the organization considers some of the depictions in I LIVE HERE potentially inappropriate for young people."

31. This story appeared in *I Live Here* the same year it was published as a stand-alone story in *Daedalus* 137, no. 1 (2008): 87–91; Chris Abani, *Dog Woman* (Los Angeles: Red Hen Press, 2004).

32. Idelber Avelar, *The Letter of Violence: Essays on Narrative, Ethics, and Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 58–59.

33. Chris Abani, *Becoming Abigail* (New York: Akashic Books, 2006) and *idem*, *Song for Night* (New York: Akashic Books, 2007). See Joseph R. Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), for a trenchant analysis of the links between the *Bildungsroman* and international human rights discourse in a globalizing world.

34. Kirshner et al., *I Live Here*, 2:9.

35. Katie Peoples, "Mia Kirshner: Exclusive Interview," *Curve Magazine*, November 2008, <http://www.curvemag.com/Curve-Magazine/Web-Articles-2008/Mia-Kirshner-Exclusive-Interview> (accessed April 3, 2011).

36. Alex Deuben, "Mia Kirshner Declares *I Live Here*," *Comic Book Resources*, December 12, 2008, <http://www.comicbookresources.com/?page=article&cid=19157>.

37. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2006), 49.

38. One of the best-known examples is perhaps the response to Alice Walker's comparison of her loss of sight in one eye by a childhood accident to female cutting in North African and Middle Eastern contexts in the film and companion text *Warrior Marks* (1993). In this case, Walker was criticized for likening her blinding by her brother, who accidentally shot her with his BB gun, to the "sexual blinding" of women through genital cutting. See, for example, Stanlie M. James, "Shades of Othering: Reflections on Female Circumcision/Genital Mutilation," *Signs* 23, no. 4 (1998): 1031–48.

39. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory Practicing Solidarity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003), 26.

40. Azoulay, *Civil Contract*, 32, 36.
41. Kirshner et al., *I Live Here*, 4:75.
42. Azoulay, *Civil Contract*, 50.
43. Kirshner et al., *I Live Here*, 3:20.
44. *Ibid.*, 3:5.
45. *Ibid.*, 3:33.
46. *Ibid.*, 2:47.
47. *Ibid.*
48. *Ibid.*
49. *Ibid.*, 2:50.
50. *Ibid.*, 2:51.
51. *Ibid.*, 2:53.
52. Butler, *Precarious Life*, 49.
53. Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008), viii.
54. *Ibid.*, 13; emphasis added.
55. Azoulay, *Civil Contract*, 85.
56. *Ibid.*, 88–89, 144.
57. *Ibid.*, 130.
58. Mohanty, “‘Under Western Eyes’ Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles,” in *Feminism without Borders*, 236.
59. See <http://www.imagined.ca> (accessed March 2, 2011).