REHUMANIZING THE ALIEN “INVADERS”: HOW TESTIMONY CAN COUNTERACT XENOPHOBIA

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ABSTRACT
Strategic use of first-hand testimony by immigrants can challenge prevalent xenophobic narratives of foreign immigrants as innate threats. Using United States President Donald Trump’s anti-immigrant rhetoric as a point of departure, these negative stereotypes can be critiqued and remediated on three levels: more nuanced individual immigrant testimonies (micronarrative); connections and diversity across stories told by immigrants (mesonarrative); and more explicit linkages between narratives and the contexts and agendas that generate them (metanarrative). The first-person testimonies of Holocaust survivors furnish the foundational exemplars of how testimony can rehumanize immigrants by enabling them to reclaim their narratives and thereby counteract collective demonization as villains or dismissal as victims.

KEYWORDS: Immigrants, Testimony, Prejudice, Narrative, Xenophobia, Holocaust, Donald Trump

INTRODUCTION
The ongoing challenges that many nations, particularly the United States and much of Europe, face in accommodating burgeoning numbers of immigrants has intensified xenophobic discourse, attitudes, and policies. United States President Donald Trump has served as a mouthpiece for such nativist sentiments, consistently stigmatizing immigrants as security threats and as unwanted burdens. These types of characterizations warrant critical analysis to prevent intensification of destructive prejudices. The following investigation proposes an invigoration of first-person testimony from immigrants themselves as a key means of challenging and reformulating narratives of immigrants as uniformly dangerous, destructive, and undesirable. A multi-level narrative analysis addresses the central research question: How can immigrant and refugee testimonies provide tools for preventing and counteracting prejudice?

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND METHOD
First-hand testimonies wield unique power to counteract prejudice through the embodied presence of an eyewitness. In this study, Holocaust survivor testimony furnishes a key touchstone of constructively using testimony for several reasons. First, Holocaust survivor testimony constitutes the crucible of testimony’s evolution. The ranks of Holocaust survivors are waning rapidly, lending urgency to the need to creatively develop and deploy testimony. Second, the collection of Holocaust survivor testimonies via personal interviews has been especially robust, enabling close examination of how collection, dissemination, and interpretation of survivor testimony affects construction of narratives. Finally, the Holocaust provides a template for examining how survivor testimonies offer opportunities for resisting and reversing prejudice. Activating the voices of survivors can invigorate
counternarratives that challenge discursive constructions of the Other as inherently objectionable.

Testimony from immigrants could put into practice several key lessons gleaned from Holocaust survivor testimony. At the micronarrative level, individual testimonies can provide counterexamples to categorical generalizations about immigrants. Attention at this level focuses on providing detailed context and background to demonstrate how immigrants do not necessarily align with how they are categorized by media and politicians. At the mesonarrative level, the diversity of narratives can activate themes and characterizations absent or suppressed in collective portrayals of immigrants. Finally, metanarrative testimony reframes immigrants by offering new narratives that can redefine the role of immigrants in society, generating storylines that treat immigrants as contributors rather than interlopers.

THREE LEVELS OF NARRATIVE TESTIMONY

The following sections explore how survivor testimonies can contribute productively to current and ongoing concerns about immigration. Operating on the micronarrative level, individual testimonies can challenge conventional narrative arcs of immigration stories. Focus on individual testimonies also restores agency to immigrants by relating their narratives more on their own terms. Mesonarrative issues cut across multiple testimonies, noting recurrent or divergent themes that resist popular public characterizations (and caricatures). Micronarrative and mesonarrative approaches disrupt entrenched storylines and immigrants. The metanarrative level sweeps across testimonies to offer alternative overall frameworks for representing immigrants and their experiences. Metanarratives could profitably shift away from immigrants as deficits and more toward immigration as an opportunity for both the immigrant and for the country of refuge.

Micronarrative Considerations: Probing Polysemy

A micronarrative approach to mediated testimony focuses on exploring the polysemy of individual testimony, noting how the same person’s narrative acquires new meaning as its medium of communication shifts. The different forms that survivor testimony can take across various media can revivify survivor narratives as living, evolving stories that invite dialogical engagement. Debord (1983) warns that televisual spectacles risk entrenching a preferred narrative as the definitive story, potentially rendering audiences as awestruck, passive observers. This risk transcends the particular medium. Univocal portrayals of survivors as helpless victims or larger-than-life heroes inhibits encountering them as genuine, multidimensional mixtures of human fortitudes and frailties. A more dialogical encounter with survivors can counteract the passive observance of spectacles, prioritizing the relatable over the remarkable. Restoration of narrative complexity enables current audiences to move toward an I-Thou relationship with survivors, acknowledging how each survivor’s victories, vulnerabilities, and uncertainties intersect with the observer’s own life (Buber, 1965, 1970). Once a survivor’s testimony becomes available in multiple forms, such as spontaneous commentary, archived testimony, edited memoir, etc., additional nuances of their stories emerge. Multiple versions of testimony are not available for all survivors, but examining multiple versions of the same survivor’s narratives enriches the possibilities for connection and meaning. The narrative of a survivor acquires richer textures as one considers the different meanings that emerge depending on its mode of communication. For example, the same testimony gathered in one of David Boder’s 1946 audios—the first Holocaust survivor testimonies gathered after World War II (Niewyk, 1998)—can assume different characteristics as it is recorded, translated into another language, and transcribed (Matthaus, 2009). Furthermore, comparing the same survivor’s narratives across different media or genres (e.g., personal diaries vs. public memoirs vs. video testimony) can reveal the mutual accommodations and tensions between medium and message.
Micronarrative polysemy carries important potential for rehumanizing immigrants who have been branded as inherently evil and undesirable. While the same immigrant’s personal narrative may not be available across multiple media, different points of view regarding that person’s story can emerge by eliciting interconnected narratives. Various people who play a part in an immigrant’s story can be interviewed to provide a fuller narrative that incorporates multiple narrative viewpoints. This interweaving of narratives permits the immigrant’s story to emerge at the intersection of these perspectives, offering more precise context and background. Considered in light of contact theory, a polysemic approach to narrative provides multiple points of potential connectivity with the immigrant’s experiences. This co-constructed narrative individuates the immigrant, restoring the dynamics of personal experiences and relationships erased by aggregating immigrants as hordes of criminals and job-stealers.

Mesonarrative Considerations: Intertextuality of Testimonies

Mesonarrative matters highlight intertextuality among multiple testimonies, identifying “a noncontiguous story that emerges across a set of narratives that are linked by characters, type of episode, interactions, or goal” (Kyratzis, 2000, p. 45). This definition invites further refinement. Mesonarrative concerns operate in two directions: intertextual convergence (intersecting narratives) and intertextual divergence (divergent narratives). This type of intertextuality in turn consists of two subdivisions. Convergence includes conjunction (narratives that mutually reinforce facts, perceptions, or judgments) and containment (elements of some narratives that other narratives explain, contextualize, or clarify). Divergence includes competing narratives (alternative explanations or characterizations) and complementary narratives (clusters of stories that demonstrate different but not incompatible characteristics compared to other clusters).

A mesonarrative approach to immigration discourse offers useful insights. As Figure 1 illustrates, xenophobic discourse has coalesced several long-standing characterizations of immigrants. These themes collectively form a tightly interwoven semantic network of negativity. President Trump treats these themes as generators and products of mutually reinforcing convergent narratives. Far from inventing these narratives and their attendant characterizations of immigrants, Trump reinvigorates long-standing racist, xenophobic, and eugenic narratives that associate immigrants with disease (Markel & Stern, 2002), crime and terrorism (Wright & Esses, 2019), moral deviance, and generally the barbarians stampeding the gates of civilization. The pattern of Trump’s anti-immigration narratives matches that of Brexit advocates who have appropriated right-wing xenophobic discourse shared by nativist movements throughout Europe. Common themes of “the racialized and demonized figure of the immigrant family” describe “local communities ‘flooded’ or ‘swamped’ by waves of needy and resource-less incoming foreigners” (Franklin & Ginsburg, 2019, p. 5).
Figure 1: Mesonarrative Network of Immigrants as Undesirables

Testimony can challenge and disrupt these patterns. Holocaust survivor testimony offers an instructive exemplar. The diversity of Holocaust survivor testimonies undermines the proclivity to characterize Jews (as the Nazis did) with an aggregate singular as “the Jew” (Schwartzman, 2016). The mesonarrative diversity (i.e., divergence) of immigrant narratives could serve a similar function, disrupting the narrative networks that Trump enables. Figure 2 illustrates how mesonarratives across survivor testimonies could establish a different cluster. Holocaust survivor narratives exemplify these narrative shifts. Polish-Jewish survivor Morris Glass, survivor of multiple ghettos and concentration camps, built a large-scale tailoring business and assured the security of others, including his brother who also survived the camps. Morris always affirmed his core principle: “I am my brother’s keeper” (Glass, 2008). Morris’s immigrant narrative exhibits several narrative themes in Figure 2: entrepreneurialism, beneficence to others, and economic success. Going further, immigrants who flee oppression could relate their narratives of resisting or evading repression, the same motive that drove Holocaust survivor Arthur Kingberg (2013) to flee Nazi Germany after Kristallnacht and then evade Japanese occupiers in the Philippines. Kingberg (2013) encapsulated his identity as: “I’m a self-made man.” With elementary school-level formal education, he holds multiple patents for mass-production machinery and became a million-dollar seller of real estate in the 1980s. Current immigrant stories can extend these themes, counteracting characterization of immigrants as dependent and destructive.
Metanarrative Considerations: Destabilization through Pluralization

A metanarrative approach operates by directly confronting the generative force that produces specific narratives about immigrants. Metanarrative calls attention to how all narratives about immigrants reflect attitudinal positions toward them. A key underlying assumption that drives all the anti-immigrant narrative themes identified in Figure 1 is the immigrant as the radical Other. In anti-immigrant rhetoric, the immigrant embodies the alien, both as an outsider and as a threat to life as the in-group knows it, represented aptly visually and discursively in the *Alien* science fiction movie franchise. President Trump reveals this underpinning whenever he assembles the spectacle of “Angel Families,” his preferred terminology for relatives of people murdered by illegal immigrants. Sharing the stage with Donald Trump or seated prominently in the audience, they often carry a large photo of their deceased loved one. Aside from reinforcing the connection between immigrants and crime, the narrative positions immigrants as devils, destroyers of innocent “real” Americans. Demonization also connotes monstrosity: these devils destroy innocence and beauty. In a speech advocating the need for a border wall as a national security measure, Trump called on an Angel Mom to show a photo of her murdered daughter: “Stand up, just for a second. Show how beautiful your girl was” (Trump, 2015). The struggle against dangerous immigrants at its foundation manifests a cosmic struggle pitting good against evil, beauty against bestiality.

A metanarrative counterpoint calls attention to different generative foundations for further narratives. Survivor testimonies provide not merely primary sources, but primary resources for instantiating different understandings of immigrants. Henry Greenspan and colleagues (2014) warn that “trauma” may serve as a poor umbrella term for Holocaust survivor experiences, since their testimonies reveal so much more than suffering and victimage. Holocaust survivor testimonies also manifest the capacity to create and contribute, not only through constructing narratives but also their construction of identity. Metanarrative orientation calls attention to the demonization of immigrants as one of many
possible narrative choices. Reframing immigrants as creators or contributors refocuses attention on what immigrants give rather than what they take away. These narratives could assume dramatic proportions by narrating heroic acts, but they also can rehumanize (and thus un-demonize) immigrants by describing more mundane acts to combat injustice. When Morris Glass (2008) discovered that clubs of boat owners in the United States refused to allow Jews as members, he established a Jewish yacht club. Such stories create a testimonial foundation for casting immigrants as seekers of justice, in direct opposition to the demonic criminal. Narrative pluralization challenges nativism and xenophobia by resisting fixation of narratives into a standard template that leaves standard concepts of immigrants unquestioned and presumably unquestionable.

**IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS**

Although this investigation does not attempt to approach specific policy issues related to current waves of immigration, insights do emerge from each approach to testimony that can inform activism and policy construction. Bifurcating positions regarding immigration push discussions toward committing the equivalent of type one and type two statistical errors. Immigration opponents (the positions are deliberately over-simplified but correspond to the division of argumentative ground) foreground community safety and security, arguing that letting in just one violent or drug-dealing immigrant qualifies as too many. These immigration opponents warn that easy immigration risks overlooking legitimately dangerous people in the desire to show empathy and aid immigrants. Permissive immigration fails to catch dangerous immigrants, endangering society by these false negatives. By contrast, immigration advocates accuse immigration opponents of false positives: infringing the rights of innocent immigrants in hope of finding social menaces. The most notable example of false negatives arose with Donald Trump’s 2018 “zero tolerance” that detained children in families attempting to immigrate together, resulting in the separation of approximately 3,000 children from their parents or caretakers (Karamouzian, 2018). Immigration advocates argue that the human costs (in deprivation of rights and psychological damage) of treating all immigrants as potential threats outweigh the potential safety gains of filtering out the comparatively few genuinely dangerous ones. How can this argumentative stalemate proceed beyond further entrenchment in mutually exclusive positions?

Deeper consideration of Holocaust survivor testimony contributes important new resources to this seemingly unresolvable impasse. First, testimonies from immigrants qualify as primary source material that can enrich understanding of their situations and identities. Much as early Holocaust testimony acquired a master narrative imposed upon it by third parties, immigrant voices have been activated essentially as media sound bites and politicized generalizations. It remains difficult to find, daresay to examine in detail, actual first-hand testimony from immigrants that narrates (in the style of Holocaust survivors) the life they faced in their home country, the specific circumstances that led to their emigration, and the precise explanation of the immigration process. Clearly, especially for immigrants still facing detention or further processing, these narratives remain in progress. As media depictions, current immigrants neatly fit into the frame of the helpless, hapless victim or the frame of the nascent threat. Broadcasting testimony would offer more comprehensive narratives that could help shift the point of view to the refugee-narrator. Discussion of motives on the immigrant’s own terms restores a sense of agency, enabling the narrator to establish the course of the story instead of being cast in a prefabricated role. Even when not gathered from current immigrants, collected testimonies could parallel the populations and situations immigrants now face. For example, interviewers could prioritize gathering testimonies from previous immigrants who immigrated to or from the same nations experiencing large migrations, or testimonies could focus on
immigrants whose process or rationale for migrating resembles the largest current areas of concern.

Second, sheer acquisition of testimony—regardless of how necessary it may prove in challenging categorical generalizations or stereotypes—does not suffice. For testimony to have any impact on discussions, perceptions, and actions regarding immigration, it must enable “spreadability” through maximal availability for usage (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). Testimony, particularly when directly relevant to an evolving issue, must move beyond the restrictive walls of archives. This extension of availability, however, should preserve the archivally inspired drive toward comprehensive scope. In this way, testimonies could provide ample resources for constructing more concrete, experientially based narratives that challenge xenophobic fear mongering without resorting to naïve idealizations of immigrants as heroes, helpless victims, or martyrs.

Finally, invigoration of testimony could assume a high priority amidst current immigration conflagrations. Divulging the discursive “unsettlement” in testimony (Schwartzman, 2020) reveals the conditional, situationally influenced nature of narratives. Descriptions of immigrants acquire their “stickiness” because speakers, authors, and audiences settle on them as functional, not because they correspond to a fixed, indisputable narrative. Unsettlement suggests recognizing characterizations of immigrants in their narrative sense: as discursive constructions that propel preferred narratives. Reconsidered this way, the purported proposition “immigrants are invaders” more accurately qualifies as an exhortation for a preferred configuration: “immigrants as invaders.” Choosing such a rendering first requires recognizing the possibility of choice, of acknowledging the capacity to craft and rewrite as well as simply retell narratives. Therein lies the crucial test facing testimony.

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REFERENCES


