

**Bearing Witness and Its Costs: Secondary Trauma and the Failure of
Catharsis in the Works of Iris Chang and Anne Sexton**

1.Dr. Qudsi Rizvi

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Maulana Azad National Urdu University
(MANUU), Hyderabad, Telangana, India

2.Ziniya Al Baha

Research Scholar, Department of English, Maulana Azad National Urdu University
(MANUU), Hyderabad, Telangana, India

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Abstract:

Testimony is usually understood as redemptive: giving voice to silenced suffering restores dignity to the victim and delivers the witness toward release. This paper argues the assumption does not hold, using historian Iris Chang and confessional poet Anne Sexton as evidence. Chang forced the 1937 Nanjing Massacre into Western historical consciousness with *The Rape of Nanking* (1997); Sexton dismantled mid-century silence around mental illness and psychic pain through *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960) and *Live or Die* (1966). Both acts of witnessing proved fatal to their authors: Chang died by suicide in 2004 at thirty-six, Sexton in 1974 at forty-five. Existing scholarship keeps the two women apart — Chang read through historical memory, Sexton through feminist psychoanalysis. Drawing on Caruth's trauma theory, Felman and Laub's ethics of testimony, Herman's model of recovery, and feminist ethics of care, this paper traces how two opposite genres arrived at the same result: neither built a mechanism by which its witness could set the material down. The analysis extends to the reader, arguing testimony's public redemption and private cost form a single, unevenly distributed transaction — not a redemptive act but a double-edged one.

Keywords: Secondary Trauma, Testimony, Confessional Poetry, Historical Trauma, Moral Injury

Introduction

The cultural imperative to "bear witness" is almost always framed through a redemptive lens. Within both historical scholarship and the confessional poetic tradition, giving voice to silenced suffering is treated as an unambiguous ethical good — a means of restoring dignity to the victim, demanding accountability, and delivering the witness herself

into some form of psychological release. The redemptive model conceals a darker mechanism. When a writer immerses herself in the granular detail of human cruelty, or excavates her own unhealed psychic wound for the page, the line separating observer from the observed does not hold. Testimony, far from discharging pain, can deepen it — overwhelming the very capacity for processing that it was meant to exercise.

Nowhere is this paradox more starkly demonstrated than in the lives of historian Iris Chang and confessional poet Anne Sexton. The two women worked in radically different genres (archival history, lyric confession) yet arrived, by separate paths, at the same devastation. Chang forced the 1937 Nanjing Massacre into Western historical consciousness with *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II* (1997); Sexton dismantled mid-century silence around mental illness, the female body, and psychic pain in *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960) and *Live or Die* (1966). Both acts of witnessing proved fatal to their authors. Chang died by suicide in 2004 at thirty-six; Sexton in 1974 at forty-five.

Existing scholarship tends to keep these two women in separate rooms: Chang read through the lens of historical memory, Sexton through feminist psychoanalysis. The comparative work of setting their testimonies against one another remains largely undone. The present study undertakes that comparison, drawing on Cathy Caruth's foundational account of trauma, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's ethics of testimony, and Judith Herman's clinical model of recovery, alongside the more recent clinical vocabulary of secondary traumatic stress, compassion fatigue, and moral injury. It asks how the generic demands of historical documentation, as against confessional poetry, shape the psyche of the one who testifies; why recording trauma intensified rather than resolved each woman's suffering; and what their deaths reveal about the limits of ethical testimony — limits that extend, as the final section of this paper argues, beyond the writer to implicate the reader as well. Testimony, this study contends, is not a single, redemptive act but a double-edged one: a form of moral and historical repair for the public sphere, purchased at the cost of the individual who performs it.

Theoretical Frameworks: The Paradox of Testimony and Secondary Trauma

To understand how the act of recording suffering can fracture the psyche of the narrator, one must look beyond classical notions of catharsis. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Cathy Caruth conceptualises trauma not as a discrete past event neatly integrated into memory, but as an overwhelming event that is "not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it" (4). Trauma is characterised by its resistance to verbal representation; it exists as a persistent, unintegrated wound that haunts the survivor rather than settling into the ordinary architecture of memory.

When a writer steps into the role of witness to trauma, she enters a dangerous psychological proximity with this unintegrated terror. In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub explore the profound psychological risks borne by the listener or chronicler of trauma. Laub observes that bearing witness to another's trauma requires the listener to "partake in the contagion of the trauma" and "feel the victim's victimhood" (57). The witness becomes a surrogate receiver of the original terror, risking secondary traumatic stress — a clinical condition in which an individual exhibits symptoms mirroring post-traumatic stress disorder simply through prolonged, empathetic exposure to another's traumatic account, rather than through direct experience of the originating event.

Secondary traumatic stress, however, should be distinguished from the related but not identical phenomenon of moral injury. Where secondary traumatic stress is fundamentally a disorder of exposure (the psyche absorbing more raw material than it can metabolise), moral injury, as clinicians have come to define it, is a disorder of conviction: a wound produced not by fear or horror alone but by the collapse of a witness's foundational belief in human goodness, justice, or order, often compounded by a sense of complicity or helplessness in the face of what she has recorded. Compassion fatigue sits nearer to secondary traumatic stress, describing the cumulative erosion of empathetic capacity across repeated exposure, while moral injury describes a single, deeper fracture in worldview. Judith Herman, in *Trauma and Recovery*, adds the clinical scaffolding that makes sense of all three: recovery requires a secure social matrix and a stable therapeutic boundary within which traumatic memory can safely be contained (155). It is the absence of this boundary, not the act of witnessing itself, that determines whether exposure resolves into recovery or calcifies into one of these more lasting injuries.

A further dimension is supplied by feminist ethics of care, a framework developed across the work of theorists such as Carol Gilligan and Joan Tronto, which reframes moral responsibility away from abstract, impartial obligation and toward responsiveness to relationship, vulnerability, and the concrete particulars of another's suffering. Gilligan locates this responsiveness in "the different voice of women," through which, she argues, lies "the truth of an ethic of care, the tie between relationship and responsibility, and the origins of aggression in the failure of connection" (173). Tronto sharpens the framework further, identifying responsiveness as one of four ethical elements — alongside attentiveness, responsibility, and competence — that together define what caring for another person actually requires (127). Read against Caruth, Felman and Laub, and Herman, this framework matters because it recasts the witness's injury not as an unfortunate side effect of an otherwise neutral act of recording, but as the direct cost of an ethical relation the witness has chosen to enter — one that, unlike a clinical relationship, offers her no equivalent structure of containment, attentiveness, or responsiveness in return.

In traditional Aristotelian poetics, catharsis implies that releasing repressed terror through artistic or narrative expression purges the psyche, restoring emotional equilibrium. In the context of extreme trauma, however, this narrative release frequently fails. Translating atrocity into language does not automatically purge the pain; it forces the writer to relive, structure, and inhabit the terror over and over. For Chang, the objective demands of historical documentation required her to absorb months of graphic primary evidence with no comparable emotional outlet. For Sexton, the subjective demands of confessional poetry required her to strip away defensive ego boundaries continuously, turning her own psychic wounds into raw material for art. In both instances, and for reasons the following sections examine in turn, the act of testifying became a mechanism of re-traumatisation rather than emotional release.

Iris Chang: The Historical Witness and the Weight of Collective Atrocity

When Iris Chang published *The Rape of Nanking* in 1997, her explicit goal was to break a sixty-year conspiracy of silence. The 1937 Japanese invasion and occupation of Nanjing resulted in the systematic massacre of hundreds of thousands of Chinese civilians and the brutal gang rape of tens of thousands of women. Chang approached this historical blackout not merely as a scholar but as an ethical crusader seeking to restore humanity to victims who had been erased from Western historical memory. She frames her project in explicitly moral terms, invoking a warning she attributes to Elie Wiesel: "As the Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel warned years ago, to forget a holocaust is to kill twice" (Chang, *Rape* 14). The line doubles as a statement of method: for Chang, historical documentation was never a neutral act of recovery but a moral obligation carried out on behalf of the dead.

It is precisely here that the genre itself becomes a psychological liability rather than a merely incidental one. Historical documentation, unlike confessional writing, is bound by an implicit contract with the reader: the historian's authority rests on her perceived objectivity, her willingness to subordinate personal reaction to evidentiary rigour. Where a poet may transmute horror directly into effect on the page, a historian working in Chang's tradition must first metabolise that horror silently and privately, producing prose that reads as measured even when the material underneath it is not. The genre, in other words, demands exactly the kind of emotional containment that trauma theory suggests is least available to someone in prolonged proximity to atrocity. Chang was required by the conventions of her own discipline to suppress the very reaction her material was provoking, with no sanctioned outlet built into the form itself.

The generic constraints of historical documentation also demanded a rigorous, immersive engagement with graphic primary evidence: archival photographs, the diaries of victims and perpetrators, and oral testimony from ageing survivors. As Chang immersed herself in this material, the emotional distance ordinarily available to a professional historian collapsed. In the introduction to *The Rape of Nanking*, she describes attending a conference on the massacre held in Cupertino, California, in December 1994, where organisers had

mounted poster-sized photographs of the atrocity on the walls of the conference hall. "Though I had heard so much about the Nanking massacre as a child," she writes, "nothing prepared me for these pictures, stark black-and-white images of decapitated heads, bellies ripped open, and nude women forced by their rapists into various pornographic poses" (Chang, *Rape* 6–7). The photographic evidence did not remain benign historical data; it functioned, in the language this paper borrows from Caruth, as an unassimilated, invasive visual trauma, one that Chang would go on to describe as leaving her, in her own words elsewhere in the introduction, in a state of panic at the disrespect done to the dead (Chang, *Rape* 7).

As Chang travelled to Nanjing to interview survivors, the psychological toll deepened further. In her documentation she records the testimony of women who suffered unimaginable violence, absorbing their unhealed trauma into her own consciousness. Her narration of the massacre repeatedly insists that the cruelty inflicted was neither random nor exceptional but systemic: "Almost all people have this potential for evil, which would be unleashed only under certain dangerous social circumstances" (Chang, *Rape* 220). The claim is offered as historical analysis, yet it also reads as a confession of what the research had done to Chang's own view of humanity — a moral injury in the precise clinical sense outlined above, in which the writer's foundational belief in human goodness is directly and repeatedly assaulted by the material she is obliged to record, with the discipline's demand for narrative coherence offering her no corresponding relief.

In processing these accounts, Chang was forced to hold terrifying detail in her mind long enough to organise it into a coherent narrative structure. Felman notes that the listener to trauma must become "the companion in a journey through an uncharted, terrifying landscape" (Felman and Laub 58). For Chang, this journey lacked a protective boundary. As her mother and biographer Ying-Ying Chang later recalled, during the spring of 1996, in the midst of writing *The Rape of Nanking*, Iris telephoned her one night to say that she had been unable to sleep: "She had nightmares and had lost weight. Her hair fell out in clumps in the shower" (Chang, *Woman* 63). The image is a strikingly physical register of what this paper has been calling the collapse of the boundary between witness and victim — trauma surfacing not as abstraction but as insomnia, weight loss, and hair loss, the body itself absorbing what the discipline of history had asked her mind to contain.

The failure of catharsis in Chang's work lies in the irreconcilable gap between historical representation and moral justice. Though *The Rape of Nanking* became a global bestseller, bringing long-overdue historical recognition to the victims, the achievement provided no psychological peace for Chang. Exposure to systematic human cruelty inflicted a severe and lasting moral injury, a profound disruption of her worldview. When she later began researching the Bataan Death March for a subsequent book, her psychological reserves were already depleted. Delusions, severe depression, and paranoia set in, driven by a

terrifying conviction that she was being hunted by hostile forces. The genre that had once demanded her silence now offered her no framework for expressing what that silence had cost; the act of documenting human evil had fundamentally dismantled her sense of safety in the world, proving that testifying on behalf of collective victims can exact the ultimate personal toll.

Anne Sexton: The Confessional Witness and the Psychic Fractures of the Self

Where Iris Chang bore witness to outward, collective, historical violence, Anne Sexton bore witness to inward, personal, psycho-social trauma. Emerging in the late 1950s alongside poets such as Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath, whose own death by suicide in 1963 shadowed the remainder of Sexton's career and became the subject of her poem "Sylvia's Death," Sexton transformed American poetry by bringing forbidden subjects — madness, institutionalisation, abortion, incest, and female bodily rage — into the literary sphere. Unlike historical documentation, which demands a degree of empirical detachment, Sexton's confessional mode demanded absolute, vulnerable transparency.

If Chang's genre wounded her by enforcing silence, Sexton's wounded her by enforcing disclosure, and the two mechanisms, though structurally opposite, produce the same collapse of protective distance. Confessional poetry, as a form, offers no equivalent to the historian's footnote or archive, no external evidentiary structure standing between the writer and her material; the poem succeeds only to the degree that it convinces the reader the wound on the page is real and current, not safely processed and past. Where a clinical setting builds containment into its very structure (a fixed hour, a professional boundary, a relationship that ends at the office door), the confessional mode offers no such architecture. The genre requires the poet to re-enter the wound each time she writes, and unlike therapy, it offers no corresponding mechanism for closing the door behind her afterward.

Sexton began writing poetry at the suggestion of her psychiatrist, Dr. Martin Orne, who viewed creative writing as a therapeutic vehicle for emotional release and self-integration. In a 1968 interview later collected in *No Evil Star: Selected Essays, Interviews, and Prose*, Sexton described the buried, unformed self that had preceded this turn to writing: "Until I was twenty-eight I had a kind of buried self who didn't know she could do anything but make white sauce and diaper babies... I didn't know I had any creative depths" (Sexton, *No Evil Star* 84). The remark frames poetry, at the outset, as pure discovery rather than danger. Yet while writing initially offered Sexton a language in which to articulate psychological distress, the poetic process quickly evolved into a double-edged instrument. Rather than containing her illness, the aesthetic demand to produce raw, compelling confessional verse required her to reopen her own psychological wounds again and again — a requirement built into the genre itself, not an incidental hazard of her particular subject matter.

In her first collection, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960), Sexton chronicles her experience in a psychiatric hospital, directly confronting the social stigma and personal disintegration of mental illness. In "Ringing the Bells," she describes the soul-crushing routine of the asylum's group music therapy session, in which patients are handed bells to ring on cue:

"And this is the way they ring / the bells in Bedlam / and this is the bell-lady / who comes each Tuesday morning / to give us a music lesson... / and this is how the bells really sound, / as untroubled and clean / as a workable kitchen" (Sexton, *Complete Poems* 27–28).

The deliberately flat, incantatory repetition of "and this is" strips the scene of any redemptive music; the bells sound not like art or healing but like domestic labour performed on command, "as untroubled and clean as a workable kitchen." Sexton's poetic witness here is not merely a record of clinical symptom; it is an unflinching, formally controlled critique of how an institution designed to cure instead disciplines its patients into a hollow, mechanical performance of order.

In "Her Kind" (1960), Sexton explicitly identifies with the persecuted, marginalised figure of the witch, embracing her status as social outcast:

"I have gone out, a possessed witch, / haunting the black air, braver at night; / dreaming evil, I have done my hitch / over the plain houses, light by light: / lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind. / A woman like that is not a woman, quite. / I have been her kind" (Sexton, *Complete Poems* 15–16).

By declaring "I have been her kind," Sexton positions herself as a collective witness for women who have been silenced, institutionalised, or cast out for failing to conform to suburban, patriarchal domesticity. The identification proved more than literary: read a decade after Sexton's death by suicide in 1974, the poem's third stanza — "A woman like that is not ashamed to die" — reads less like defiant metaphor and more like premonition, the boundary between the poem's persecuted speaker and its author collapsing in retrospect in a way the 1960 text could not yet have intended.

As Sexton's literary reputation grew, her identity became fundamentally intertwined with her public role as the "mad poet." Audiences and critics alike came to expect that she would continually perform her own trauma, on the page and, increasingly, at public readings. The demand created a dangerous aesthetic feedback loop in which mental stability threatened her artistic identity, while artistic production continuously eroded whatever ego boundaries she had managed to rebuild. Judith Herman's framework for trauma recovery, which emphasises the necessity of establishing safety before engaging with traumatic memory (155), describes precisely the condition Sexton's own working method violated: rather than approaching her wounds from a position of security, she was structurally required, book after book, to re-enter them.

The same compulsion toward return recurs across her later work with mounting intensity. In "Wanting to Die," from the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Live or Die* (1966), Sexton writes with unnerving clinical precision about the private vocabulary of suicidal ideation: "But suicides have a special language. / Like carpenters they want to know which tools. / They never ask why build... / Suicides have already betrayed the body" (Sexton, *Complete Poems* 142–43).

The carpentry metaphor is chilling precisely because of its calm, professional register: death, for the speaker, is not a mystery to be mourned but a technical problem already half-solved. The poem was composed a few days after Sexton's friend and confidante, the psychiatrist Anne Wilder, asked her directly, in a letter, what drew her to suicide given the outward comfort of her life — a question to which Sexton first replied with a "morbid free association" before sending Wilder the poem itself as a follow-up (Middlebrook 215–16). Read against this exchange, the poem enacts the very failure of catharsis traced throughout this analysis: rather than working through the impulse toward death by naming it for a friend who had asked in good faith, Sexton instead rehearsed and refined that impulse into art, giving it a precision and a permanence it did not have before the poem existed.

While her poetry offered profound redemption for her readers, validating the lived reality of female mental distress and bodily alienation, it kept Sexton locked in a perpetual state of re-traumatisation, culminating in her decision to end her life in October 1974.

The Reader's Complicity: Testimony's Public Redemption and Its Private Cost

A further dimension of the ethical problem this paper has been tracing concerns not only the witness but the audience she is writing for. Felman argues that testimony is structurally addressed to another, that bearing witness is never a solitary act but always an appeal for a listener willing to "partake in the contagion of the trauma" alongside the witness (Felman and Laub 57). The reader of *The Rape of Nanking*, or the reader of "Wanting to Die," is therefore not a neutral observer standing safely outside the transaction; she is drawn, however briefly and however incompletely, into the same psychological proximity that consumed Chang and Sexton themselves. The redemptive value that both writers' work undeniably possesses — historical acknowledgment for the victims of Nanjing, a durable public language for female psychic pain — is produced precisely through this transfer of proximity from writer to reader.

What neither the reading public nor, evidently, either writer's own support system fully reckoned with was the disproportion built into that transfer. A reader closes the book and returns to her own life; the writer, having generated the material out of her own sustained immersion, has nowhere equivalent to return to. It is the same absence traced in both preceding sections — Chang's discipline offering her no outlet for the horror it required her to metabolise, Sexton's genre offering her no boundary around the wound it required her to

reopen — extended now to a third party. The reader inherits the intimacy of proximity to trauma without inheriting any of the cost of having produced it.

Read against the feminist ethics of care introduced earlier, the asymmetry comes into sharper focus. Where an ethics of care insists that responsiveness to another's vulnerability carries with it an obligation of reciprocal responsibility, the reader's relationship to testimony offers vulnerability without reciprocity: she is invited into proximity with the writer's wound, asked to feel its weight, and then released from any further claim on her once the book is closed. The writer, having done the work of making that vulnerability legible and felt, receives no equivalent care in return — neither from the institutional structures of her genre, established in the two preceding sections, nor, finally, from the very readership her testimony was written to serve.

Testimony's public success and its private cost are not, then, opposed outcomes running on separate tracks; they are two faces of a single transaction, in which the very intensity that makes a text ethically and historically valuable to its readers is the same intensity that renders it psychologically unsustainable for its author. The redemption testimony offers is real, but it is not evenly distributed among those who participate in producing it.

Comparative Synthesis: Generic Constraints and the Limits of Ethics in Testimony

Analysing Iris Chang and Anne Sexton side by side reveals how different generic forms impose distinct, yet equally devastating, psychological burdens on the witness — burdens that follow directly from what each genre demands and withholds, not merely from the painfulness of the material each woman happened to handle. While Chang operated in the realm of external, collective, historical atrocity, using objective documentation, Sexton inhabited internal, personal, psychic trauma through subjective lyric poetry. The generic constraints of historical realism forced Chang to carry a burden defined by scale and moral weight; because she documented the slaughter of hundreds of thousands, she felt an absolute ethical obligation to maintain empirical precision without looking away, and the discipline's demand for that precision left her no sanctioned space in which to set the material down. The psychological mechanism that dismantled her psyche was secondary traumatic stress and moral injury, born from absorbing an overwhelming volume of uncontained human evil, compounded by the political denialism she faced after publication — denialism that, crucially, denied her even the compensating relief of a settled historical verdict.

Sexton, by contrast, navigated a burden defined by depth and vulnerable transparency, and the genre that demanded this transparency offered its own, inverse form of containment failure. Confessional poetry demands that the artist strip away self-protective irony to offer raw emotional truth; the demand is not incidental to the form but constitutive of it, since a confessional poem that withholds is, by the genre's own logic, a failed one. The psychological mechanism that destroyed Sexton was the aestheticization and, eventually, the

commodification of her own suffering. Because her literary currency was tied directly to her psychological fractures, she was caught in a tragic trap in which mental stability threatened her artistic identity, while artistic production continuously eroded her ego boundaries and forced a re-entry into unhealed wounds. Where Chang's genre punished disclosure, Sexton's genre required it — yet both, by different routes, arrived at the same structural absence: a form of testimony with no built-in mechanism for the witness's own recovery.

Both cases expose the severe limitations of a purely ethical framework for testimony, a limitation that can now be named directly. An ethics of care, of the kind outlined earlier through Gilligan and Tronto, rightly insists on responsiveness to another's vulnerability as a moral good; an imperative to speak truth to power, in the tradition Chang and Sexton both inherit, rightly treats testimony as a public duty owed to the silenced. Neither framework, however, as applied to Chang and Sexton's own case, adequately reckons with the asymmetry traced across the preceding sections: both assume, implicitly, that the witness possesses an effectively unlimited capacity to absorb and articulate pain, or that the moral and historical value of the testimony produced is sufficient compensation for what producing it costs the one who produces it. Chang and Sexton demonstrate that the human psyche has finite limits, and that those limits are reached by different roads depending on what the genre itself asks of the one who testifies. When an individual takes on the role of witness without adequate structural, therapeutic, or collective containment, the act of testifying ceases to be a redemptive dialogue and becomes an act of psychological self-consumption — a cost distributed unevenly between the witness who bears it and the public that receives its benefit.

Conclusion

The tragic trajectories of Iris Chang and Anne Sexton force a fundamental re-evaluation of the relationship between testimony, narrative representation, and psychological catharsis. Through their courageous work, both women achieved monumental public redemption. Chang permanently rescued the Nanjing Massacre from historical erasure, forcing the international community to acknowledge one of the darkest chapters of twentieth-century warfare. Sexton broke through decades of literary taboo, creating an authentic poetic language for female rage, bodily trauma, and mental illness that continues to speak to readers today. These public victories, however, came at an irreplaceable personal cost. Their writing demonstrates that testimony is not a harmless, therapeutic conduit through which pain cleanly exits the body or mind. Instead, the process of recording trauma — whether the collective, genocidal violence of historical slaughter or the intimate, isolated terror of psychic fracture — can act as a violently re-traumatising agent. For Chang, the weight of uncontained historical evil shattered her moral universe; for Sexton, the aesthetic demand to inhabit her trauma continually rendered long-term psychological recovery impossible.

Read together, the two cases argued here do more than illustrate a shared outcome; they map two distinct roads to the same destination, each dictated by the genre through which the witnessing was performed. Historical documentation and confessional poetry ask nothing

alike of the writer on the surface — one demands distance, the other demands its opposite — yet neither builds into its own form any mechanism by which the witness might set the material back down once the work is done. That absence, rather than either genre in isolation, is the real subject of this study: not simply that testimony can wound, but that the wound is structural, built into the unwritten contract between witness, form, and reader alike, in ways neither Chang nor Sexton, nor the traditions they were writing within, had adequate language to anticipate.

The legacies of Chang and Sexton serve as a solemn warning for historians, poets, and artists alike. The human imperative to bear witness on behalf of the silenced and the suffering remains an essential ethical duty. Society must nonetheless abandon the naive assumption that testifying is inherently cathartic or self-healing for the witness. Without structural support, emotional boundaries, and an awareness of the severe risks of secondary trauma, the act of giving voice to the dead and the broken can end up claiming the life of the witness as well. What Chang and Sexton's deaths ultimately demand of us is not less testimony, but a more honest reckoning with what testimony costs — and a willingness, still largely absent from the institutions that receive such work, to build the containment their genres never did.

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