and it turns into a series of stories that often have little to do with the historiographic discourse, but are reports of events that are so humanised and subjectivised that they are closer to a chronicle than to history.

This contemporaneity sometimes translates into a real "lesson for the Present", but this is just one of the trends that emerge. Sometimes, maybe more often, rather than having a real ethic use of the past *for* the present, it seems it is more important to make an "experiential" use of the past *as* the present. There seems to be a dominating confusing system that superimposes past-present-future, history-chronicle-memory and this is probably not only the hallmark of this celebration, but also one of the most pervasive cultural traits of our years.

But this is another story, which requires a different corpus.

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Speaking Out: Testimonial Rhetoric in Israeli Soldiers' Dissent

Abstract

Probing the interface between activism and memory-work, this study explores the sociocultural conditions, genre characteristics and action potential of *speaking out* as enacted by the Israeli veteran organization Breaking the Silence [BTS]. BTS testimonial project combines chronologies of factual reports with narratives of "moral shock" in producing a localized version of authentic "flesh witnessing". This move locates Israeli soldiers in the position of victimized-victimizers, who call for an end to the occupation of Palestinian territories while reshaping Israeli future collective memory through the testimonial edifice they create. BTS activists blend the voices of perpetrator and victim in a self-reflexive and highly troubled enunciation. This open-ended, unresolved speech-centered project is a discursive battle against politically cultivated hegemonic forgetfulness and silence.

Keywords

ethnography of speaking, testimony, witnessing, oppositional discourse, speaking out.

In the spring of 2004, a group of Israeli veterans, who had spent portions of their mandatory three-year military duty as combat soldiers in the Palestinian territories occupied by Israel in 1967 [hence, OPT], held a photography exhibition in Tel Aviv comprised of pictures taken by soldiers during their service. Encouraged by the public interest they sparked, the group then organized under the name of *Breaking the Silence* [hence, BTS], launching a sustained testimonial campaign whose goal was to alert Israeli society to the reality of the occupation as experienced and witnessed by the soldiers assigned to uphold it. While the testimonies indicate that they were attuned to the suffering of the Palestinians, the group's specific focus was on the moral price young Israeli soldiers – and Israeli society more generally – paid by maintaining the occupation regime.[3] Over the past eight years, they have used an informal snowball recruiting method, conducting one-on-one interviews with veterans who recounted what they did, saw and felt during their military rounds in the OPT. The testimonial archive they have built currently includes over 800 video-taped interviews with soldier-volunteers and scores of soldiers'

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[3] See the BTS website at http://www.breakingthesilence.org.il/ (accessed 7.10.2012). Throughout the article, we use "soldiers" and "veterans" interchangeably. Israeli combat soldiers join the military reserves upon completion of their mandatory service. They may be called up for several weeks every year for service in the OPT, so that even as veterans they don't leave the army behind.

photographs, and the effort continues.[4] Portions of these interviews have been transcribed, edited and widely disseminated in a variety of forms and venues in both Hebrew and English.[5]

By cultivating this ever-expanding testimonial edifice, and by insisting on making its traces visible in the Israeli public sphere, BTS activists have been engaging in a deliberate and complex collective speech activity that is identified in their own meta-discourse as *speaking out*. Their *speaking out* is a testimonial activity marked by a guilt-ridden confessional flavor through which they transform intimately remembered personal experiences into social-moral tales of public significance. Thus, one of their early mission statements, which relates to BTS founders' experiences in the Palestinian town of Hebron, says:

> In coping daily with the madness of Hebron, we couldn't remain the same people beneath our uniform. We saw our friends and ourselves slowly changing. Caught in impossible situations... *We decided to speak out. We decided to tell.* Hebron isn't in outer space. It's one hour from Jerusalem... Now all you have to do is to come. And see. And hear. And understand what's happening there.[6]

Our study explores the cultural force of the testimonial project this statement heralded as well as the forms in which it was articulated. We draw on a cultural-rhetorical approach to studying the role of speech in human affairs, regarding the BTS project as an ethnographic site which can offer analytic and critical insights into the transformative potential of oppositional discourse. Drawing on Don Handelman's (1990) approach to the study of public events, we view BTS testimonial project as an open-ended series of speech activities that anchor events that are "models" rather than "mirrors". As a modeling-event, BTS *speaking out* provides a template for action that is purposive, future-oriented and change-producing. This approach to speaking as the pivot of modeling-events foregrounds its transformative and anticipatory nature. While ethnographic studies of speaking are always concerned with understanding the sociocultural context of elocutionary acts, their modeling and change-producing potential is often left out of sight. The exploration of BTS testimonial discourse will address this potential within an ethnographic framework.

The difficulty involved in generating a vocabulary that can describe, analyze and offer a critique of the Israeli matrix of control over

[4] The most recent installment of testimonies, circulated in the summer of 2012, deals with human rights violations associated with the treatment of Palestinian children and youth.

[5] BTS have produced ten booklets of thematically organized testimonial segments between 2004-2012, as well as a book of over 400 pages of testimonies and photographs (BTS 2012). The fact that these testimonies appear both in Hebrew and English indicates that they address an international and not only a local audience, thereby linking their project to a globalized discourse of human rights activism. Our citations are taken from the English version of the testimonies unless otherwise indicated by reference to our own translation.

[6] BTS, *The Hebron Booklet*, 2004, front cover, our emphasis.

the OPT, is attributed to the culture of silence that surrounds the occupation regime, in intellectual-public discourse, in official military discourse as well as in media coverage.[7] Over the years, however, a range of dissenting civil society groups have actively opposed the ongoing state of occupation through monitoring and critical activities.[8] Both the pervasive social silence over the reality of the occupation, and the persistence of defiant struggles to overcome it, provide the context for the kind of oppositional speech whose working and cultural import are investigated here.

1. The BTS *speaking out* campaign

The visual display of the photography exhibition that launched the BTS campaign was augmented by oral testimonies offered by some of the soldier-activists who guided visitors along the exhibition path as well as by segments of videotaped interviews with veterans that were screened on site (Katriel 2011). This rather unusual show-and-tell strategy of anti-occupation activism, and its deeply troubling moral contents, generated considerable media attention and attracted thousands of visitors as the exhibition traveled to other venues around the country. While condemned by some, the appearance of BTS on the Israeli public scene was endorsed by many others, and it seemed that the soldiers' efforts to "bring Hebron to Tel Aviv" were sparking the kind of public debate they were aiming for. As time went by, this initial phase of public interest was followed by dismissal or concerted efforts to delegitimize BTS activities on the part of military officials, the press, and politicians who questioned their credibility, accused them of disloyalty and sought to cut off the financial support they received from European governments.[9]

The "witnessing organization" (Frosh 2006) BTS subsequently established proceeded to elicit and circulate additional soldiers' testimonies. Aware of the testimonial efforts of other individuals and organizations, they sought to add to the Israeli scene of anti-occupation activism their own distinctive viewpoint as former soldiers.[10] One of the

[7] See, for example, Grinberg (2009), Dor (2003, 2005).

[8] These include alternative information and media criticism projects promoted by organizations such as *B'Tselem* (http://www.btselem.org/, accessed 7 .10.2012), *Keshev*: (http://www.keshev.org.il/en/accessed 7.10.2012), and others.

[9] This widespread condemnation came to a head followingthe publication of a testimonial booklet dealing with Operation Cast Lead (Gaza incursion 2009) which was claimed to have been used by the UN-sponsored Goldstone Report. See the overview compiled by the media monitoring organization *Keshev* dealing with the media attack on BTS http://www.keshev.org.il/media-analyses/cast-lead-in-the-media.htnl (in Hebrew, accessed 7.10.2012)

[10] Other anti-occupation grass-roots groups emerged in Israel and Palestine during the second Intifada. Some of them engage in testimonial activities alongside activities that involve embodied presence in sites of struggle (Norman 2010, Carter Hallward 2011). BTS's

BTS activists interviewed for this study stressed the partial yet distinctive positioning of BTS in this wider witnessing field. Giving recognition to the ongoing witnessing work of well-known journalists Gideon Levy and Amira Hass in the daily *Ha'aretz*, and of other witnessing organizations such as *B'Tselem*[11], he pointed to the potential value of the anti-occupation testimonial activities to which the BTS project contributes, saying:

I do hope that someone will use the enlightened material collected by BTS, or by *B'Tselem* or many others, Gideon Levy, Amira Hass, there are people who brought out much more than we did. We simply opened a new angle that made a "bum", right. But it was done before us and will be done after us – to make a record of the occupation. I hope that whoever uses it, and talks about it, will perhaps, possibly have historical power.[12]

BTS testimonial project, like other testimonial efforts opposing the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories, is thus located in the nexus between activism and memory work (Katriel and Shavit 2011). It crafts a unique collective voice out of the personal voices of individual soldier-witnesses in promoting "oppositional knowledge" (Coy et al. 2008) about the Israeli occupation regime in the OPT through the distinctive viewpoint of perpetrators-turned-witnesses. While acknowledging the suffering of the Palestinian population, and at times rendering it visible through the anecdotal evidence they provide, their particular focus is on the role of foot soldiers in perpetuating this suffering and on the moral and existential dilemmas it raises for them and for Israeli society more generally.

As agents of oppositional knowledge, BTS members view the occupation not only in terms of an urgent political exigency but also through a collective memory lens. Making an imaginative leap, they combine advocacy addressed to present audiences with the painstaking creation of an evidentiary archival base to be used by future ones. As Yehuda, BTS founder, said:

[...] the first Intifada [1987-1993] passed somehow and it's simply not in the narrative. It's been erased. The average Israeli doesn't even know what it is. It doesn't exist in the national consciousness. And the place of BTS now is to create a bank, a museum of the second Intifada, so that when Israeli society inscribes its national narrative about what happened here during these years, it will not be able to ignore the thousands of hours of sound and video of soldiers' testimonies that tell what they did there.[13]

Thus, directing their gaze to the future, BTS members envision a complex

logo-centric strategy offers a symbolic corrective to the soldiers' embodied presence in the OPT in the past.

[11] See *B'Tselem* website http://www.btselem.org/, accessed 7/10/2012.

[12] Interview with Noam Chayut, January 3, 2008.

[13] Yehuda, research interview, 27.4. 2008 (our translation).

temporality for their act of witnessing (Gutman, Brown and Sodaro 2010), hoping that through their persistent activist efforts they can overcome the marginalization of their voices and create a substantial audience for their message through a discursive reshaping of Israeli collective memory in years to come. Indeed, despite BTS activists' often pessimistic position with regard to their immediate political impact, the archival fund they have created has already begun to serve the goal of keeping the memory of the second Intifada alive, serving as a resource for elaborations of the voices it inscribed in the form of citation, mimesis and interpretation in artistic re-enactments and in scholarly contexts.[14]

Our forthcoming analysis, therefore, builds on the soldiers' own construction of their defiant memory-work as a social-discursive activity whose forms and functions are amenable to ethnographic exploration. The theoretical perspective that informs this analysis is elaborated in the next section.

2. *Speaking out* as transformative action

Our approach to BTS testimonial project of *speaking out* brings together the traditions of the ethnography of communication as originally formulated by Dell Hymes (1972, 1974), the study of the rhetorical situation as conceptualized by and following Lloyd Bitzer (1968), and a research interest in native constructions of rhetorical activities as social criticism (Gencarella 2011). In what follows, we will try to show that combining these lines of research provides a better understating of the sociocultural conditions and processes involved in the construction of oppositional discourses and their immediate as well as future-oriented advocacy role.

The ethnography of communication as a subfield of anthropology is centrally concerned with the role of culturally inflected speech activities in the expressive and workaday lives of individuals and groups (Hymes 1972). Within this perspective, communication and culture become inextricable as culturally focal communicative events and practices are analyzed in elucidating the ways in which they both reflect and constitute cultural assumptions and social arrangements, providing "models

[14] BTS testimonies have been used in artistic documentaries *Z32* by Avi Mugrabi (2008) that builds on the testimony of a soldier catalogued in BTS archive under the film's title; *Edut* [Testimony] by Shlomi Alkavetz (2011) that juxtaposes professionally acted out soldiers' testimonies taken from BTS archive and Palestinians' testimonies taken from the human rights NGO *B'Tselem* archive (see footnote 11). The film *To See If I'm Smiling* by Tamar Yarom (2007) has been assisted by BTS and anticipates their collection of testimonies by women soldiers (2009), whose voices have attracted scholarly treatment in Sasson-Levy, Levy and Lomsky-Feder (2011). See also Ashuri (2012) for a discussion of BTS testimonies in the context of new media studies.

of" and "models for" social action (Geertz 1973). One of the ways in which speech occasions and expressive forms are identified as culturally significant involves tracing talk about talk. Thus, BTS declarations that time has come to *speak out,* or that they were *breaking the silence*, are such meta-communicative invocations of locally identifiable speech. In exploring BTS enactment of *speaking out* as a meta-communicative term, we build on the assumption that culturally recognized speechways are historically grounded in local meanings and subject to local norms and rules of production and interpretation that are codified in relation to the different contextual dimensions.

Our interest in the transformative potential of soldiers' defiant speech, however, poses a challenge to the study of normative codes that tends to be central to the analytic focus on the integrative function of shared, habitual and ritualized communicative action (Philipsen 1992, 2002). Within this framework, the empirical and analytic value of tracing norm violations rests primarily with what they can teach us about underlying cultural codes rather than about the direct discursive interventions deliberately designed to dismantle them. Understanding the BTS campaign of *speaking out*, therefore, requires us to complement the well-established concern with the discovery of speech patterns as an element of shared culture so as to encompass discursive activities that disrupt shared understandings about speech conduct in a push towards social change.

Drawing on Lloyd Bitzer's discussion of the "rhetorical situation", Carolyn Miller (1984) proposes a vocabulary for addressing the dynamics of transformation-oriented speech performances. While Bitzer originally formulated "exigence" as "an imperfection marked by urgency" (Bitzer 1968: 386) in a material sense, i.e. as a worldly event located outside of language and culture, Miller proposes a discursive-constructivist view whereby exigence is "a form of social knowledge – a mutual construing of objects, events, interests, and purposes that not only links them but also makes them what they are: an objectified social need" (Miller 1984: 157). In this view, exigencies and rhetorical motives become interchangeable, as socially constructed exigencies provide the rhetor with socially-objectified motives that are realized in and through performative acts. This conceptualization leads us to see the soldiers' defiant speech not only as a violation of a politically cultivated normative code of silence, but as a subversive rhetorical act that reconfigures this code – and the culture of denial it supports (Herzog and Lahad 2006; Fridman 2007) – as an exigence that motivates a rhetorical response. We thus shift our analytic focus from 'culture' as a shared system of meanings to 'political culture' as a site of contention, moving beyond the structural-functionalist assumptions that underlie the notion of a "communal function" to a conflict-oriented view of society whereby normative orders involve inherent tensions and power struggles between social actors.

Moreover, Miller's rhetorical approach to the study of social action

allows us to consider the ways in which rhetorical situations in themselves are socioculturally patterned. To this end, she proposes an ethno-rhetorical definition of genres as consisting of a typified rhetorical response to recurring sociopolitical exigencies that involves a particular fusion of semantic substance and symbolic form (Miller 1984: 159). Along these lines, we consider BTS *speaking out* in terms of the generic repertoire of "war witnessing" (Harari 2005, 2008; Smith 2007), tracing the ways in which it echoes but also renegotiates earlier versions of this genre as it has emerged in late modernity. BTS version of war witnessing, which has both local roots and transcultural resonance, involves shifts in the genre's defining features of exigence, substance and symbolic form as well as in its positioning as an oppositional discourse.

Finally, seen from a critical rhetorical perspective, the emergence of BTS *speaking out* indicates the creative potential of the soldier-witnesses to harness their power of testimony towards "folk criticism", i.e., towards "the creation of certain ways of communicating to address fundamental concerns through local issues as embedded in the realm of everyday life" (Gencarella 2011: 255). Grounded in the situated knowledge that practice creates, the folk-criticism involves "a notion of 'vernacular theory' – that which occurs in everyday life by those who lack cultural power and who speak a critical language grounded in local concerns" (McLaughlin 1996: 5-6). Folk-critics are recognized as "'organic intellectuals' who emerge from within (and in immediate response to) the political energies, pressures, and contradictions of marginalized or oppressed social groups" (Gencarella 2011: 258).[15] We thus consider BTS activists as organic intellectuals who have taken up the role of home-grown cultural critics, promoting a vernacular ethical theory through their testimonial rhetoric.

In sum, the purpose of the study is to develop an empirically-based cultural-rhetorical approach to the exploration of BTS discourse of *speaking out* as both a political and a memory-oriented oppositional project. Our main concern is not with the soldiers' testimonies as available texts for the study of collective memory but with the discursive qualities of their testifying as constructive acts oriented to the field of memory and as a resource for modeling social action. The analysis is based on a number of complementary methodological moves: i) An interpretive reading of the BTS published corpus of thematically organized testimonial segments and images; ii) formal interviews and informal exchanges with central activists in BTS; iii) participant observation in a range of public events organized by BTS over the past eight years, including BTS guided

[15] This discussion combines Antonio Gramsci's (1971) notion of "organic intellectual" with Kenneth Burke's (1935) perspective on criticism as "a faculty that all creatures share" (Gencarella, 2011: 252) in countering the privileged position of the "traditional intellectual", which is reserved for professional critics whose "status appears to set them apart from the drift of partisan political life" (Gecarella, 2011: 258). Folk-criticism is thus conceptualized as a vibrant, everyday practice that is continuous with scholars' critical perspectives.

tours in the town of Hebron offered to the public as a form of alternative tourism; iv) a reading of the journalistic coverage of BTS activities and the public debates they have engendered. These combined ethnographic moves have provided an empirical base for the forthcoming analysis of the BTS testimonial project.

3. Social silence as a rhetorical exigence

By choosing the name of *Breaking the Silence* for their organization, the soldier-activists whose testimonial campaign provides the empirical site for our study, sought to highlight the political role of silence as a deliberate discursive strategy and a normative code that posits widely recognized gaps between the said and the unsayable, between the known and the publically acknowledged, between the whispered and the erased. These gaps, and the varied ways in which they are filled, unsettle the remembering/forgetting binary constructed through the ideological choices of "memory agents" that dominates the field of memory studies (Ben-Ze'ev, Ginio and Winter 2010). Social silence, or "state of denial" (Cohen 2001), pervades Israeli society regarding the reality of life in the occupied Palestinian territories. This denial is an active presence in the soldiers' social surroundings, as poignantly brought out by one of BTS members:

> After two days in Hebron I understood that in order to survive there I must lock up all that I am, all my values and ideologies, all my feelings and thoughts, in a little box. And shut up... So a high wall of silence grew between and around us. We were silent after guard duty, silent on our leaves at home. We were silent with our girlfriends, with our cronies, with our parents. I was silent as I watched myself slowly turning into a dumb, cold robot...[16]

The political silence that permeates the soldiers' lives comes to be experienced as an active instrument of silencing of the kind analytically discussed by Eviatar Zerubavel (2006) in his sociological study of the "Elephant in the Room" phenomenon. This silence "involves more than just absence of action, since the things about which we are silent are in fact actively avoided..." (Zerubavel 2006: 9). The conspiracy of silence associated with "open secrets" involves not just denial but also *meta-denial*, i.e., avoiding any mention of the fact that mention of the elephant is avoided so that "the very act of avoiding the elephant (...) is itself an 'elephant'" (Zerubavel 2010: 40). The very mention of silence in the veteran organization's name is thus a first step in breaking it.

[16] *Breaking the Silence* website, Yonatan Boemfeld, "Empty Words", from address at the opening of the exhibit. This citation is no longer found on BTS website (it was last accessed by us on 25.10.2010).

In the case of BTS, the proverbial elephant in the room that Israeli society seeks to shroud in silence – and that the BTS project strives to foreground through its testimonial activities – pertains to the moral significance of the Israeli military rule in the OPT and the embodied experiences of common soldiers who are required to uphold it. The question of naming and framing the story of Israel's military occupation has been the topic of ongoing public controversy for over forty years. Indeed, in Israeli discourse, lexical choice in this context signals a political stance (Feige 2002). Thus, using a designation that either explicitly or implicitly invokes the state of occupation is heard as a statement of affiliation with a left-leaning agenda, a verbal move that counters the normalization and obfuscation of the Israeli occupation regime. Similarly, the use of the designation Judea and Samaria (the official term used in Israeli public broadcasting) implies the right-wing narrative of the Jews' entitlement to their divinely promised ancestral land (including what are now the West Bank and Gaza).

By explicitly naming the occupation, let alone the need to end it, BTS signal a rejection of the historical-religious narrative of the Jews' "return" to their ancestral home as it applies to the territories occupied in 1967. Furthermore, by highlighting the ills of the occupation through numerous personal testimonies, they disaffiliate themselves from the mainstream state-security narrative in terms of which Israel's military activities in the OPT are legitimized as a local version of the global war on terror. It is precisely these normalizing and globalizing gestures of legitimization that BTS discourse seeks to interrupt by using the term "occupation" and by describing the bureaucratic and military control practices associated with it in minute detail. Aligning themselves with transnational human-rights discourse, they build up both a discursive space and an evidentiary edifice that help inscribe the day-to-day workings of the occupation regime, calling for a recognition of its impact on the lives of Palestinians and Israelis alike, and sketching the plot-line of a counter-memory.

Naming the occupation as Israeli society's "elephant in the room", BTS activists thus set out to counter the manifold social and political silences permeating the lives of individual soldiers. As the foregoing citation indicated, these include: i) silence in interpersonal settings – within soldiers' peer groups in the army, and among family and friends outside of it; ii) media silence; iii) and self-silencing. This multi-faceted silence was described by a BTS member during a guided tour he led through the town of Hebron, emphasizing the silencing role of linguistic obfuscation and outright fabrication:

> When we called ourselves Breaking the Silence, we meant two dimensions of silence. The first – for anyone who was here [in the army] to stand in front of the mirror and understand what we did. And stop hiding behind "preventive shooting", and "demonstration of presence", and "violent patrol" and "deterrent shooting"...And then there's the second dimension of silence...You wake up in the morning, turn on the radio in Israel and hear: "The IDF fired back at the sources of fire". Never

for once did we identify any sources of fire! This sounds clean...you may call it the silence of the media, I call it our silence.[17]

As this segment suggests, the story of BTS activists' military career traces a shift from an initial state of total enmeshment in their military role, when they fully accept the state-security frame that helps legitimize the control practices they employ during their military rounds. For some of the soldiers this legitimizing frame became fractured by a mounting sense of isolation, by experiences of "moral shock" (Jaspers 1997: 106), by numbness and fatigue, by the irritation of tired aphorisms and by lies they detected in media discourse, leading to a loss of trust in the military system and the logic that grounds it. One of them gave voice to this moral distress by generalizing it to all of his peers, saying "[they] can all sense they're doing something wrong, let's put it that way. They can all point it out and feel desperate".[18]

While they are clearly troubled by the active political silence that surrounds them, BTS members' most troubled accounts of silence attach to incidents of self-silencing which are repeatedly invoked in their testimonies. These incidents give rise to the realization that the structural power the soldiers – as part of a well-armed occupying force – wielded over the Palestinians was coupled by moments of sheer helplessness as they found themselves torn by their inability to avert acts of brutality to which they were witness. Most tellingly, this helplessness and self-alienation were often experienced as loss of speech, as in the following examples:

[...] The guy just stands there and stares. He doesn't understand what they want from him. So the commander yells at him he should get out his jack and take the wheels off... He has this horrible grin on his face. It's awful. I can't do anything. *I don't have enough air to say anything. I take my helmet and fall on the stone wall, still covering from the front, and I cry. There's nothing I can do...*[19]

[...] The officer... approached the funeral and wanted to disperse it...he even cursed, cocked his weapon, and approached an eighty-year-old man who could hardly move and pointed his gun at his face ... I could really see that he didn't consider them equal human beings. *I'm still mad at myself for not saying anything. As in other incidents, I simply lowered my eyes and didn't know what to do with myself ...*[20]

[...] One story is about a little kid, a [Jewish/settler] boy of about six, who passed by me at my post... He said to me: "Soldier, listen, don't get annoyed, don't try to stop me, I'm going out to kill some Arabs". *I look at the kid and don't quite*

[17] Hebron tour, 1.7.2007
[18] BTS, *Soldiers' Testimonies From Hebron 2005-2007*, 2008, front cover.
[19] BTS, *The Hebron Booklet*, 2004, 16, our emphasis.
[20] BTS, *ibid.*, 2004, 11, our emphasis.

understand what I'm supposed to do. So he says: "First, I'm going to buy a popsicle at Gotnik's"– that's their grocery store – "then I'm going to kill some Arabs". *I had nothing to say to him. Nothing. I went completely blank...*[21]

For BTS activists, this loss of speech assumes a moral import, signaling a failure to properly act in the face of brutality and injustice. Rather paradoxically, such memorable moments of loss of voice and depleted agency are located at the very site of what official military parlance calls "action" in its most highly valorized military version. It is against this background of guilt over self-silencing that BTS activists construct their decision to speak out, not as a repudiation of the soldierly role but rather as an affirmation of the values that animate it in the spirit of the Israeli education they had all received. Indeed, the continuity between their military role and their new, self-chosen role as soldier-witnesses is highlighted in the following segment from one of BTS mission statements: "During our service we successfully fulfilled a wide range of military tasks. There is one task left: to tell, to speak, and to hide nothing".[22] By using this military metaphor for their activist work, the soldier-witnesses indicate that the employment of fearless speech turns them from upright soldiers into upright citizens. Notably, by weaving this narrative of transformation and continuity, of self-silencing and self-reclamation, BTS soldiers invoke a generic strand of public expression of late modern Western soldiers' "war witnessing," to which we now turn.

4. "War witnessing" as a rhetorical genre

Our discussion of the historical roots of BTS discourse is based on a rhetorical reading of a cultural-historical approach to the emergence of soldiers' narratives of martial disillusionment and their related images of soldiers as victims in 20th century Western discourse (Harari 2005, 2008). Harari describes a shift from a war culture centered on a code of honor – as glimpsed in early Renaissance soldiers' writings – to a modern view of participation in war as involving "a process through which the experiences one undergoes build and develop one's self" (Harari 2008: 5). In this emergent cultural scheme of *Bildung*, the horrors of the battlefield were redeemed not by the opportunities it provided fighters to gain honor through courage in action but by a view of the war experience as a privileged source of knowledge about oneself and the world. This view of war as epiphany became associated with harsh experiences of shock and trauma, as evident in post WWI literature and in projects such as Jean Norton Cru's monumental book of French soldiers' testimonies

[21] BTS, ibid., 2004, 17, our emphasis.
[22] BTS, *Testimonial Booklet #1*, n.d., Hebrew version, back cover (our translation).

(Cru 1993[1929], see Givoni 2010) that voiced a harsh critique of the war, proposing an alternative story of *Bildung* that "equates revelation with disillusionment" (Harari 2008: 4).

This thematic shift can be interpreted in terms of different constructions of the rhetorical situation. As Harari convincingly argues, the shift from romantic tales of masculine camaraderie, heroism and patriotism to tales of martial disillusionment did not spring from technologically anchored changes in the nature of war. The horrors of the battlefield were already acknowledged in the early Renaissance memoirs he studied. What changed was the problematic of the battlefield experience as an experience of disillusionment associated with the broken promise of "the beautiful war". This sobering experience was discursively articulated in terms of the emergent authority of "flesh witnessing" as a rhetorical mode:

> [...] eschewing the rationalist authority of logical thinking and the scientific authority of objective eye-witnessing, veterans lay claim to the visceral authority of "flesh-witnessing". They are neither thinkers nor mere eye-witnesses. Rather, they are men (and occasionally women) who have learned their wisdom with their flesh. In order to establish their authority as flesh-witnesses, modern veterans first have to create the idea of flesh-witnessing in the minds of their audience. This is done by repeating two basic formulas when describing extreme war experiences: "It is impossible to describe it" and "Those who were not there cannot understand it". These formulas create a fundamental difference between flesh-witnessing and eye-witnessing or scientific observation. (Harari 2008: 7)

In Miller's terms, we can say that the mode of flesh witnessing emerged as part and parcel of a newborn rhetorical situation whereby the exigence of sobering battlefield experiences was realized in and through veterans' testimonies and self-narrations. While these included anti-war sentiments and vocal expressions of soldierly discontent, the narrative logic of *Bildung* remained intact so that the moments of dark epiphany were recollected as triggers to enhanced self-knowledge. This allowed the twentieth-century memoirists to integrate the disruptive experience of war into a vision of life seen as an ongoing process of developing and improving the self. Therefore, "even when twentieth-century soldiers claim to be completely disillusioned with their prewar ideals, they still believe in the traditional Enlightenment ideals of self and *Bildung*" (Harari 2005: 67).

The testimonial and literary legacy of WWI soldiers gradually shaped the genre of "war witnessing" in which sobering battlefield experiences were constructed as a recurring exigence that gave rise to the rhetorical response of "flesh witnessing", which fused images of soldiers as victims with the symbolic form of martial disillusionment narratives.[23] The sense

[23] This legacy includes, among others, literary works by British poets, such as Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon (http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections); by novelists such as the German author Erich Maria Remarque ([1929] 1987) and the Greek author Stratis Myrivilis ([1930] 1987); and the testimonial projects by Ernst Friedrich ([1924] 2004) in Germany and Jean Norton Cru ([1929] 1993) in France.

of horror and futility that animated early instances of the genre of war witnessing eventually evolved into a full-fledged anti-war rhetoric that became part of a broader social movement at different historical junctures in the twentieth century. The increasing dominance of this anti-militaristic sentiment is associated with the emergence of the "post-heroic" age that characterizes modern European nations' transformation into "civilian states" (Sheehan 2008). This political development was paralleled in other sociopolitical arenas as well, where moral witnessing came to be employed as a proper rhetorical response, e.g., in the context of human rights activism in which testimony has evolved into a "technique" that organizes discursive practices (Givoni 2011).[24]

A notable example of this type of soldierly protest in the annals of twentieth anti-war activism is the Winter Soldier Investigation of the Vietnam War era. This Marathon of orally delivered public testimonies by Vietnam War veterans held in early 1971, where they spoke about their battleground experiences in Vietnam, became a legendary moment in the cultural legacy of the anti-war movement.[25] As we were told by a founding member of BTS, who gave us a DVD with an edited selection of testimonial segments from this American event, the Winter Soldier investigation was the most immediate model upon which the testimonial project of BTS was designed. However, while BTS performances of *speaking out* echo such earlier versions of "flesh witnessing," their appropriation of the genre manifests systematic changes in its defining elements of exigency, substance and symbolic form. As in the case of their twentieth century predecessors, BTS members see themselves as victims of the military situation they find themselves in, but they are also keenly aware of their role as victimizers in the service of an occupation regime they find morally unacceptable. Their disaffection lies not in their position as the victims of war (rather than its potential heroes) but rather in their recognition of their morally troubled position as "victimized-victimizers", an identity category that disrupts the victim/perpetrator

[24] Human rights activism, which has become central to the international arena following WWII, finds its expression in a discursive regime grounded in a universalist recognition of commitment to a shared humanity. Human rights campaigns, which cut across national borders, reveal cases of "distant suffering" and frame them in terms of violations of basic human rights. They formulate moral and emotional appeals designed to mobilize shame and empathy among transnational publics in the hope of generating action that can lead to effective intervention (Drinan 2001; Torchin 2012).

[25] The Winter Soldier Investigation was a media event sponsored by *Vietnam Veterans Against the War* that took place in Detroit, Michigan from January 31, 1971 – February 2, 1971. Contemporary American soldiers, who have organized under Iraq Veterans against the War in 2004 (the same year as BTS) have also re-enacted this model. See the website of Iraq Veterans Against the War at http://www.ivaw.org/ (accessed 7.10. 2012).

binary that underlies mainstream discourse.[26] Thus, we maintain that BTS testimonials constitute a new category of witnessing, one that blends the voice of the perpetrator and that of the victim in one and the same self-reflexive and highly troubled enunciation.

For BTS members, the shift in exigence from a view of the battlefield as a sobering experience to the exigence involved in the social silence surrounding soldiers' military experience is complemented by a shift in the complexity of their rhetorical response to it in both substance and form. The profound disillusionment that typifies their testimonies does not lead to self-discovery within a *Bildung* framework but rather to an unredeemed sense of disorientation and self-alienation as in:

> Since our release from the army we could not get over the feeling that we have changed, that the service in the territories and the situations we confronted have distorted and damaged the values with which we grew up. We have agreed that as long as Israeli society continues to send its sons to do combat service in the territories, it is of utmost importance that we all know, all citizens of the State of Israel, what heavy price the generation fighting in the territories is paying...[27]

Indeed, BTS soldiers' flesh witnessing involves the recounting of numerous morally troubling incidents that chip away at the officially cultivated heroic and patriotic view of the meaning of military action in Israeli society. The soldier-witnesses are not only disillusioned with the nature of their military assignments, which largely involve policing activities rather than potentially heroic battlefield engagements. They also testify to a deeply fractured moral sense, borne of the unbridgeable gap between the values they were brought up on and the realities they faced, as in "I found myself in situations that I didn't know how to cope with. It had me checking myself all the time to see how I held on to my values, how low I could go..."[28]. They speak of a depleted sense of agency that grows out of the severance of action and belief, as in "I said to myself, damn, I'm really doing something here that I don't believe in"[29], or of actions stripped of any sense of purpose, as in "It made us wonder what we were doing at the...checkpoint. Why was it forbidden to pass?"[30] They deplore the lack of basic clarity concerning the military's role *vis a vis* the settlers., as in "I reached a point in Hebron where I didn't know who the enemy was anymore"[31], and the lack of normative checks on soldiers' actions, as in "I was disturbed and

[26] This category was proposed in Katriel (2009) and used in Shavit and Katriel (2009). Kimberly Spring (2010) has discussed the dismantling of the perpetrator/victim binary with reference to American soldiers' testimonial campaign regarding the Iraq War.
[27] BTS, *Testimonial Booklet #1*, n.d., back cover, Hebrew version, our translation.
[28] BTS, *The Hebron Booklet*, 2004, 31.
[29] BTS, *ibid.*, 2004, 21.
[30] BTS, *ibid.*, 2004, 21.
[31] BTS, *Ibid.*, 2004, 38.

frightened most of all by the unregulated and uncontrolled power, and the things it made people do".[32] They highlight soldiers' indifference to the morality of their actions, as in "Now, in retrospect, I have doubts whether my order was justified as we really didn't have a clue at whom we were shooting"[33], or to the consequences of such routine practices as indiscriminate shooting, as in "I cannot say whether I hit or not. But I fired at the ambulance with a heavy gun".[34]

Thus, the world of the occupation the veterans testify to is an altogether senseless and disintegrating social and moral order, experienced as a lawless and irrational existence, as in "And I find myself in an army post, having to say to people: 'Listen, you can't get through here now'. 'Why not?' 'Because these are the orders now'. Simple. I didn't really have any good reasons to give them, and it wouldn't matter what I said, they were still prevented from moving on".[35] These profound feelings of disorientation grow into self-loathing as soldiers' relentless self-probing leads them to concede to their complicity with the system, as in "I was ashamed of myself the day I realized that I simply enjoy the feeling of power..."[36], or a particular incident jolts them into self-awareness, as in "There was something so noble about him [an elderly Palestinian man], and I felt like the scum of the earth".[37] The loss of moral compass divests the soldiers' experiences of any emotional coherence as they vacillate between emotional extremes – from the sense of numbness that accompanies routine military action, as in "It's hard to describe the kind of enormous sea of indifference you're swimming in while you're there [Hebron]"[38], to its contradiction, as in "serving in the territories isn't about numbness, it's a 'high', a sort of negative high".[39]

Lacking definable goals and verifiable consequences, military action becomes meaningless and troubling, leading soldiers to question the morality of the system of which they are a part as well as their own grasp on the reality of the situations they face. The form and structure of the verbal edifice they construct through their testimonial project speak of this loss of orientation and self-alienation. Paradoxically, the only moments in the testimonies in which the soldiers attest to a sense of self-continuity and meaningfulness involve border-crossing experiences in which they are jolted into recognition of their shared humanity with the Palestinians under their control. These moments of empathy are fuelled by the work of analogy and imaginative perspective-taking that are vital

[32] BTS, *Ibid.*, 2004, 12.
[33] BTS, *Testimonial Booklet #2*, 2005, 12.
[34] BTS, *ibid*, 48.
[35] BTS, *The Hebron Booklet*, 4.
[36] BTS, *ibid.*, 10.
[37] BTS, *ibid.*, 40.
[38] BTS, *ibid.*, 17.
[39] BTS, *ibid.*, 4.

to political thinking and opinion forming, as the following testimonial segment demonstrates:

[...] But this man was not obsequious, and he spoke the truth: that his life was a living hell, and that he wanted us to get out already...I don't agree with the man's opinions, but he told the soldier that he had entered his home just like that, and was humiliating him, undermining his dignity. And I looked at the man and said to myself: wait a minute, here is this man in his own home, and it made me think of my own family home, surrounded by a garden and greenery, a kind of fortress surrounded by a hedge of lantana and hibiscus, and I thought what if someone were to burst into the house like that, entering through an upstairs window, and force my parents and my younger brother into one of the rooms and start interrogating us, questioning us...These are not people of a different kind. The men even physically look like my grandfather...That person could be your own father, for whom you have the greatest respect...".[40]

As we see in this and many of the other testimonial segments we have cited, the collective voice that emerges from this testimonial edifice is intensely personal and generic at one and the same time (Na'aman 2008). Furthermore, despite the fact that the one-on-one interviews with soldiers by BTS activists follow a structured protocol that traces the interviewees' military career in a chronological manner, the published BTS materials do not preserve this chronological storyline. Indeed, while brief narrative segments are interspersed in the testimonial books and online video archive, the overall structuring of these testimonial texts is organized around theme-sets in a list-based manner that ruptures the linearity of personal stories and the coherence and sense of closure that linear narrative often entails (Linde 1993). Thus, taken as a whole, the BTS project does not narrativize the soldiers' personal experiences, avoiding the causal links and explanatory structures that render the world of human affairs meaningful. Rather, it employs a strategy of thematization to organize the soldiers' collective voice around the violation of shared cultural values and norms of human conduct. Heaping up story-fragments, factual reports, descriptive lists – all removed from their original witnessing texts – into a hybrid, thematically organized verbal edifice, BTS discourse specifies and inscribes scenes of military situations and norm violations in Israeli collective memory through an aesthetic and politics of excess that are characteristic of the melodramatic mode as a "language of presence and immediacy" (Brooks 1976: 67). This open-ended thematically organized body of textual fragments, held together by the power of repetition, aggregation and accumulation, carries no narrative closure, no sense of "lessons learned" – just the insistence of utterance in the face of erasure.

[40] BTS, *ibid.*, 21. More on the sense of border-crossing and the personal cost involved, see memoir by BTS member, Noam Chayut (2009).

By *speaking out* and holding on to the truth of their own experience, BTS activists are thus writing another chapter in the cultural legacy of soldiers' "war witnessing". Their testimonial act, while sharing what they have learned about themselves and the world, is first and foremost an attempt to reclaim the power of utterance. Their testimonials bridge the distancing presence of borders, walls, roadblocks, and administrative regulations that keep the OPT out of Israelis' view, as well as overcome the wall of silence that allows them not to acknowledge what they all know.[41] Transforming knowledge of lived-experience into codified public information requires tapping into cultural resources that can shape an urgent rhetorical response. The next section addresses the resources available to BTS members to this effect.

5. *Speaking out* as a cultural performance

In the case of BTS, as we have seen, the appropriation of "flesh witnessing" as a rhetorical response to the political exigency of social silence has evolved into a way of speaking natively glossed as *speaking out*. Explicitly named ways of speaking function as discourse-organizing elements within particular speech cultures (Hymes 1974). They organize choices among speech acts and speech events, and regulate the rules for selecting among them in any given enactment (Carbaugh 1989). Indeed, in the context of the ideological struggle over the representation of the OPT in contemporary Israeli discourse – and its future sedimentation in Israeli collective memory – the choices embedded in BTS speaking out serve to counter the justificatory apparatus that turns social silence into self-silencing as a politically produced cultural preference.

Despite the subversive nature of the speech performances through which their witnessing organization is constituted, Israeli veteran-activists see themselves as an intrinsic part of the society whose normative code of silence they seek to dismantle. Therefore, in constructing their public appeal they invoke valorized cultural symbols and meanings, such as commitment to the common good and adherence to the cultural values associated with a speech ethos of truth-telling. In Israeli culture, straight talk is associated with *dugri* speech (Katriel 1986), a way of speaking that bears many similarities to the classical rhetorical notion of *parrhesia* ("fearless speech") which Foucault (2001) considers to be integral to the critical attitude in Western tradition. We propose that the social role of truth-telling that Foucault traces to Antiquity is refracted in BTS discourse through the speech values underlying Israeli *dugri* speech – a speech style that is historically associated with the advent of Western modernity in

[41] See Ophir, Givoni and Hanafa (2009) and Yael Barda (2012), in Hebrew.

Jewish life via the secularist, Israeli ethos of national revival with its accent on agency and courage.[42]

Combing the classical Greco-Roman literature for uses of the term *parrhesia* and its derivatives, Foucault employs interpretive strategies similar to those employed by ethnographers of speaking who focus on historically situated meta-communicative terms (see, for example, Garret 1993) so as to illuminate the social meanings of *parrhesia* as a speech-centered rhetorical category in Antiquity. The main points of his analysis, which echo our foregoing discussion, are summarily presented as follows:

> [...] *parrhesia* is a verbal activity in which a speaker expresses his personal relation to truth, and risks his life because he recognizes truth-telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as himself). In *parrhesia* the speaker chooses frankness instead of persuasion, truth instead of falsehood or silence, the risk of death instead of life and security, criticism instead of flattery, and moral duty instead of self-interest and moral apathy. (Foucault 2001: 19-20)

Foucault thus formulates the cultural code that governs *parrhesia* as a distinctive speech activity in terms of the speaker's positioning in relation to the truth; in relation to his or her own self; and in relation to his or her audiences. The fearless speaker, the *parrhesiastes,* risks de-legitimization, censure and marginalization (or, in some cases, even death) as he ventures to speak out in the public sphere, taking personal responsibility for his utterance. Personal responsibility is closely associated with transparency and directness of style. In Foucault's words:

> For in *parrhesia* the speaker makes it manifestly clear and obvious that what he says is his own opinion. And he does this by avoiding any kind of rhetorical form which would veil what he thinks. Instead, the *parrhesiastes* uses the most direct words and forms of expression he can find. (Foucault 2001:12)

Directness of style – unembellished truth-telling – is also the defining feature of *dugri* speech, which, like ancient Greek *parrhesia,* is typically employed in challenging consensually held positions by giving voice to the speaker's personal sense of truth. *Dugri* speech, too, is associated with risk-taking and courage in addressing potentially unwelcoming audiences and with an aesthetic of simplicity and naturalness that masks its rhetoricity (Katriel 1986: 43).

Dugri speakers and *parrhesiastes* both occupy discursively marked social

[42] Consider similarities with other contemporary ways of speaking that capitalize on the notion of sincerity as a legitimating value for "telling it like it is". See the ethnographic analysis of the American speech norm of "being honest" in televised Talk Shows by Carbaugh (1989), and the uses of "straight-talk" in the American political arena by Markovitz (2007). These American examples centrally invoke the language of rights rather than notions of courage and defiance.

positions in their respective cultural contexts. In the Greek polis, fearless speech was reserved for men-citizens of proper class who could profess personal, moral and social qualities that grounded their assertive stance and legitimated their public critique. In Israeli culture, somewhat similarly, speaking *dugri* has been associated with the idealized and highly gendered image of the Israeli-born Jew, the *Sabra,* which became the hallmark of the new Jewish-Zionist (masculinist) identity during the Israeli nation-building era, and later with Israel's militarist ethos and the soldierly role.[43] Following Foucault, we propose, therefore, that if *parrhesiastes* are precursors of modern critics then *dugri* speakers are their vernacular contemporaries.

Thus, BTS *speaking out* carries special resonance within Israeli cultural ethos in which the localized version of fearless speech – the *dugri* way of speaking – is a privileged form. It is a morally-driven subversive act whose distinctive tonalities ultimately lie in its performance. As one of BTS members put it:

> The essence of the moral act is the act itself...The deepest thing is to refuse to accept reality. To get up and say, 'I am not part of this. I live a different life'...I can get up in the morning and not shut up...I have a moral duty to do this.[44]

BTS statements and testimonials construct this refusal as a grand gesture of condemnation – political condemnation of military practices, moral condemnation of the occupation regime and of the social silence surrounding it. As a testimonial rhetoric, this condemnatory stance takes the form of self-condemnation as the soldiers recount their complicity in upholding this regime. The following testimony captures some of the soldiers' self-directed, retrospective sense of outrage:

> Four and a half years of service as a proud combat officer, you feel you make the most out of your education. You believe in what you do, but then you come out and look back, and you understand you were a monster, a thug. [45]

BTS discourse thus harnesses soldiers' belated insights, and the sense of guilt attending them, in constructing a "mobilizing shame" strategy along the lines of contemporary human-rights discourses (Keenan 2004, McLagan 2007). Acting as "organic intellectuals", as *parrhesiastes*, or as quintessential *dugri* speakers – socially marginalized by the oppositional stance they assume – they seek to create witnesses who will be unable to say "I didn't know", assuming "epistemic responsibility" for what is being done in their name (Linell and Rommetvreit 1998).

[43] The study of *dugri* speech includes an analysis of two instances of *dugri* events associated with soldierly defiance (Katriel 1986: 76-98), which are analyzed with reference to the notion of social drama proposed by anthropologist Victor Turner (1974).

[44] Interview with Yehuda, 28.4.2007.

[45] Ziv Ma'avar, age 24, "shovrim shtika" testimony reprinted online, 26.11.2004, http://www.nrg.co.il/cgi-bin/nrgprint.pl?channel=channel_news.

6. Concluding Remarks

BTS members employ "flesh witnessing" in constructing their rhetorical response to the exigence posed by the politically cultivated silence surrounding the Israeli military regime in the OPT both as direct oppositional action and as a resource for the future construction of an Israeli counter-memory. We have considered their culturally localized version of flesh witnessing with reference to the Western tradition of critical speech in terms of Foucault's discussion of the ancient Greek notion of *parrhesia* and to the study of Israeli *dugri* speech. BTS *speaking out* is distinctive in combining defiant speech and testimonial discourse in contexts of silencing and potential erasure – as such, it is neither fully encompassed by the Hebrew term *ledaber* nor by the English term "speaking out" as these terms for talk might be used in other sociocultural contexts.

The very act of *speaking out* embodies the possibility of reclaiming one's sense of agency and morality through acts of fearless speech. As Markovitz (2007) has pointed out, scholarly discussions of the political import of the norm of sincerity that underlies the discursive strategy of "telling it like it is" have not given due emphasis to the aspects of risk and courage associated with the employment of straight talkin the public sphere. These are precisely the aspects of fearless speech that have been highlighted by Foucault with respect to *parrhesia* in ways which, we believe, are pertinent to the understanding of *dugri* speech and to BTS *speaking out.*

In mounting their testimonial campaign, BTS have joined others who employ the genre of testimony for social-political ends in today's so-called "era of the witness" (Wieviorka 2002). As Michal Givoni (2010) has pointed out, testimony is a distinctive and dynamic speech activity that in countering the moral ravages of social indifference in contemporary life serves as "an act of moral weaving, an attempt to (re)establish a human relation where one is denied or presumed to be nonexistent". Delineating a genealogy of the notion of testimony as it has evolved in the past century, she questions its current use in the field of memory studies by distinguishing different types of testimonial regimes and their diverse historical contexts of emergence. The three testimonial strands in the history of the past century she singles out are: i) the testimonial regime of post-WWI soldiers as it found its expression in the testimonial project of Jean Norton Cru (1993[1929]) which fused individual soldiers' testimony into a collective generational voice; ii) the testimonial edifice of atrocity victims' witnessing epitomized by the special role assigned to Holocaust testimonials (Felman and Laub 1992); iii) the political testimonial practices associated with the emergence of human-rights activism in the second part of the twentieth century. Our analysis of BTS testimonial project both builds on and cuts across this typology of

testimonial regimes. It posits the distinctive positioning of Israeli veterans as victimized-victimizers whose testimonial rhetoric is both informed by post-WWI soldiers' "flesh witnessing" and is also politically aligned with human rights testimonial practices.

Our main concern, however, has been with the performative dimension of BTS testimonial discourse as a component of their defiant speech. That is, with the transformative potential of BTS collective soldierly voice in challenging the silences imposed by Israeli militaristic culture (Ben-Eliezer 1998). Thus, while Givoni helpfully problematizes the notion of testimony, our move has been to problematize the act of *speaking out* (in a case involving testimonial discourse) as a rhetorical performance within an ethnography of speaking perspective. Expressing their dissent by mounting a testimonial campaign was obviously only one of the strategies of resistance open to BTS activists. Notably, at the time that they launched their testimonial activities, hundreds of Israeli dissident soldiers (mainly reservists) had opted for a strategy of civil disobedience and declared – under the heading of Courage to Refuse – their refusal to continue to serve in the occupied territories.[46] Although they were charged by some critics as equivocating, as attempting to clear their conscience and claim moral superiority through their acts of confessional testimony (Handel 2008), BTS refused to take an organizational stance on the matter of conscientious objection – the ultimate act of ideological resistance in Israeli society. Insisting that this does not affect the subversive power of their project – a point somewhat supported by their increasingly hostile reception in mainstream Israeli society[47] – they nevertheless remain locked in their position as guilt-ridden victimized-victimizers whose act of speaking out is constrained by reaffirming their participation in a society whose morality and norms they reject.

The testimonial strategy employed by BTS thus attests to a cultural vision according to which political exigencies and the power struggles that underlie them are constructed in speech-centered terms – as rhetorical situations in which fearless speech is a valuable instrument of civic engagement and in which the end-goal of speaking out is to generate more speech – to raise questions usually left unasked, to trigger public debate on topics usually left untouched, i.e. to subvert the hegemonic silence Israeli society is studiously cultivating. Thus, *speaking out* is a transformative speech performance that transcends the rules of the game in which it makes its intervention. It introduces radical diversity into the field of discourse by trading situational appropriateness concerning "the said" and "the unsaid" for the potential ramifications of new discursive

[46] See http://www.seruv.org.il/english/default.asp (accessed, 16.10.12)

[47] In October 2012 a new face-book organized campaign was launched by a group calling itself "Zionists Breaking The Silence", whose explicit goal is to counter the BTS project, which it accuses of de-legitimizing the state of Israel and its army.

possibilities borne of culturally inflected acts of defiance that perform their communicative work through transgressive verbal gestures.

The attempt to analyze such radical speech utterances – and their performative constraints – through an ethnographic lens, with its privileging of systematic relations and speech patterning that tend to represent the normative order of dominant groups in society, highlights inherent tensions within the ethnography of speaking enterprise – the tension between language and utterance, between structure and event, between type and token. Treading this thin line, we have explored the transformative potential of politically transgressive speech through the case study of BTS discourse. By attending to the sociocultural conditions that make BTS testimonial rhetoric part of a shared speech culture in its role as a counter-discourse, we hope to have demonstrated that the study of oppositional speech is a productive research site in which the inherent tensions of speech codes and the cultural creativity of speakers can be addressed.

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