The Testimonial "We": Collaborative Life Writing in Senthuran Varatharajah's *Vor der Zunahme der Zeichen*

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In its portrayal of digital correspondence between two refugees who have long settled into their lives in Germany, Senthuran Varatharajah's first novel *Vor der Zunahme der Zeichen* ('Before the Increase of Signs') offers readers a glimpse into generational life stories about flight after arrival. Varatharajah's novel diverges from other notable Germanophone works about refugees such as Abbas Khider's *Ohrfeige* (*A Slap in the Face)* or Jenny Erpenbeck's *Gehen, ging, gegangen* (*Go, Went, Gone*) not only in its focus on life after obtaining asylum, but also in its epistolary structure in the form of a Facebook conversation that interweaves both interlocutors' personal and family stories about flight. In its thematization of flight, *Vor der Zunahme* distinguishes itself from refugee narratives that foreground the singular voice of a witness who discloses accounts of painful ordeals, experiences of transit to an asylum country, and the hurdles of the asylum process. The novel turns instead to the ongoing lives of figures whose stories pertain to non-contemporaneous histories of forced migration such as the Sri Lankan Civil War (1983-2009) and the Kosovo War (1998-99), evading the often sensationalist content of narratives about flight that linger on images of trauma, reinforce notions that the "single story is the currency of refugees," and privilege whichever crisis event remains particularly current in media (Espiritu et al. 112).

Along with the structure of social media, the novel also draws on experiences of flight and asylum as narrative themes that readers may potentially link to its paratextual basis in personal experiences with asylum. While Varatharajah presents a fictional story, the novel suggests certain biographical parallels with the author himself which lend the novel a level of extratextual reality grounded in Varatharajah's own family background. Much like the author himself, the novel's male protagonist Senthil Vasuthevan fled with his family to Germany during the Sri Lankan Civil War as an infant. He now studies philosophy in Berlin while pondering his tenuous connection to his parents' native tongue, Tamil, over the course of the novel (Schmidt). The novel's other main interlocutor, Valmira Surroi, also arrived in Germany with her family as part of the Albanian diaspora fleeing the Kosovo War in the late nineties. As they exchange recollections of their families' arrival and early childhood in Germany, Senthil and Valmira pursue connections between their respective family histories and singular experiences as adults who have now spent most of their lives speaking in German and living in Germany. The novel's narrative structure emulates an online chat between Senthil and Valmira in which the two tell each other stories about their studies, upbringing,

relationship to the German language and their parents' first language, and family backgrounds, tied loosely together by each other's conversation prompts. Senthil and Valmira's nonlinear correspondence never consolidates into any discernible plot, and their interaction does not develop beyond that of two strangers meeting online who seek connection with another sharing a similar experience of life after arrival in Germany.

In its parallel telling of two intergenerational stories about flight after asylum, Varatharajah's novel reflects on the possibility of shared postmemorial witnessing. Against the context of testimonial life writing, wherein witness testimony is especially subject to suspicion of false witnessing, Varatharajah's novel features a semi-dialogical form of narration that departs from what Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson characterize as the metrics of authenticity especially tied to the subject position of first-person or "I-narration" ("Metrics of Authenticity" 591). As Smith and Watson observe, witness narratives figure as a form of high-stakes life writing that not only situates readers as "ethical subjects within the global imaginary of human rights advocacy," but also relies on first-person witness testimony to cultivate an individualized experiential history compelling enough to convince readers of its credibility ("Metrics of Authenticity" 590-93). However, by centering the voices of two interlocutors who prompt one another to remember their respective family histories of flight, *Vor der Zunahme* dwells on the question of bearing witness through intergenerational transmission of memory and modes of building connection across disparate refugee experiences.

In an investigation of the narrative structure through which Varatharajah illustrates the exchange between individual and shared experiences of flight, family stories, and cultural histories disseminated within communities of resettled refugees, this article considers how his novel's portrayal of retrospective and collective memory attests to the enduring impact of war, sociopolitical upheaval, and forced displacement among diaspora communities. My reading of *Vor der Zunahme* will begin by building on the joint studies on life narratives, autobiographical writing, and e-witnessing by Kay Schaffer, Sidonie Smith, and Julia Watson to examine how Varatharajah approaches testimonial life writing through a virtual epistolary form. Next, I analyze how the novel brings into question the role of digital technologies in mediating both testimony and the boundary between individual and collective personal narratives by elaborating on Marianne Hirsch's work on postmemory. In a continued study of collective narration and memory, I draw on Carol Bohmer and Amy Shuman's research on political asylum and Giacomo Mantovan's study on "tactical" storytelling among Sri Lankan Tamil asylum applicants in France to consider how Sri Lankan Tamils employ elements of Tamil social history to navigate the asylum credibility process. To conclude, I demonstrate how Varatharajah traces the impact of collective histories of forced migration on the shaping of individual stories about flight to reflect on the

alternative possibilities for witnessing extended by the novel. With a focus on intergenerational transmission and postmemory in the asylum context, this article argues that *Vor der Zunahme* invites readers to re-conceptualize testimonial form as collaborative acts of witnessing made possible through the intermingling of its protagonists' personal narratives with the shared histories of diaspora communities.

Growing Networks of Memory: Life Writing and "E-Witnessing"

As readers turn to the first pages of Varatharajah's *Vor der Zunahme*, they find themselves at the beginning of a virtual conversation between two strangers who stumble upon one another as suggested contacts on a digital platform. Along with timestamps, lowercase letters, and mobile icons beside each message, the novel references familiar notifications on Facebook through the indicated feature of "*personen*[1]*, die ich vielleicht kenne*" (9) 'people you may know' and opening heading "Unterhaltung heute gestartet" (9) 'Conversation started today,' which further signals the initial stages of the protagonists' acquaintanceship.[2] At first glance, this newly formed conversation between Senthil and Valmira models online communication in a form that would likely be recognizable to present-day readers, yet the conversation itself rarely conforms to the expectations of a traditional dialogue. Although the two characters barely know each other apart from one or two mutual friends, they are quick to confide not only information about their biographical details, field of study, or career, but also intimate memories about their families and personal experiences living in refugee homes. As the novel begins with this random encounter, it mirrors the kinds of conversations enabled by social platforms even as the plausibility of one's willingness to share private details about oneself in such an instance might remain in question.

In its form as a *Facebook-Briefroman* 'Facebook epistolary novel,' Varatharajah's novel does not resemble a conventional autobiography or biographical narrative, yet it draws from life writing insofar as it embeds the practice of self-representing lived experiences within a fictional text (Schmidt). In *Vor der Zunahme,* Senthil and Valmira's biographical experiences are fictional due to the characters' own fictional status. Nevertheless, within the confines of the fictional narrative, they each tell stories about their lives and that of their families by relying on "personal memories as a primary archival source" (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 6). In addition to the novel's emphasis on personal memory and lived experience, Varatharajah's use of a recognizable digital platform as a narrative frame against the context of asylum-seeking also positions the novel among the kinds of witness narratives circulated widely in online media.

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[1] In the novel, Senthil writes exclusively in lowercase type.

[2] All translations of *Vor der Zunahme* are mine.

As Schaffer and Smith describe in their study on "e-witnessing," digital technologies have fundamentally altered the ways personal storytelling is mobilized to "register grievance and advance collective forms of recognition and redress" in campaigns for human rights (223). Unlike cases of "analog witnessing" exemplified by traditional human rights campaigns drawing on oral testimony in truth commissions, interview recordings, and published accounts from survivors, e-witnessing refers to the transformative impact of digital tools and media in the narrativization of witness claims and configuration of forms of activism (Schaffer and Smith 223-24). While e-witnessing does not preclude the role of personal storytelling, it interacts with other modes of witnessing enabled by digital environments that invite the large-scale participation of online publics in sourcing information, organizing action, and raising awareness for a distinct cause.[3] At the same time that Senthil and Valmira's life stories hinge on personal witnessing, the digital network through which they recount their memories, albeit staged, is similarly engaged to enable a witnessing of human rights violations from prior periods of armed conflict that rests on multiple agents of narration.

As a form of witnessing unlinked to a representative figure or source of grievance, e-witnessing does not rely solely on an individual story from which to advance social action. Instead, it involves a continuous exchange of information, commentary, and audiovisual content from online users in a process that is "less progressive than recursively interactive" in its lack of a central narrative to advocate for a specific issue (Schaffer and Smith 228). In non-digital forms of witnessing, Schaffer and Smith articulate an "aspirational grammar" toward action through the use of a focused narrative to cultivate empathy (228). Conversely, e-witnessing features the usage of social networking such as texting, tweeting, video or photo sharing, and links from online users with different vested interests that function jointly to reform the structure of human rights activism historically grounded in the personal testimony of identifiable primary and secondary witnesses. By elaborating on established practices of human rights activism, digital technologies highlight the relational processes underlying testimonial production and reception as they locate the act of personal witnessing among networks of information transmission and authentication. In deriving its structure from social media, Varatharajah's novel models the decentralized forms of witnessing promoted by digital networks through Senthil and Valmira's partial recollections and disjointed messages to one another.

While Varatharajah depicts a conversation between his two protagonists, the interlocutors often do not appear to respond to each other, or at least not directly. For most of the novel, Senthil and Valmira do not communicate in the style of a

[3] Gillian Whitlock also refers to the role of Web 2.0 technologies in facilitating the "mass eyewitness account" in her study on the online mobilization of firsthand testimony captured on smartphones and further amplified by national broadcasters in the wake of Australia's "Stop the Boats" campaign to forcibly tow-back asylum seekers (248-49).

standard dialogue, but rather disclose select memories to each other that seem to only implicitly build on their conversation partner's preceding message. In one example, Valmira describes watching images of Pristina, Kosovo on television with her parents for the first time since their departure and not being able to understand the Albanian spoken in the news. Senthil follows with a memory of language as he recounts the words of an elderly woman at the last refugee center he lived in, who watched over him and his siblings and taught them to only speak German "hier in diesem land" (135) 'here in this country,' noting that "tamil sei eine katzensprache" (Varatharajah 135) 'Tamil is catspeak.' While not strictly a combination of monologues either, the protagonists' form of communication provides readers with insights into the ways that each of the interlocutors' memories lead into one another without being subsumed by either person's storytelling.

Unlike a conventional dialogue between two speakers, in which the reciprocity of exchange is mostly driven by an explicit prompt-and-answer and vice versa, Senthil and Valmira's conversation portrays two distinct stories unfolding alongside each other. In an interview, Varatharajah refers to this form of the novel as "ein dialogisches Prinzip, aber ein negatives" 'a dialogic principle, but a negative one,' where communication takes place between interlocutors who are responsive to each other's speech, "aber ohne den Körper des anderen zu verletzen" 'however, without harming the body of another' ("Politisch Schreiben"). As he compares the act of dialogue to a physical interaction where contact may inflict bodily harm, Varatharajah envisions his protagonists' exchange as an exercise in care that foregrounds the differentiated experiences conveyed in their personal stories and those of the diaspora communities to which they allude. Senthil and Valmira's approach to dialogue highlights a collaborative process in which the individual story is not compromised, such that neither takes precedence over the other; as Senthil muses, "sie könnten auch aneinander vorbeisprechen […] sie könnten gleichzeitig sprechen" (14) 'they could also talk past one another […] they could talk at the same time.' In this reimagined form of dialogue, Senthil and Valmira impart their stories in a manner unobstructed by possible interruptions or pressures of narrative coherence. By taking care to maintain the particularity of Senthil and Valmira's experiences, Varatharajah prevents their stories from coalescing into a monolithic, homogeneous narrative about refugees in general.

Jonas Teupert similarly describes how the formal structure of Senthil and Valmira's writing resonates with the diasporic conditions of *Verstreuung,* or scattering, in its resistance to merging their individual stories into a cohesive narrative (17). In his analysis of the novel, Teupert observes the ways Varatharajah's form of the Facebook novel constitutes both the "conditions for homelessness in the 21st century" and "a form of diasporic belonging across national backgrounds," as it reflects on the shared experiences of refugees in the

present day whose presence interrogates the borders of nation-states (17).[4] Varatharajah's novel further underscores the element of dispersion embodied in the experience of diaspora through Senthil and Valmira's reliance on digital media to orient their memory and knowledge of the historical conflicts to which they trace the origin of their relationship to language and narratives of self. The multiplying aspect of their exchange mirrors the online social network from which the novel borrows its narrative frame in that it suggests "an accumulation of fragmented contributions from many sources and actors," nestled within a "constantly changing web of paratexts and surrounds, links, calls for action, information flows, and networks of reception" (Schaffer and Smith 228). The novel portrays this very transmission of information via several media channels in Senthil and Valmira's first encounters with images of Sri Lanka and Pristina after civil war. In contrast to Senthil's preference for writing in lowercase, Valmira's style of writing features standard orthography:

> Senthil Vasuthevan
> 05:41
> channel four, ein britischer fernsehsender, strahlte vor zwei jahren eine dokumentation aus, die über die letzten wochen des bürgerkriegs berichtete; aussagen von augenzeugen, die unkenntlich, als schattenrisse nur zu erkennen waren, sowie kriegsverbrechen auf verpixelten bildern und in verwackelten videos, von handykameras aufgenommen, wurden zum ersten mal einer öffentlichkeit gezeigt. (Varatharajah 132-33)
>
> Channel Four, a British television channel, premiered a documentary film two years ago that reported on the last two weeks of the Civil War; testimony from eyewitnesses who looked unrecognizable as mere silhouettes, as well as war crimes in pixelated images and blurry videos recorded on phone cameras which were made public for the first time.
>
> Valmira Surroi
> 05:54
> […] Es waren die ersten Bilder von Prishtina, die ich seit unserer Flucht gesehen habe, alles sah anders aus als in meiner Erinnerung. Sie waren körnig und flimmerten […] Ich erinnere mich daran, dass ich nichts von dem verstand, was die Menschen in den Nachrichten sagten. Sie sprachen Albanisch und eine Stimme aus dem Hintergrund übersetzte es und sie klang jünger und lauter als die des alten Mannes, über die sie sich mit einigen Sekunden Verzögerung legte. (Varatharajah 134)

[4] Teupert refers to Georg Lukács' conception of the form of the novel as an expression of "transcendental homelessness."

> They were the first images of Pristina that I had seen since fleeing, everything looked different than how it was in my memory. They were grainy and flickered […] I remember how I understood nothing from what the people in the news said. They spoke Albanian and a voice in the background translated and it sounded younger and louder than that of the old man it overlaid after a delay of a few seconds […].

In describing their experiences observing images of Sri Lanka and Pristina through televised documentaries and news reports, Senthil and Valmira highlight the multiple remote sources through which they were able to access information about the conflicts from which their families fled as well as their aftermath. Senthil notes, for example, how he was made aware of the Channel Four documentary *Sri Lanka's Killing Fields* from his brother, who in turn, discovered the film on YouTube.[5] The film itself, a product of British journalism consisting of anonymized testimonial accounts, censored images, and grainy video recordings, has served as one of the few archives he has to witness the atrocities of the Sri Lankan Civil War. Senthil's description also draws attention to the composite nature of the documentary's materials, which has drawn witness accounts from individual eyewitnesses but also from footage captured on phone cameras. Similarly, Valmira stresses the feelings of alienation she experienced watching dated and granular images of Pristina on television inconsistent with her own memory of the city and being unable to understand the Albanian in which the news was initially reported.

In imparting brief and uninterrupted recollections, which act as memory cues for each other to retrieve resonant scenes of memory, Senthil and Valmira's responses accentuate the entangled structure of the digital technologies from which they piece together their knowledge of their respective family histories. As they interweave their life stories in conversation, Senthil and Valmira's exchange further recalls Schaffer and Smith's definition of e-witnessing in that it suggests "witnessing without a singular agent of narration," which is most legible in their attempts to trace their family history through an array of external sources forwarded by multiple actors and transmitted further in their correspondence with one another (228). In Schaffer and Smith's analysis of e-witnessing, such diffuse networks of witness narratives in the digital era may fail to consolidate into effective means of enacting change and establishing solidarity (229). In *Vor der Zunahme*, however, Varatharajah characterizes the social media-driven decentralization of witnessing as reflective of the contextual relations that give shape to stories about flight unanchored to firsthand experience.

[5] The investigative documentary was broadcast via Channel 4 on June 14, 2011.

In the novel, the sharing of digital images and videos on social platforms allows Senthil and Valmira to recognize how their life stories and memories of flight both converge with those of their close and extended family and neighbors as well as develop with the influence of circulated media. While the emergence of such media technologies may divert attention from the personal voice of witnesses, they also offer a kind of witness politics that need not rely on the prevailing figure of a suffering victim in human rights discourse through which "violence and abuse can become empty signifiers" (Schaffer and Smith 234). As Varatharajah's novel focuses instead on the relational dimensions of Senthil and Valmira's life stories, it deviates from the forms of witness narratives that seek to foreground the plight of a specific individual in order to give precedence to the resonance of collective histories in personal witnessing.

The novel's use of social media as a narrative frame through which to convey stories about flight compels readers to reconsider the centrality of the singular witness voice in testimonial narrative by restoring the larger context of family experiences and collective histories from which individual life narratives derive. To promote awareness through storytelling and ultimately mobilize potential redress to a rights violation, traditional witness narratives often rely on the personal witnessing of a definable survivor. Unlike such narratives, the accounts conveyed by Senthil and Valmira stem from variable voices that compound with no defined claim to a single identity or aspiration to advocacy. Instead, Varatharajah embeds the act of witnessing in a virtual network where externally produced narratives about human rights transgressions, personal memories, and family correspondence circulate between near strangers. In doing so, he frames his protagonists' exchange of life stories as a form of mutual recognition that hinges neither on a personal voice nor cohesive testimony. As opposed to conveying a homogeneous story about asylum-seekers, the novel centers each protagonist's unique biographical experience at the same time that it explores the points at which their individual life stories, however dissimilar and distant, may also intersect as part of a shared history between those affected by forced displacement.

In a delayed reference to Valmira's early messages about her first visit to the National Library in Pristina, Senthil ruminates on the collective loss of memory experienced by Tamils and Albanians in the wake of Albanian books burned during the Kosovo War and the burning of the Jaffna Public Library by anti-Tamil Sinhalese groups. After searching on Google images, Senthil likens the domes of the National Library in Pristina to those of the Jaffna Library, and recalls how the Jaffna Library was once the largest of its kind in Asia before "die siebenundneunzigtausend bücher und palmblattmanuskripte in ihr verbrannt wurden" (Varatharajah 128) 'the ninety-seven thousand books and palm-leaf manuscripts in it were burned.' From Wikipedia, Senthil also learns about the 100,000 Albanian books and reading rooms that were burned during wartime and

reflects on the personal impact of such a loss as he imagines how the remnants of the furniture and books may have once been used by Valmira's parents. As he describes the destruction of entire repositories of knowledge pertaining to Tamil and Albanian histories, Senthil contemplates his father's observation on the attempted erasure of both language and "Gedächtnis" (128-29) 'cultural memory.'[6]

While Senthil's response divulges only the personal memory of having Googled images of a historical event that he did not witness himself, it foregrounds the tentative connections between separate collective histories of violence prompted by Valmira's personal memory of the National Library in Pristina. Like Senthil, Valmira herself did not witness the burning of cultural texts and public archives and can only learn about the events from the internet, which serves as an archival source of cultural memory in place of in-person experience or the physical libraries referenced. In his allusion to his father's regret over the loss of Tamil language and cultural memory, Senthil also remarks on his own severed connection to Tamil history as he observes his incapacity to remember. When he notes, "auch wir erinnern uns an nichts" (129) 'we too remember nothing,' Senthil refers not only to the cultural history lost in the burning of the Jaffna library, but also to his own inability to be an embodied witness to the event. By calling attention to his reliance on various sources of information to gain insight into historical events that played a crucial role in his and Valmira's family histories of flight, Senthil highlights how their lives remain inextricably linked to collective histories to which they nevertheless have no direct access.

As Senthil draws on Valmira's personal memory to spur his reflections on the parallel experiences between Tamil and Albanian histories, he engages in a shared endeavor to imagine how their personal lives might figure into historical memory. In the above passage, Senthil envisions how Valmira's parents may have once inhabited the library space or perused the burned books in Pristina by drawing on her earlier recollections of her parents' college days. In his following reference to his parents' photo album, Senthil also describes an old photo of his father's old home in Sri Lanka, another attempt to visualize a moment in his family history before his birth. As he observes the unknown figures in the photo, he imagines where his brother might have been, if he had seen the faces and clothing of two women he did not recognize, whether they could have been his aunt and mother, and if he was still unborn in his mother's belly (Varatharajah 130). Rather than a portrayal of memory recall alone, the novel depicts Senthil and Valmira's reciprocal storytelling as a collaborative undertaking to reinsert themselves and their stories into those of their families and cultural communities.

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[6] I use the term "cultural memory" to refer to Aleida Assmann's description of "kulturelles Gedächtnis" in its function as archive through forms such as libraries and museums which are uniquely capable of storing extensive information that human memories cannot.

By mobilizing elements of life narrative and a virtual framework in *Vor der Zunahme,* Varatharajah employs a form of storytelling that makes space for personal and shared memories of flight in its pursuit of connections to past histories of conflict. Although Varatharajah's characters may both have arrived in Germany as young asylum seekers, their families fled to Germany owing to distinct political conflicts and resettled under different circumstances. While Valmira recounts visiting her remaining relatives in Pristina after the Kosovo War, Senthil and his family do not return to Sri Lanka due to the governing administration's active repression of the Tamil minority population (Varatharajah 127).[7] Varatharajah highlights the role of personal memory in his portrayal of Senthil and Valmira's family histories, yet he does not privilege a single narrator or personal narrative. In its exploration of Senthil and Valmira's attempts to recover incomplete memories of their family pasts and early lives in Germany through conversation, the novel encourages readers to consider how the act of remembering lies at the intersection of individual and social memory. Aleida Assmann, for instance, describes the ways in which episodic memories, fragmented in nature, not only constitute part of a larger network of other memories and that of other individuals, but also become "continuously socially readapted, be it that they are substantiated and corroborated, or challenged and corrected [to] create social bonds" (213). Through this imagining of the social process by which his protagonists reconstruct their individual memories, Varatharajah illustrates how Senthil and Valmira's acts of remembering speak to a shared pursuit of family history rooted in larger histories of forced migration.

Whose Memory? Family Narratives and Postmemory

In Varatharajah's novel, family history plays a crucial role in Senthil and Valmira's exploration of cultural memory and construction of personal narrative. As they contemplate the ways that their families' histories of flight continue to shape their present, both characters acknowledge how they narrate other people's stories in their correspondence. Senthil, for example, shares a memory of having seen his mother beg her young nephew for forgiveness upon seeing him for the first time in fifteen years on their visit to Oslo. The reason for his mother's profound regret is left unexplained, and as Valmira responds, "Ich weiß nicht, was ich zu Deiner Geschichte sagen soll" (Varatharajah 38) 'I do not know what I should say to your story.' Senthil responds simply with, "es ist nicht meine geschichte" (39) 'It is not my story.' Senthil also partly relies on others to help elaborate his memory

[7] Senthil mentions that the Parliament of Sri Lanka introduced a "Sinhala Only Act" in 1956, replacing English as the language of bureaucracy since British colonization of Sri Lanka in 1815. He notes that in the present day (in 2016), Sinhala remains the primary language through which laws are passed and that the Sri Lankan army has left a lasting impact on the city of Jaffna.

of this scene as he notes, "so wie es vor drei jahren von [meinem Bruder] hörte" (38) 'as I heard it from my brother three years ago,' further indicating his perspective as one of several onlookers to his mother's remorse. Even as he tells this story, which he does not consider his own, Senthil discloses how intensely his mother's emotional state has lingered in his memory. In his account of the visit, he describes his mother's feelings of shame as she hid in the kitchen, and later lay her head by her feet in an impassioned plea to undo unnamed past wrongs toward her nephew.

As with their recollections of news reports on the Sri Lankan Civil War and the Kosovo War as well as imagined scenes of the libraries in Jaffna and Pristina, the memories to which Senthil and Valmira allude recall what Marianne Hirsch terms postmemory (106-07).[8] In her study on intergenerational acts of transfer, Hirsch calls into question not only how individuals of the "post-generation" may be able to carry forward the memories of previous generations, especially traumatic experiences, without appropriating them, but also whether such intergenerational transfers remain bound to the space of the family or beyond (104). These questions of guardianship and boundary-drawing surrounding memory, trauma, and transmission emerge in Varatharajah's portrayal of his characters' endeavors to connect with their family histories of flight. Hirsch's concept of postmemory, which emphasizes the "affective force" of memory transmitted by preceding generations rather than cognitive recall stemming from personal experience, surfaces in the emotional weight invoked by Senthil and Valmira's attempts to remember the cultural history experienced by their parents and extended family (109). The crucial distinction Hirsch makes between memory recall and postmemory helps to illustrate how Varatharajah's characters experience a connection to a past made available to them through family stories to such an extent that they appear to constitute part of their own memories.

As Varatharajah's protagonists draw upon family narratives, they do not take ownership of the memories of others within their respective families, but rather activate the underlying configuration of memory transmission from the intimate space of the family to the individual. Similar to how Hirsch describes how potently such "inherited memories" compose the stories that individuals have of events which occurred before their birth, or far from their own experience, Senthil and Valmira draw on narratives transmitted within the family and across to each other in a process of "imaginative investment, projection, and creation" (106-07). Rather than center accuracy of memory, the novel underscores the process of crafting memory from fragments, especially in the context of cultural history whose preservation has been disrupted or actively erased as a result of sociopolitical conflict. As she relates her parents' account of the initial signs of systemic

[8] Hirsch primarily examines the generational structure of postmemory with the family as a space of transmission in the context of the Holocaust.

persecution toward Kosovo-Albanians, Valmira admits that she can hardly remember what came before her family's flight from Pristina as "nur Bruchstücke sind geblieben" (Varatharajah 125) 'only fragments remain':

> Valmira Surroi
> 04:22
> [Meine Eltern] fingen an zu erzählen, wie in Klassenzimmern Wände eingezogen wurden und Vor- und Nachmittagsunterricht eingeführt wurde, um serbische Schüler von albanischen zu trennen, sie fingen an zu erzählen, wie an Schulen und Hochschulen nur noch Serbisch gesprochen und gelehrt werden durfte, und wie Polizisten in die Räume der künstlerischen Fakultät kamen und mit einer Handbewegung die Bilder zerschnitten, sie kamen ohne Ankündigung. Keshtu filloi, so fing es an, sagen sie. (Varatharajah 125-26)
>
> [My parents] began to recount, how walls were installed in classrooms and mid-morning and afternoon class sessions were introduced to separate Serbian students from Albanian students, they began to recount how only Serbian was allowed to be spoken and taught in schools and universities, and how policemen came into the rooms of the art department and tore up paintings with a single movement of the hand, they came without warning. Keshtu filloi, so it began, they say.

Valmira stresses the reported nature of the account as she repeats "sie fingen an zu erzählen" (126) 'they began to recount,' yet the storytelling process that has taken place in a personal exchange between Valmira and her parents has also built an experiential and emotional proximity to a foreboding time for Albanians in Kosovo. Valmira describes, for example, the progression of events beginning with the segregationist measures taken in schools and escalating to police involvement, and ultimately reconstructs her parents' sudden realization of the ever-increasing dangers that were approaching. Valmira's narration of her parents' experiences highlights how she retrieves memories of Kosovo before their flight at a generational remove while it also demonstrates how the intergenerational transfer of memory facilitates the witnessing of events that she would otherwise be unable to witness.

Earlier in the novel, Senthil similarly echoes the abrupt onslaught of bad omens as he narrates how his mother watched the capture and disappearance of young Tamil men by the Sri Lankan army and reflects on his capacity to bear witness from the cradle:

Senthil Vasuthevan
02:52
[…] sie kamen ohne ankündigung. sie kamen durch wände. sie kamen tag und nacht. meine mutter sah, wie sie in einem jeep an ihrem haus vorbeifuhren. sie sagt, das sei ein zeichen. sie sagt, bevor diese zeichen zunehmen, vor der zunahme der zeichen sollte er gehen. er hätte keine zeit mehr…ein bündel trägt meine mutter im arm, ein hellblaues tuch, um diesen säugling gewickelt, der, laut ihren erzählungen, ich, jemand, der diesen flüchtigeren hauch mit unvorbereiteter stimme noch nicht zu erzeugen fähig war, gewesen sein soll. ich war sein letztes zeugnis. drei oder vier monate nach seiner flucht wurde ich geboren. ich war nicht sein zeuge. (Varatharajah 81)

[…] They came without warning. They came through walls. They came day and night. My mother saw how they drove by her house in a Jeep. She says, that is a sign. She says, before these signs increase, before the increase of signs, he should go. He would have no more time…My mother carries a bundle in her arms, a light-blue towel swaddling this baby, who, according to her stories, someone who was not yet capable of witnessing this fleeting whiff with an unready voice, should have been me. I was his last testimonial. Three or four months after his[9] flight, I was born. I was not his witness.

In Senthil's recounting of his parents' stories, he clarifies the title of the novel through his mother's counsel to leave a dangerous situation before the warning signs increase. Senthil, the infant swaddled in the blue towel, appears in this memory as retold by his mother, who carefully observed these intensifying threats. Additionally, the title of the novel seems to reference his and Valmira's pursuit of a "time before flight," which neither can access from personal experience and thereby depend on proliferating forms of mediation to fill gaps of personal memory and cultural history. While use of the term "Zeichen" in this context refers to cautionary signals, it also gestures toward its secondary meanings in the novel as multiplying digital symbols and characters, as well as Senthil and Valmira's reflections on language as a system of signs. The increase of signs echoed in the ways Senthil and Valmira sift through the many stories and photographs imparted by family, in addition to sources such as documentary films and news segments, further point to the novel's observations on the possibility of witnessing and those positioned to bear witness. Through the use of the words "erzeugen" 'to witness,'

[9] In my translation, I interpret the first possessive adjective "sein" as a reference to Senthil himself, who I read as describing his estrangement from his infant self, who is unable to actively witness his own flight.

"Zeugnis" 'testimonial,' and "Zeuge" 'witness,' Varatharajah plays with the forms one can articulate the act of witnessing, documentation of witnessing, and the role of witness.[10] By differentiating between "Zeugnis" and "Zeuge," Varatharajah calls attention to Senthil's disconnection from the actual experience of flight, which he cannot conceive of consciously, and actively witnessing as an infant, at the same time that he ponders his existence at the site of flight as an attestation in itself.

While Hirsch observes that such instances of postmemory pose the risk of potentially displacing one's own experiences with those of previous generations, Senthil and Valmira's family narratives function as sites of access to the historical circumstances of flight that have informed their self-understanding and present lives. Senthil and Valmira's stories foreground what Hirsch presents as a structure of memory transmission that complicates Jan and Aleida Assmann's straightforward conception of a line linking "individual to family, to social group, to institutionalized historical archive" (Hirsch 111). For exiled and diasporic communities, the resonant effects of postmemory carried over in the archive of collective trauma signal the disruption or loss of embodied connections to the past. Yet, even as Varatharajah's novel highlights the ruptures of memory in Senthil and Valmira's stories, it also considers how the intergenerational transmission of memory can enable witnessing as a collective endeavor that need not rely on the premise of personal experience to rehabilitate one's relationship to one's family past or cultural history.

Varatharajah's novel reflects on notions of fractured memory and estrangement from "die Zeit vor unserer Flucht" (125) 'the time before our flight' through references to modes of communication such as post mail that have served as an unstable link between family members who fled and stayed behind. In one instance, Senthil tells Valmira of an unexpected postcard whose content, place of origin, and sender he could not recognize, as he also questions how his mailing address was obtained and whether he was truly the intended recipient (Varatharajah 24). Senthil's inability to read the writing on the postcard or locate the geographic location of the illustrated landscape accentuates the fragmentation and dispersion of mediated communication, which, as Teupert observes in his reading of the same passage, is likewise true in digital media "with the illegibility of messages that cannot be attributed to a known sender" (6). Senthil also muses on the delayed temporality of physical mail in the case of his uncle's letters to his father, who had made a point to underline "west germany" on the envelope even though years had passed since the fall of the Berlin Wall (Varatharajah 134). Throughout the novel, breaks in Senthil and Valmira's communication also occur from time to time, ranging from minutes to a day apart (Varatharajah 82, 70, 31). The pauses between their messages indicate to readers the fluctuating temporality of digital

[10] Use of the word "Zeuge" or witness also appears in reference to Senthil's upbringing as a Jehovah's Witness after his family's arrival in Germany.

communication, which can involve a minor interruption caused by the gradual composition of a message, as well as an extended delay due to the differing times at which social media users are active online to respond. Even as digital media today offer the possibility of communication in real-time, the novel's inclusion of timestamps emphasizes the persistent discontinuities in communication as it signals to readers the time elapsed between Senthil and Valmira's messages to one another.

Although the novel is premised on its characters' chance encounter as enabled by social media, Senthil and Valmira's conversation carries constant reminders of their distance in both time and space through their constant missed opportunities to meet in person. As the protagonists speculate when they might have crossed paths, for example, Senthil reveals he had moved to Berlin by the time Valmira arrived in Marburg and remarks that they would have never been able to encounter each other (27). Senthil and Valmira's failure to meet in person reinforces, on the one hand, their reliance on a virtual "non-space" for their meeting such that they can only "aus dieser Entfernung zueinander sprechen" (Varatharajah 120) 'speak to one another from this distance.' On the other, their sense of spatiotemporal distance from not only one another, but also the events of displacement, compels them to position themselves through the places referenced in stories about their lives before arriving in Germany. As Teupert describes, these places "not only organize the linkage to the past but also the spatial orientation in the present," and guide the characters' attempts to "produce locality" in the absence of an uninterrupted connection to their former lives in Sri Lanka and Kosovo (8). In one exchange, Valmira tells Senthil of her habit of orienting herself through recurring use of the word "hier" or here, which she attributes to a desire to hold onto memories of the houses, cities, and countries "aus denen wir kommen, [die es] nicht mehr gibt" (Varatharajah 173) 'from which we come, which no longer exist.' Valmira recognizes in Senthil a similar impulse to orient oneself in remembrance of places devastated by territorial wars and ethnic conflict and, in doing so, discerns the process by which they recuperate their relationship to memories of displacement in a constant motion between absence of place and pursuit of locality (173, Teupert 3).

The novel's social media frame builds on this search for orientation amid spatiotemporal discontinuity as Valmira once again asks, "Bist du noch hier?" 'Are you still here?' and Senthil responds, "die verbindung ist abgestürzt" (Varatharajah 82) 'the connection has crashed.' Valmira's use of "here" to locate their shared online presence instead of a tangible space reminds readers of the instability of their remote communicative acts, which rest on a sometimes unreliable internet connection. Senthil traces this very disruption in their communication and memory to the physical threat of death and subsequent forced uprooting in both of their family pasts as he notes, "wir kennen seine bilder, aber ich wusste nicht…wie sehr wir von dort aus immer gesprochen haben werden" (Varatharajah 151) 'we

recognize their images, but I did not know…how often we will have always spoken from there.' In both content and form, the novel incorporates the transitory and vulnerable conditions of flight that follow the upheaval of forced displacement. For Senthil and Valmira, this mostly becomes manifest in their attempts to navigate memories which are not strictly their own, but whose resounding effects continue to inform their present.

While the novel does not suggest that Senthil and Valmira resolve their feelings of alienation from their family background or cultural history, it traces the constellation of their own life stories in relation to those of others in a process of narrating their connection[11] to an inaccessible past. As Senthil tells Valmira, "ich erinnere mich nicht an das ereignis, aber an die erzählungen von diesem ereignis erinnere ich mich" (246) 'I do not remember the event, but I remember stories of this event,' he points to the essential role that storytelling plays in his remembering. He further notes, "wenn ich es dir wiedergebe, gebe ich dir die spuren, die ich verwische" (246) 'when I convey them to you, I give you the traces that I erase,' and thereby recognizes the transient quality of these stories. Senthil also calls attention to the vulnerable act of disclosure that their exchange entails as he frames the act of confiding these stories in one another as a betrayal of those to whom the stories "belong" (246). By emphasizing the sensitive nature of narrating one's life and the lives of loved ones, as well as recounting often traumatic experiences of flight, Varatharajah positions Senthil and Valmira's storytelling in the space of testimony.

Witnessing Others: Collective Histories and Biographical Truth in Testimonial Life Writing

Through its depiction of postmemory, *Vor der Zunahme* meditates on how retrospective memory is reconstituted in the characters' joint processes of remembering and shaped by the transmission of family narratives and collective histories of Sri Lankan Tamil and Kosovo Albanian diasporas. In this regard, Varatharajah tells stories about flight that do not depend on the memory recall of a first-person witness to give testimony. As they fled with their families as infants, Senthil and Valmira must rely, at least in part, on what Smith and Watson describe as prosthetic memories, which "a nation or group constructs around the past, or the post memory of a generation born after the event" ("Metrics of Authenticity" 597). The concepts of prosthetic memory and postmemory speak to the question of indirect witnessing in Senthil and Valmira's correspondence, as their search for connection to a parental past draws on narratives shared among and reproduced by

[11] The specific term "Zusammenhang" appears multiple times in the novel in the context of Saussurean semiotics to reflect on the etymology of words across languages and cultural traditions (Varatharajah 60, 211-13).

members of diaspora groups (Hirsch 106, 110-11). For Senthil and Valmira, the transmission of generational memory specifically involves the safeguarding of stories that retain personal memories attesting to the internal displacement and political persecution of Sri Lankan Tamils and Kosovo Albanians. Varatharajah's characters cannot bear direct witness, but through their storytelling, they seek to preserve the very stories at risk of being effaced from historical archives by state actors and being distorted or forgotten over the course of generations. As both interlocutors dwell on the problem of witnessing from a distance, especially with regards to events of forced displacement, they underscore the precarity of stories that must perform an enduring testimonial function.

Owing to how the production of testimonial narratives relies on the account of a first-person witness yet also draws from familiar human rights discourse and post-conflict narratives, stories that attest to collective memory of conflict are often subject to suspicions of false remembering and fabrication. Bohmer and Shuman address this very skepticism and legal legibility of asylum-seeker testimony in the political asylum process as they examine the factors by which immigration officials evaluate claimants' stories as scripted (15-37). In reference to an official's statement on Sri Lankan asylum-seekers who claim to have fled due to their perceived allegiance to the Tamil Tigers by the invading Sinhalese army, Bohmer and Shuman highlight the official's suspicion that "Everyone tells the same story from a particular country" (28-29). In such a case, they observe how the official questions the credibility of the narrative due to its familiarity rather than any inconsistencies in content or rhetoric. Bohmer and Shuman's observations on deception and credibility indicators in political asylum cases point to the extent to which widely circulated narratives about crisis events can lead legal decision-makers to recognize the same information in a claimant's testimony as too well-established or even a potential "stock story" or "borrowed script" (21). In a similar vein, Smith and Watson distinguish the crucial role that "I-narration" or first-person witness plays in testimonial narrative to convey the authenticity of firsthand experience. In their analysis, Smith and Watson highlight how the underlying plurality of the narrating "I" may undermine the authentication of testimonial narratives rooted in first-person testimony.[12] *Vor der Zunahme*, however, contests existing legal frameworks for testimony that rely on singular witness accounts as it demonstrates how cultural history, family narrative, and personal memory intersect in the process of narrating experiences of flight and asylum-seeking.

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[12] Smith and Watson elaborate on the production of a composite "I" in witness narratives that combine the voice of the suffering witness with those of the social worker, editor, publishing house, and human rights organizations. As an example, they refer to the memoir *Burned Alive* by "Souad," an anonymized first-person account of a Palestinian woman's survival of an honor killing ("Metrics of Authenticity," 601-04).

In its portrayal of the relationship between narration, memory, and histories of forced migration, *Vor der Zunahme* highlights the vulnerability of testimonial life writing, which carries the burden of communicating histories of systemic violence often experienced collectively through the biographical accounts of individuals. Mariane Ferme also pinpoints the reliance on and construction of an individual asylum-seeking subject according to a "logic of singularization" in asylum procedure (111). As identity documents are employed by states to position people within broad population categories, they also "singularize identities and fix them in time," overlooking the identity transformations and changes of circumstances that take place during a person's life (Ferme 111). As states manage asylum and immigration based on restricted temporalities and individualized cases, they reduce the historical continuity of structural violence and ethnic conflict to mere exceptions.[13] In contrast to this focus on the individual life history, *Vor der Zunahme* foregrounds the longstanding histories of Sinhalese-Tamil and Serbian-Albanian inter-ethnic conflict through Senthil and Valmira's family narratives. By underscoring the historical circumstances that have impacted specific communities as a whole, Varatharajah's novel demonstrates how the memory thereof continues to constitute an integral part of individuals' life stories in subsequent generations.

Similarly, Mantovan's study on the role of certain bureaus in helping to prepare life histories for Sri Lankan Tamil asylum applicants in France sheds light on the rift between the focus on individual experience in asylum procedure and the collective approach that Tamils implement while narrating their life stories. For Sri Lankan Tamils, who usually employ the first-person plural "we" (*nangal*) to respond to decision-makers' questions, Mantovan emphasizes "the habit [they have] of inserting their experiences into a collectivity," which include shared experiences of the Sri Lankan Civil War that lead many to not consider "that they have behaved in a special way which makes them deserving of refugee status" (227). In clarifying further how the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam[14] aimed to mobilize their campaign through the figure of "a collective subject fighting for self-determination," Mantovan discerns the ways Tamils conceive of their individual life histories as fundamentally relational (226-27). In contrast to the kinds of institutionalized biographies required by asylum procedure, in which decision-makers consider asylum applicants as individual subjects, claimants affiliated with the Liberation Tigers narrate their life histories as collective subjects.

Vor der Zunahme explores this notion of giving testimony to a collective history through Senthil's reflections on the function of secondary witnessing in

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[13] Ferme provides as an example the US attorney's renewal of Sierra Leone's Temporary Protection Status (TPS) on the basis of individual cases eligible to apply for asylum.

[14] The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam was an organization that sought to create an independent state for Sri Lankan Tamils owing to the continued violence and persecution carried out by the Sinhalese-led Sri Lankan government.

reference to the Gospel of John, as he writes, "wenn ich von mir selbst zeuge, so ist mein zeugnis nicht wahr" (144) 'If I alone bear witness to myself, my testimony is not valid,' noting later, "ein anderer ist es, der von mir zeugt, und ich weiß, dass das zeugnis wahr ist" (144) 'There is another who bears witness to me, and I know that the testimony which he bears to me is valid' (Varatharajah 144, Bekken 130). In this instance, Senthil remembers how his father sought to remind him and his siblings of their old home in Jaffna through pictures, linking the memorial function of his father's family photos to questions of witnessing and testimonial truth in scripture. As he learns about his family's former life in Jaffna through his father's story and photos, Senthil meditates on the authenticating power of external testimony to a life whose memory and destruction are carried forward by those receiving the stories. For Varatharajah's characters, as for "Kumar," to whom Mantovan refers as the head of a bureau responsible for strategically employing Tamil collective history in the preparation of clients' biographies, Tamil asylum applicants necessarily draw from stories within their community as their personal stories are bound up with their shared history.

Conclusion

Varatharajah's *Vor der Zunahme* offers a means of reading personal narratives about flight with attention to the aspects of cultural memory and interpersonal communication implicated in their formation. At stake in testimonial life writing is the granting of asylum contingent on the production of biographical narratives and accounts of flight that decision-makers neither characterize as an incoherent account owing to failures of logic, nor a "scripted story" that appears too "rehearsed" or familiar to be believed as unique to an individual's account of experience.[15] However, as Smith, Watson, and Mantovan have similarly observed, the authentication of testimonial narratives and asylum claimants' life histories often relies on the construction of an individual subject who must be characterized as the "protagonist of one's own history" (Mantovan 226). *Vor der Zunahme* challenges the culture of disbelief around asylum narratives through its questioning of individual testimony—unaffected by external factors or other people's narratives—as a marker of credibility. In its structure as a conversation instead of a first-person narrative, a form to which asylum applicants must conform, Varatharajah's novel does not focus on a single experience of flight tied to an individual's particular actions. Unlike narratives about flight that portray the reclaiming of personal testimony, *Vor der Zunahme* features the decentralization of the individual life narrative to give prominence instead to the resonance of

[15] Bohmer and Shuman describe these failures of logic as perceived discrepancies in the organization or structure in asylum applicants' stories. See Bohmer and Shuman 22-26 for a more detailed overview of narrative assessment in the political asylum process.

intergenerational transfers of memory calling on histories of conflict that have collectively impacted Sri Lankan Tamils and Kosovo Albanians.

My reading of *Vor der Zunahme* has sought to demonstrate how the novel foregrounds the collaborative production of memory between Senthil and Valmira as a means of witnessing intergenerational stories about flight that continue to inform their lived experiences in the present day after obtaining asylum. Through a shift in focus toward family narratives and collective memory, Varatharajah's novel compels readers to consider how stories about flight are embedded within social histories of forced migration generated and managed among networks of diasporic communities and digital media. Senthil and Valmira, as members of Tamil and Albanian diasporas, owe their present lives to these shared histories of violence and forced displacement without which Senthil acknowledges, "wir wären nicht in dieses land und nicht in diese sprache und ich vielleicht auch nicht in diese schrift gekommen, wenn [der tod] uns nicht erwartet hätte, in jaffna, in prishtina" (Varatharajah 151) 'we would not have come into this country and this language and perhaps I would not have come to write, if death had not awaited us in Jaffna, in Pristina.' In *Vor der Zunahme*, storytelling about flight unfolds at the level of intergenerational transmission and collective memory to re-inscribe individual refugee narratives into protracted, communal histories of forced migration, thereby inviting readers to reflect on flight beyond the singular moment of crisis.

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