

Narrative 'Trauma-Testimony' and Fragmented Identity in *Sometimes in April*

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Abstract:

This paper examines how trauma victims' sense of self is split and how personal identity is fragmented in the course of giving testimony of the traumatic events. The film 'Sometimes in April' is used as a case study based on its critical engagement with different elements of narrativity of traumatic events, and the subject of identity. The paper adopts the concepts of narrative construction of the self, selfhood, and identity following the works of scholars like Ricoeur, Schechtman and Taylor. It argues that the film 'Sometimes in April' is an alternative sociological space for the studying and understanding of narrative and identity construction of victims and witnesses to the 1994 Rwandan genocide.

Keywords: Narrative, Identity, Testimony, African film, Trauma

Introduction

Traditionally, trauma refers to a physical and psychological phenomenon which constitute a violent disruption of the body's integrity. It is described as an intensely painful experience in which the mental and emotional after-effects can completely alter the sufferer's relationship and perception with the surrounding world. The unprocessed memory of the experience always remains engraved in the mind, leading to pathologies of memory, emotion and practical functioning. In the late nineteenth century, the concept began to be applied to psychological phenomena by pioneers like Sigmund Freud and Pierre Janet in their work on hysteria. Psychological trauma refers to an experience that overwhelmed a person's normal means of mentally processing stimuli. Reflections on recent past traumatic experiences of contemporary Africa can be found in various narrative and discursive platforms; like written literatures, photographic documentations and archival materials. Film is also one vital platform for relaying these experiences, as it has the capacity to create out of images, sounds, geography and history the narrative of human suffering, reflection and healing. In this sense, films construct memory and regenerate historical consciousness through the

production of documentary and fiction film formats. The reflections from films, especially from the ones that portray trauma, offer witnesses the opportunity to re-integrate and task their consciousness. This is not necessarily to conserve history for posterity but essentially for witnesses “to tell their stories to the public, to be listened to, and to be acknowledged” (Blaney, 117). By this assumption, a film that projects the traumatic history of a people should be able to exude corporeal consciousness, engage the contexts of narrative, memory, identity, and testimony.

This paper analyses how the effect of trauma can alter the introspective valuation of the self, thereby affecting testimony and its narratives. Using Raoul Peck’s 2005 film *Sometimes in April* (hereafter SIA), the paper argues that a traumatic body is an emblem of an embodied subjectivity in which identity figures as an emergent property, and which continually evolves under the impact of the environment and the adaptive transformational processes. This processing of trauma is attached to memories or events that resonate with the quality of what would otherwise be perceived as an unbearable emotion. A continual exchange between inner and outer environments, worlds, or simply spaces, is endemic to this processual self. Varela, Thompson and Rosch argue that this self emerges as a property of aggregates such as “feelings, sensations, consciousness and forms” (71). It is this sense of self rather than any substantive quality that becomes the basis of the multiple processes of transference that shape the experience of witnesses and the environment. This paper limits its scope to the filmic account, subjecting its fictional representation of the Rwandan genocide to frameworks of interpretation and contextual formulation. It purposively foregrounds the dramatic and filmic characteristics of the film with theoretical constructs that bear consonance with its narrative of real images, imageries, meanings and consciousness of the genocide. The conjoined word ‘trauma-memory’ is used to depict a testimony that is trauma-informed, as well as inherently controlled and narrativized via the shattered agencies and structures of the witnessing self. The term as used in the context of the paper, seeks to thin out the delineation between the two words ‘trauma’ and ‘memory’, so as to enhance the fictional web of corporeality depicted in the film. Since the film visualizes and emblemizes a holistic gaze of the genocide, the term readily suggests that the film is narratively structured in the voice of the victims, yet symbolized through the bodies of other actors in the genocide; i.e., perpetrators, collaborators, bystanders, and all survivors. Most of the discourses on memory, testimony and trauma have been rendered by a variety of cultural practice, genres, and media such that the search for a more common theoretical ground for analyzing their overlapping, inter-agency, and also lines of separation have proved difficult. The film *SIA* is purposively chosen for this study, as it provides components which highlight a view that the psychic structure of trauma victims is relational to the interactive contexts of memory, testimony and narrativity.

Filmic Track of Memory vs. Historical Truth

In recent decades, the art of film as a visual culture has been an influential semiotic mechanism in relaying testimony and archiving historical narratives. Visual culture emerged, according to some views, as a response to the media convergence and global flows of images in the late 20th century

(Cartwright), centered on understanding how images function in a broader cultural sphere, and on how people use visual media to make meaning in everyday life. Jinks notes that; “Arguably, it is film’s ability to engage (and manipulate) its viewers’ emotions that gives it its greatest potential to convey meaning about the past, not by didactically imparting knowledge and interpretation (although they often do), but by encouraging audiences to ‘feel’ or ‘experience’ aspects of the past, and thereby to intuit knowledge and understanding for themselves” (73). Pictorial representations evoke special interest because they serve the need to unveil the unseen (including the past that we are not part of). Moving images activate different sites of memory from those activated by other visual cultures. However, the increasing circulation of images and the incessant influx of cataclysmic incidents covered by films can lead to two opposite ways of relating to the experiences of the past; especially such experiences of pain, which can lead to objectifying trauma. The first experience might relate to healing from being able to confront the past, and an opposite experience can lead to further trauma – what has been referred to as ‘second-hand victimization’. This situation has created looming questions in the study of films of trauma, culture and testimony. What role does the mediation of film play in the conflict between events, what was seen and what is believed? Does film serve to connect or disconnect people with the real, to verify or ‘de-realize’ the traumatic events? These questions and many other invoke a tangled subject, related to media event theory (Dayan and Katz), which for several years now has received increased attention in film and television studies.

SLA cues the atrocity memory of the Rwandan genocide through the fictional narrativization of traumatic imageries in visuals and dialogues. The film portrays two Hutu brothers who are on the opposite sides of the complex relationships between the Rwandan majority tribe of Hutu and the Tutsi minority. Augustin Muganza (Idris Elba), one of the brothers, is a soldier in the Rwandan military; a father of three and husband to a Tutsi woman, Jeanne. Honoré Muganza (Oris Erhuero), his charismatic brother, is a celebrity media figure who helps spread extremist messages of Hutu propaganda over the popular Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM). The radio station broadcast was one of the most nefarious instruments used in aggravating the charged atmosphere of hatred and violence during the genocide. As the tension rises, Honore becomes more radicalized, intensely spreading heady and chauvinistic ethnic messages of Hutu ideologies over the radio. Meanwhile, his brother Augustin vehemently opposes the provocative atmosphere, fearing that some cancerous violence looms around the corner. The eventual consequence of the crisis consumed both brothers, rupturing their different psyches and obliterating their familial relationship. The film actually begins a decade after the end of what has been regarded as one of the most virulent genocide in history. It navigates, through artistic flashbacks, the one-hundred day genocide and the post-conflict milieu of 2004. Augustin, now a schoolteacher, receives a letter from his brother Honore, who is on trial in Arusha (Tanzania), at an International Criminal Tribunal for his apparent involvement in the genocide. In the letter, Honore requests his brother to come to Arusha to meet him if he wants to know the details of the death of his family during the genocide. This request disturbs Augustin who is torn at the prospect of seeing his brother after a decade of

estrangement, and the reality of knowing the truth about the murder of his wife and children. With great inner turmoil but sustained by the support he gets from his new partner, Augustin arranges the trip to see his brother. In their meeting, Augustin has to face the past squarely in order to come to terms with the present.

SLA does not seek to construct common memory. Rather, it reflects a conception and centrality of a narrative of trauma in the memory frame of real victims and witnesses to the Rwandan genocide. While the film itself is a fictional material, it provides a narrative of historical truth of the genocide. Objective reconstruction of a traumatic event does not have to be total in fiction films. Even real victims of trauma cannot totally reconstruct the truth of a traumatic event because memory is configured with actants of impermanent networks. Torchin has argued that "Film bears witness and offers testimony that is simultaneously dramatic and truthful; the visible invests the medium with additional claims to truth, but cinematic strategies render the events comprehensible." (74). In securing the truth status of testimonies in *SLA*, the film shows some actual news and event footages of the genocide period. Some actual locations of intense massacre during the genocide were used. Some witnesses, who themselves stood in the shadow of the common genocidal experience, were employed in the film as cast and crew members. While these may not be measures of absolute truth of events during the genocide, they bring some degree of self-reflexivity to the narrative structures of testimony in the film. Harrow is of the opinion that snippets of real history can help in advancing the context of a film narrative within a known cultural background. However, film narrative itself is a complete cultural text which may not always require raw data from history to compensate for the absence of reference to known people. Harrow argues that in fact, "film texts aim to de-familiarize our experiences so that we should experience life as depicted through the imagistic language of film which is not the everyday language" (36). *SLA* serves as a symbol for remembrance. It constitutes memory in itself. It belongs to the category of historical trauma films that creates "...platforms for perspectives and information that could not make their way into the public conversation via traditional means; and they energetically questioned the routine practices of overlooking the difficult questions of the past" (Holc, 74). While discussions of a film's historical knowledge invite consideration of its propaganda tendencies, the creative impulse of *SLA* does not suggest historical accuracy of events of the genocide, but it functions as one of the many accounts that push towards a possibility of self-revision and redemption. As it is, "Society exhibits a great longing for openly discovering this past not only out of interest in more objective accounts but as an intrinsically motivated means of self-assurance" (Nikor & Hegasy, 85). *SLA* provides an alternative text document for archiving the Rwandan genocide. There is a sense in which its narrative delegitimizes such conceited ideas as the written document being the sole repository of historical truth and knowledge. "Truth claim may be necessary, it does not completely suggest sufficient conditions of historiography" (LaCapra, 1-2)

Images that confront the past: Analysis of *Sometimes in April*

The story of *SLA* is a story of Rwanda, steeped in the images of past ethnic discrimination which was systematically initiated by the Belgian colonialists. The film, written, directed and produced by Raoul Peck, analyzes in ambitious detail, the horrific events that devastated millions of lives during the unprecedented 1994 outpour of terror and violence in Rwanda. There will be little understanding of the genocide without recourse to the roles of the colonialists. This understanding must have prompted the film producer to begin the film by showing a map of Africa captured in a long shot. The map gradually zooms in to give a close shot of the map of Rwanda, which is quickly followed by a scrolling screen texts of the history of Rwanda; “For centuries, the Hutu, Tutsi and Twa of Rwanda shared the same culture, language and religion. In 1916, Belgium took control of Rwanda from Germany and installed a rigid colonial system of racial classification and exploitation...” (*SLA*). By giving a glimpse into the history of colonialism, *SLA* tries to correct what Mamdani (28) has observed as the “silences in academic research” on the Rwandan genocide. These silences relate to the presentation of the Rwandan genocide as an anthropological oddity with no history or plausible reasons to account for its occurrence. These colonial historical details are reinforced succinctly by Clark in *The Gacaca Courts, Post-Genocide Justice and Reconciliation in Rwanda*:

The most significant contribution by the Belgians to the widening social, cultural and economic divide between Hutu and Tutsi, however, was the introduction of ethnic identity cards in 1933. The Belgians issued an identity card to every Rwandan man and woman that indicated whether he or she was a Hutu, Tutsi or Twa. Numerous factors determined an individual’s ethnic categorisation, including his or her ownership of cattle. Individuals with ten or more head of cattle were classified as Tutsi, along with their offspring; those with fewer than ten were classified as Hutu. After 1933 people received their ethnic classification according to their father’s line. This system continued throughout the twentieth century until it was abolished after the genocide. It was often on the basis of identity cards that Hutu killers identified Tutsi whom they massacred in 1994. (Clark 2010, 17)

The elevation of the Tutsis over the Hutus created resentment among the Hutus, who were the majority tribe. The narrative device of the film with the filmic techniques underscore the potential of the film as a testimonial. A deep voice-over immediately commences after the screen text, layering further historical details on the camera’s bird’s eye view of an expanse of Rwandan’s flora. This montage technique lets the viewers into a visualized space of Rwanda, and allows them to internalize the features of a country that experienced a devastating act of mass butchery in which nearly one million Tutsis and moderate Hutus were killed in a space of three months by Hutu extremists. Bah recounts that “The genocide in Rwanda between April and June 1994, which was central to the crisis of the region, was one of the most gruesome massacres of civilians since the Holocaust during the Second World War” (253). These events are represented in complex ways by the film, especially through a multilayered character-based dramatic narrative that carefully

weaves together a lot of 'true stories'. In the course of the pre-production of the film, the producer/director Raoul Peck travelled to Rwanda to meet with some of the witnesses; who have been mainly victims of the events. As part of his research, he listened to them and took strong notes. The harrowing first person-accounts convinced him of the need not just to bring their nuances to a global public by situating the events in a wider historical framework but to invite considerations of the real and symbolic import of those blighted days on humanity. By juxtaposing these first person accounts with fiction, Peck turns the film into a mosaic that lays out fundamental aspect of an intricate puzzle. The benefit of this was the extent of the verisimilitude imposed on the film. Put together, the film was able to make a powerful statement about the relationship between present and past, the importance of history, communal memory, and healing.

SLA can be located within the framework of a growing body of texts on historical trauma and memory studies. It evokes memory in order to explicate the ways in which it discursively works through a historical event of traumatic magnitude. It mobilizes imagery in a dramatic narrative populated by proximate characters while inviting informed viewers to revisit, and uninformed viewers to witness scenes from the past. It calls attention to the spectral or haunting property of some forms of memories that are to be retrieved from the past despite the pain they caused or the forms of denial they produced. It also inquires into how the reconstructed memories of the past that others have made consciously manifest through testimonials affect perception of that past. For instance, in one of the memorable flash forwards in the film, Augustin Muganza is captured by the camera reading a letter from his brother Honore, who is languishing in detention for crimes against humanity committed during the genocide. The letter is relayed in Honore's voice-over:

My dear brother, the rains are here, it is April again. How many years since we have spoken. From my prison I am writing you this long due letter. I don't expect pity or love. I know that despite all the graves in your life, you have found something to live for. It was not supposed to happen this way; the war, the killings. When I finally realized that I was an actor in this tragedy, I chose not to live with that, I thought my death will bring me peace. I was wrong. Only the truth can ease my guilt. Dear Augustin, I must tell you what happened to Jeanne and the children. Come to Tanzania. Don't write me back. Just come. Your brother, Honore. (*SLA*)

The reading of this letter against the background of the camera's flashpoints on the picture of his late family, which is hung on the walls, creates an immediate track of traumatic memory. The struggle with trauma is a struggle with memory. Such struggle typifies flashes which go backward and forward in recurring timelines. Reasonably, the detailing of the plot of *SLA* contains several longer and other sometimes dispelling and fragmented flashbacks, where Augustin recounts or revisits episodes of his family life, his desperate struggle to survive during the events, and his search for what happened to his beloved ones. The film tries to visualize the hectic workings of (individual and collective) memory in relation to traumatic experiences. Before the final outbursts of the ravaging butchery, smoke has been billowing from every corner of Kigali; the capital city of Rwanda.

Human corpses are strewn everywhere on the streets. Augustin begs his brother, who is still popular among the rank and file of the perpetrators, to take his family to safety at the Hotel Mille Collines, where some international citizens are being given protection. Despite his wife's resistance, Augustin stayed behind, hoping it will be a temporary separation from his family. Before Honore has travelled far with his brother's family, their car is stopped by soldiers manning a roadblock. Honore introduces himself as a party cadre working for the RTLM extremist radio station and that he is on the way to a supermarket for shopping with the family. As for the family, Honore says that "they are ours" (*SIA*), meaning that the family also supports Hutu extremists. After a brief exchange of words with his superiors, one of the soldiers goes to the car and asks Jeanne to produce her identity card. The moment Jeanne announces that she forgot the identity card at home, the soldier violently breaks the window amidst loud screaming from Jeanne and her two sons. Honore's plea that, "I work for the party" (*SIA*) goes unheeded and the soldiers willfully harass the children and kill the family. Augustin's separation from his wife and sons, the lack of news or knowledge about his daughter who is in the boarding school, and the eventual killing of his friend, Xavier, right before his eyes, become for him the abstraction of his memory from which he interprets himself as an unconscious participant in the genocide. It becomes a representation of experiences and feelings too traumatic to acknowledge.

A traumatic past leaves its own residue behind. It occupies a hidden haunting presence and activates a symptomatic revenant in the identity of the victim. The end of the film does not guarantee a resolution to this trauma, which has the tendency of returning to turn familial genealogy into a nightmare of incredible stories. The reflected ending signals interminability – not as sentimental faked identification with history and its actors, but as a way of inscription of the representation of a past.

From 'Ashes' to 'Ashen': Memory and Testimony in *SIA*

Those who are concerned about the tenets of history would see testimonies as sources of information about the past and not in its complete reliability. Justifiably, they are at times prone to dismiss an interest in them. Testimony becomes important when they are related to the way memory provides something other than purely documentary knowledge. In testimony, memory is like the component and operative dimension of narrativity. The self compulsively relives flashes of images in embodied pre-consciousness. Often such intense psychic feelings or self-states is translated into a desire for narrative. The traditional Kantian idea that a personality gains coherence through narratives of self-historization seems to be confirmed by recent researches in the neurosciences that establishes an inextricable link between narrative and a sense of self. Suzanne Kaplan and Andreas Hamburger reason that; "Memory, in state of the art psychology, is not simple storage; rather, it resembles a construction process, combining abstract engrammes with subjectively convincing mental images, resulting in what is experienced as a vivid recollection. It can be shaped through and co-constructed in communication" (106). The position of this inference is that testimony is retrospective and the failure to ideate the active agency of memory in its narrative is

to repress its phenomenological appropriation of empathy. For empathy is privately owned. It cannot be transferred. It is not represented, but achieved. While testimony opens up empowering possibilities, it does not impose redemptive completeness in the victim. This is why empathy is required to downsize the tension in the memory of the testifier. "Empathy is being in feeling with another, rather than understanding another's feelings, in the sense that it is the inhabiting of another's emotional state not its simulation". (Chare, 38). Thus, in *SIA*, we see survivors' difficult relationship with testimony. In one of the scenes, Augustin tries to talk with a woman (later identified as Valentine), who had come to testify in Arusha; as a victim and survivor of the genocide:

Valentine: You are a survivor..., aren't you?

(Brief silence)

Augustin: Yes.

Valentine: Are you testifying in the tribunal?

(Long pause)

Augustin: No, am visiting somebody. Are you testifying?

(Long silence)

Valentine: I am a secret witness. (*SIA*)

The exchange between Augustin and Valentine is disrupted by intermittent silence. There are multiple figurations of the self layered in the exchanges and in things left unsaid. This figuration stands for the trauma's remainder of inexpressibility, its lapse in conscious register and the ruptured psyche's self-protective urge to forget. The pedagogical character of testimonial accounts lies in their structure as communicative acts. Shoshana Felman's and Dori Laub's argument that testimony is a "crucial mode of our relation to events of our times (5)" is more relevant nowadays when we find ourselves surrounded by inundating, instantaneous media coverage and reports about almost every kind of human catastrophe. Testimonies draw their substance from the events witnessed. They are a privileged mode of revealing the character of such experiences. Testimonies, then, are to be discussed in their relation to the event yet, they should be placed in relation to the witness as well. For Felman and Laub, a testimony must first of all be placed in "a relation to events" (5). In relation to traumatic events, testimony seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance. Further, they claim that testimony, as grounded in scraps of a memory that has been overwhelmed, is actually an act. That act, however, cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition. As such, testimony may reflect "events in excess of our frames of reference" (5). A testimony therefore can be said to be a "discursive *practice*," as opposed to a "pure *theory*." Testimony directly pertains not only to the person testifying or to the event. It also involves the listener of the narrative as well. In other words, testimony involves not only the traumatic event but also encompasses the witness to the event, as well as the listener to the witness who relates the event.

Testimony of trauma is not intended to foster either repression or immobilization in the face

of history. Rather, testimony is often understood as a vital personal supplement to impersonal documentary evidence. Pedagogically, it encompasses a means for making history come alive. Overturning the anonymity that is often the fate of victims of historical trauma, testimony is treasured to the extent that it saves the shards of catastrophic experience from oblivion. Thus, as Carey-Webb notes, testimony may serve as an expression of survival and loss, simultaneously aspiring to “human continuity, the establishment of justice, and the making of the future” (7). To understand what the possible difficulties within the process of testimony might be, it is perhaps interesting to cite Lawrence Langer’s position of testimony:

Testimony is a form of remembering. The faculty of memory functions in the present to recall a personal history vexed by traumas that thwart smooth flowing chronicles. Simultaneously, however, straining against what we might call disruptive memory is an effort to reconstruct a semblance of continuity in a life that began as, and now resumes what we would consider, a normal existence (2).

Testimony comprises representations either by those who have lived through such events or by those who have been told or shown such lived realities, either directly or indirectly, and have been moved to convey to others what has been impressed upon them. Pedagogically, these testimonial accounts are used as modes of instruction that attempt to transmit information about the past and to keep specific events before one’s eyes, thereby foregrounding the events’ significance for current and future generations. For victims who experienced intense trauma in the Rwandan genocide, the pedagogical implication might be to portray them as isolated pieces of after-war materials. This opinion is reflective in the character of Augustin. Right from the outset of the film, he renders what is probably the most passionate monologue of the film:

Yes, it’s April again. Every year in April the rainy season starts. And every year, every day in April, the haunting emptiness descends over our hearts. Every year in April, I remember how quickly life ends. Every year in April, I remember how lucky I should feel to be alive. On April twelve, 1994 my wife Jeanne was killed. In that same month of April, my sons Marcus and Yves Andre were also killed. My friend Xavier was killed in April. My daughter Anne-Marie was killed sometime later, but I never asked when. (*SLA*)

When testimony is spoken from within the world of traumatic experiences, it feels like it is outside of ordinary life. Because the survivors have crossed the boundary posed by trauma, it is naturally assumed that they possess knowledge and understanding that those on the ordinary side do not have. It is also assumed that they know what is valuable and meaningful about life, including knowledge of war, peace, vengeance and forgiveness. In *SLA*, testimony was used to address other concerns related to the immense individual and collective consequences of the traumas of political violence: to facilitate reconciliation; to help survivors recover; and to reconsider identity. This stretched testimony in new and challenging directions toward the political, traumatic, and ethno-cultural. Valentine’s reflection and testimony, about the head of the municipal who had accompanied the

interahamwes (local soldiers) to rape and carry out acts of brigandage in their community is apt:

Head of tribunal: May I ask, why did you make what must have been a difficult decision to come to Arusha and testify in this tribunal?

Valentine: I saw all this man did and I felt responsible to testify about this man's betrayal of the people who are entrusted to him. When a person leads assassins, he is also an assassin. (*SLA*)

Sometimes in April's narrative strategy solicits the viewers' memory and engages them in the restructuring of past events. In the discursive foundation, and dependent on the narrative frameworks existent in a particular culture, the issue of testimony always return to an arena where the individual and the collective meet. Even individual memory, implying an interaction between the past and the present, is culturally and collectively framed. Memory is not an object that is simply there to be extracted, but rather it is produced by active subjects that share a culture and an ethos. It is thus, that testimony as a form of memory narrative does not have to be totally true. It does not, also have to instantiate the conventional or ideal beginning, middle and end plot structure of narration, even as it aspires to unambiguous coherence. This responsibility of coherence or credibility marks testimony as a moment of apprehension and communication in which one testifies to another who, in turn, chooses or is impelled to represent what was seen or heard, thus continuing the process with someone else. In *Sometimes in April*, there are moments of obstacles and hindrances to the production of testimonies; such as the ability to remember or the inability to consciously be coherent with the narrative of the events. The impossibility of constructing a narrative and the symbolic lapses and voids involved in trauma is also typified when Valentine is testifying at the tribunal:

Valentine: Later, I don't remember exactly but, the interahamwes held us in another room and they raped all the girls. A young man crept up on me, "take off your pant", he told me, there is no place for me now. The government had abandoned us. After that, he did humiliating things to me. He didn't regard that I was a mother. (Sighs). I heard the young girls screaming but I could not see them... (*SLA*).

In "Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening", the trauma psychoanalyst Dori Laub recounts the story of a woman in her late sixties who narrated her experience in Auschwitz to interviewers. In her testimony, she narrated one intense moment when she saw four chimneys going up in flames. The woman's voice reverberated the emotion of the holocaust while she is being recorded for the purpose of archiving the testimony. Several months later, a conference of holocaust historians, artists and psychoanalysts met, and the woman's video was reviewed in one of the debates. It was discovered that the woman's testimony was not accurate. The number of chimneys that was blown up was misrepresented. Historically, just one chimney was blown up and not four as testified by the woman. Since her story was fallible, the meeting regard her testimony as lacking credence. But, according to Laub

A psychoanalyst who had been one of the interviewers of this woman, profoundly disagreed. “The woman was testifying,” he insisted, “not to the number of chimneys blown up, but to something else, more radical, more crucial: the reality of an unimaginable occurrence. One chimney blown up in Auschwitz was as incredible as four. The number mattered less than the fact of the occurrence. The event itself was almost inconceivable. The woman testified to an event that broke the all compelling frame of Auschwitz, where Jewish armed revolts just did not happen, and had no place. She testified to the breakage of a framework. That was historical truth.” (60)

A useful context in understanding trauma testimony is to consider the multifaceted dimension of social exchange attributed to memory. “As memory is experienced differently by different individuals, one cannot speak of how a “people” remembers without taking all components of remembering into consideration” (Ayoub, 57). A victim’s sense of self and historical representation is rendered inarticulate in a spasm of riotous recall. The awareness of this leaves possibility for authentication which can be reinforced with testimony of other witnesses.

When the ‘Ego’ fails the ‘ID’: Fragmented Identity in SIA

A pervasive cultural atmosphere saturated by images and narratives of violence may desensitize people to what they see and hear, making it just another mundane part of their daily lives. As Michael Smith warns by invoking Jean Baudrillard’s postmodern theory of simulacra and simulation that “the postmodern world is lacking distance or interiority, where everything occurs instantaneously and is explicitly visible, the “fatal” collapse and erasure of the distinction between appearance and reality occur” (50). This collapse and erasure of the distinction between appearance and reality go a long way in the reconstitution of a personal identity. To pronounce a static definition of personal identity is to invite an epistemological dilemma. The ways in which the various categories of creating, interacting and re-creating our personal self have become the components of our identity. Identity is complex and varied, and its reflections are bounced off, both in the outer and inner characteristics of the person. The argument here is that it is necessary to consider a range of corporeal and incorporeal materiality in the definition of the term, as mere consideration of one circumstance to the exclusion of another will inadvertently result into describing the self without identity or identity without the self. Many theories of personal identity have been fraught with theoretical imprecisions and conceptual fragilities because of lack of consideration for this assumption. Freud’s ‘Iceberg Model’ is akin to this conceptual reflection. In his study of human consciousness, he suggests that human being is a divided self. He argues that what mainly drives humans is submerged in the unconscious. The ‘id’, in his definition, “is made up of all our unconscious drives”. The ‘superego’ comprise elements that prevent us “from responding fully to everything our ‘id’ drives us to want to do. The superego is made up of all rules we are taught we must follow”. The ‘ego’ arises from conflict between the ‘id’ and the ‘superego’. “It is our consciousness” (Fortier, 68). Following Freud’s perspectives, it becomes more difficult to ascertain the true state of personal identity of

a victim whose conscious level is in antagonism with the unconscious; someone whose reflection of the self has been ruptured by a traumatic event. Specifically, the introspective mediation of such a victim has lost the capacity for symbolic functioning. A large scale of psychological processes of sublimation is compromised. On a phenomenological level, the 'ego' is bruised as such victim is quite unable to coherently organize thoughts into conscious awareness. Moments of situations like this are experienced in *SLA* when victims' narratives transpose into spontaneous silence. This sort of silence is what Donald Meichenbaum considers as "internal dialogue". "This suggests that an important element in the behavior change process is not only speaking to oneself but also listening to oneself. It is close to a self-communication system, a dialogue with oneself that comes to influence behavior" (212). In the context of this kind of silence and the testimony of a traumatic event, Dori Laub opines that "Narrative must be rebuilt in order to reach beyond the fragmenting barriers of the traumatic event and renew linkage with the lost pretraumatic past. For this building process to occur, a certain degree of disengagement from externalities must take place, whereby survivors are with and within themselves, introspective and attuned to their inner lives" (57).

In *SLA*, we are presented with traumatized characters who have conflicting desires as they want to talk about their trauma, to work through it, but also to suppress it into their subconscious and conceal it. Their fragmented self is that "in-between experience of a past breaking away from the present. The past is then born from the historians (and individual's) traumatic experience of having entered a new world and from the awareness of irreparably having lost a previous world forever" (Ankersmit, 265). The film presents the psychological fragmentation of the characters as being shaped by multiple socio-historical forces. In a particular instance in the film, Martine (Augustin's new partner) returns to Sainte-Marie Catholic School nearly a decade after the genocide. She had been a teacher in the school before the outbreak of the genocide, and she had witnessed the killings of several girls while trying to protect them from the violence. Augustin's daughter, who attended the school was one of the victims. In the ruins of the building that used to be the school, she encounters an inexplicable shutdown of the self and associating consciousness. She starts to hear voices within her; voices of the girls:

Voices: The girls are here. They are waiting for you. Why don't you come?

Martine: No I can't.

Voices: Why don't you come? What's wrong with you? Come!

Martine: No! (*SLA*)

She rushes out of the building in a disoriented manner. She has encountered some symbols that vividly accentuated those images and imageries of the violence in her consciousness. Those images become triggers, and this occasioned a heightened form of fragmentation. Sub-textually, the voices she's hearing do not address her physical person, but the abject self of her person, severed from its own experience, its community, and the rest of humanity through trauma. It is like "The enigma of the otherness of a human voice that cries out from the wound" (Caruth, 3). Such is the enigma

of Martine's 'non-self'; one of the torn fragments of the remains of her disrupted identity which had once been normal. While on the surface the scene seems to create fragmented personae of Martine's identity as it appears to escape meaning and recognition for the characters she's involved with, on a more complex level, it powerfully dramatizes a suggestive psychological experience of victims of the Rwandan genocide and the subconscious alienation which they probably suffer from. This kind of overwhelming experience is difficult to place in a proper narrative by victims. Because of the repetitive nature of trauma, survivors find it difficult to place the traumatic period within a "smooth-flowing chronicle". This need to give the event a place in their personal history is similar to making it part of what Burnstein called "narrative memory" (13). Langer believes that there is a certain danger in this need. His view is that "in fashioning consecutive chronicle, survivors who record their accounts unavoidably introduce some kind of teleology, investing the incidents with a meaning" (40). The traumatic path implies a break in the ability to live through an experience that makes sense and has some meaning. There is a suspension of temporality, expressed in the repetitions, reappearances, and recurrent specters that follow. According to Werner Bohleber

This is owing to the fact that trauma is not only the consequence of a shaking to the core of the psyche's structure, but also that the ego/self is abruptly overwhelmed and reacts with helplessness, fear of death and annihilation anxiety: the psychic processing mechanisms become paralyzed, and only emergency reactions are possible. This experience of massive psychic overwhelming then results in permanent change to the psyche's organization. Naturally, not every traumatic situation impacts upon everyone in the same way; predisposing factors also play a role. The normal functioning of psychic organization is, however, suspended. (20)

Re-conceiving testimony begins by assuming that the survivor is not simply an isolated vessel who passively carries the residue of traumatic memories or the documentation of criminal events. When the otherness or alienation caused by trauma is too much to bear, it erupts as a violent acting out or an impassive deadening of the self or dissociation. To counteract the transience of life, events have to be transformed into narrative structure. But the repeated re-enactment of traumatic conditions, or experiences by the traumatized testifies to the persistent and pernicious force of trauma, the devastating effects of which are not tamed by narrative. The narrative itself becomes fragmentary, becoming disjointed in the complete analysis. In a meaningful narrative, when an episode is concluded, it is not the end because it is attached to a string of other reverberating narratives. The episode influences the rest of the plot, commenting on central themes and reflecting the values incorporated in the rest of the story. As it were, the parts always reflect in the whole, and vice versa. Triggers thus render victims into a state of narrative incompleteness. As Caruth notes; "The traumatized carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess" (60). The technical strategy of sustaining bits of the self when going through unresolved personal conflicts and identity fragmentation is to work through it and devise personal coping mechanisms. Based largely on their clinical observations,

Meichenbaum and Fitzpatrick used a constructivist narrative approach to gauge trauma survivor's coping abilities, emphasizing that "individuals respond to their interpretation of these events and to their perceived implications of these events" (720). Understandably, an event itself may not be as traumatic to an individual as much as the meaning attached to it. The meaning of this is that once the concept of the individual variation is acknowledged in the reading of trauma, that it is not the event itself that makes the event shattering or not, but rather an individual's internal perception of that event and the meaning the individual puts to it, the focus is then placed on the continuum of posttraumatic responses which shapes the coping and resilience ability. Jean Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis lucidly define how the process of working through or mourning enables the individual to confront repressed elements from the past and to halt the mechanisms of repetition. While admitting that working through is itself a form of repetition, they argue that "interpretive activity counters and cauterizes the harmful elements of such repetition" (488-489). Despite going to Arusha to see his brother, Augustin fails to meet with him for the first few days of his arrival. His interminable mental flashbacks have prompted him to inflict a guilt-judgment on both himself and his brother. On so many occasions in the film, he breaks down and weeps; an action which reasonably depicts that his identity is fragmented, and his self has been dismembered through the imagery of the past violence. His brother, Honore, who is a perpetrator in the violence suffers from the same guilt infliction. They both suffer agonizing moments of recollection and have not devised reasonable coping mechanisms. When Augustin finally meets with him, their encounter was icy:

Honore: So, why did you come?

Augustin: Because you asked me to.

Honore: Augustin why are you here? Are you going to be like everybody else? They come here to parade their good conscience around as if it's a crown... (*SLA*)

Testimony of traumatic events usually triggers a series of reactions in a victim's body. This reaction, usually refers to as a 'fight-or-flight' response, causes individuals to exhibit extreme, unexplainable strength. This response is a defense mechanism against pain from trauma and is mainly an instantaneous method for survival. It has been scientifically reiterated in studies that deal with coping with trauma, that the body prepares a person by sending a flood of chemicals that hasten the reaction of the body and focus attention to the crisis. Individuals react immediately in ways that are sometimes extremely surprising or confusing. These reactions can be categorized into four groups: "physical, mental, emotional and behavioural, and they include responses such as the momentary extreme strength, and quick-thinking", (Rosenbloom and Williams, 20). The responses are varied, depending on individuals and the intensity of a traumatic event. Dominick LaCapra explains that; "Indeed, severely traumatized people may have different dimensions of the self engaged in acting out, working over, and working through which may not, to a greater or lesser extent, effectively communicate with one another" (90-91). The Arusha tribunal was initiated not only to serve justice, but also help victims to work through and over their trauma. From the point of

view of *SLA*, it provides such ambience that allows for expressions of grief, and a deliberate scripted recall of the specific moments from the genocide but fails to provide victims a moralized and influential framework for responding to trauma and its representations. As victims have not fully worked through their grief, the tribunal presented itself as more of a place of purgation than healing. In a telephone conversation with Martine in one of the scenes in the film, Augustin reacts to the processes of the tribunal:

Augustin: You don't understand. This thing. It doesn't make sense.
Everybody that planned genocide is here.... They get full meals.
They get AZT medicine while rape victims are dying of AIDS.
It's like a fucking health club! (*SLA*)

Conclusion

SLA is confrontational and politically explicit in accusing the protagonists (active and passive) of the genocide. In the understanding of Kaplan and Wang's trauma cinema strategies, *SLA* can be observed as cure, as shock treatment, very minimally as voyeurism, and of course as witnessing. However, to the populations in the region that the film portrays, it becomes not simply a witness or recorder but an interpreter, which transmits the acknowledged painful process of traumatization. This acknowledgement is important for viewers and witnesses themselves, as there is a need to confront the horrors of these historical settings in order to move on. However, movement beyond the traumatic experiences has implications toward the divergent survivors, perpetrators, and beneficiaries of these environments, because they all find themselves at different points of a healing timeline. It is here that the film functions both as a social critique and as a form of therapy. It serves as both due to the fact that it enacts the loss and trauma in the present. It highlights the possibility that survivors can actively tell stories that embody personal, truthful, and ethical narrative representations of the experiences of the violence. As active participants in living historical, social, and cultural domains of experiences, those survivors carry within them many different voices; these voices speak of themselves, of their journey, of those around them (friends and enemies, living and dead), of the eras in which they lived, and of their unique conscious struggling. In this respect, a testimonial account is a performance intent on carrying forth memories by conveying a person's engagement between consciousness and history (Felman & Laub). Struggling with the difficulties of communicating experience through symbolic practices, such performances incur a responsibility to convey a tangible sense of prior events in ways that enable their remembrance and the assessment of their significance. In *SLA*, the Rwanda genocide is represented in the sense that the impacts of the historical experience are still alive – not only did some individuals survive, but the genocide as a human experience survived a haunting specter too. The historical reference remains stable and reaffirms the master-narrative of the event. In a pragmatic sense, such reference enables trauma victims to situate themselves in relation to the past and to name the past in the present. "The issue of obligation, moral and political, has been raised in every film about the Rwandan genocide. It

may be that the films on Rwanda have functioned to enmesh this moral obligation with the political mandate by producing a popular knowledge of genocide - one not so present in the news media of that period, which preferred to cast the events as a case of eternal tribal warfare". (Torchin, 123-124)

In visual terms, *SLA* works to build and to reveal memory, insisting that the telling and the visualizing of traumatic stories are complicated ongoing processes. The memory revealed therefore can be described as social memory, which is sustained in the medium of ever-changing social contexts. The film presents to the viewer a narrative of traumatic experience, holding together fragments of history and political memory in clear recurring flashbacks and monologic frames. This filmic technicality might be interpreted in its imagery that the trauma being told still have recurring fragments left behind, therefore healing has not been completely achieved. During the making of the film; "In one incident, the special-effects crew scattered fake cadavers in a swamp outside the capital of Kigali that had been a killing ground and hiding place for Tutsis. The scene was too real for a village woman who wandered to the set and saw more than a dozen silicone corpses. She screamed and sobbed, overcoming the shock only with a psychologist's help" (*NBC News TODAY*). This particular incident was a reflection of the film's narrative intent of confronting the horrors of the genocide, working through it and projecting such understanding as to the fact that healing has not been completely achieved. The manner of rendering the last line in the film by Martine, and the visual style of capturing that moment by the camera complement this view. Martine walks to the Gucaca local court (a traditional open court in Rwanda initiated after the genocide to try perpetrators). Here, some of the perpetrators of the genocide are being tried. Martine moves completely to the camera in a close shot, and speaks directly to the screen - as if speaking to the whole world, with the court audience behind her representing victims;

Martine: I was there. I am a survivor. (*SLA*)

Filmography:

Sometimes in April, 2005. Raoul Peck. HBO Films.

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