

Fostering a Listening Community Through Testimony: Learning with Orphans of the Genocide in Rwanda

Alexandre Dauge-Roth

As a teacher of French and Francophone studies, I am eager to provide meaningful contexts of conversation in which students can improve their linguistic proficiency and develop their cultural literacy through immersion experiences. However, what shapes a meaningful context of dialogue? Is an academically generated conversation equally meaningful for students and community partners? These questions led me to reevaluate the relationship between my students, myself, and potential Francophone interlocutors in designing a course on the representations of the genocide against the Tutsis in Rwanda. Fundamentally, one essential question arose: What are the informative, but more importantly, potentially transformative place, voice, and role I am willing to give to members of a specific community as we study their history? In short, there was a need to reflect on what it means pedagogically to implement a polyvocal and decentered mode of teaching and how it would impact methods of evaluation. By opening up an unprecedented space of dialogue, would students challenge the borders of academia and reflect upon our civic role within the testimonial encounter and the acquisition of knowledge?

As Kalí Tal (1996) asserts in *Worlds of Hurt*:

Bearing witness is an aggressive act. It is born out of a refusal to bow to outside pressure to revise or to repress experience, a decision to embrace conflict rather than conformity, to endure a lifetime of anger and pain rather than to submit to the seductive pull of revision and repression. ...If survivors retain control over the interpretation of their trauma, they can sometimes force a shift in the social and political structure. If the dominant culture manages to appropriate the trauma and can codify it in its own terms, the status quo will remain unchanged (p. 7).

To understand testimony in this light forces any academic community to grasp what role it plays in the reproduction of the political and cultural status quo when confronted with the needs, views, and challenges of minorities, foreigners, and survivors of traumatic experiences. Fostering social

spaces of testimonial encounter potentially leading to the contestation of the status quo and the cultural erasure of subaltern voices [those outside the power structure] constitutes another way to envision civic engagement for any community—be it an academic community or not.¹ This article examines the academic status of survivors' voices and the social responsiveness to others' histories of pain demanded by these encounters through two courses taught in French focusing on the representations of the genocide against the Tutsis in Rwanda. Both courses explored the possibilities of civic engagement through a pedagogy where testimony is envisioned as a transformative space of encounter and survivors have a say in defining the parameters of the partnership.

Identifying Community Partners

In the first course taught on campus in 2007, entitled Documenting the Genocide against the Tutsis in Rwanda, students had the opportunity to engage in a semester long correspondence with Tutsi survivors while studying documentaries, films, fiction, and testimonies bearing witness to this genocide. The second course, Learning with Orphans of the Genocide in Rwanda, combined, during an intensive short-term in May 2009, on-campus preparation and off-campus study. After a week devoted to learning the history of the genocide, theoretical approaches to testimony, documentary making, and oral history methodology, students spent three weeks in Rwanda. They worked in partnership with survivors orphaned by the genocide in 1994 who have lived since 2001 within the residential community of the association Tubeho—which means in Kinyarwanda “Let’s live.”² The hope was to create and define, with our community partner, a space of encounter

¹Regarding issues of academic imperialism and the risk of generating an artificial cultural solidarity among heterogeneous voices when an academic community positions itself as speaking for the subaltern, see Gayatri Spivak's groundbreaking essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (271–313). Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988.

²To know more about the association “Tubeho” visit the site of the non-profit “Friends of Tubeho:” [www.friendsoftubeho.org]. See also my article written with Simone Pathé, one of the student who took part to this course: “A Place we Can Talk” *Bates Magazine* Vol.107.6 (Fall 2009): 24–27 or [<http://home.bates.edu/views/2009/12/23/a-place-we-can-talk/>].

that would allow survivors to bear witness on their own terms and challenge us, their interlocutors, to explore what it means to be a listening community and what forms of responsiveness we ought to forge as heirs of the histories of pain being passed on to us. As Stevan Weine (2006) underlines in his analysis of witnessing to trauma generated by political violence:

Through testimony, survivors and receivers engage with some of the most critical political, existential, and moral questions that a society can ask concerning identity, otherness, existence, values, and enemies. ...These questions are at the core of how society and its people redefine themselves and the codes by which they live (p. 135).

It is in this light that we, the listeners, had to fully evaluate the transformative implications of learning *with* when listening was everything but a neutral practice aimed at acquiring knowledge. Here, we had to address how this knowledge required us to reevaluate the relationship between our will to know and civic demands.

Challenges of Learning *With*

How can we not only learn from testimonies written by survivors of traumatic events but, more fundamentally, learn with survivors of traumatic experiences? This became a recurrent question throughout these courses. First, to shift from the assumption that we learn from survivors requires us to explore civic engagement as a venue for generating new forms of academic hospitality and redefining what it implies for a community to listen to trauma. For such a social dialogue to occur, it is, then, imperative to question the authority learning communities give to survivors' voices. Furthermore, it is crucial to acknowledge that learning *with* survivors who bear witness to experiences with which one cannot identify represents a demanding and potentially alienating endeavor. Thus, fostering the possibility of learning *with* requires a willingness to be interrupted, an openness to seeing our social imagery challenged, and a readiness to finding ourselves estranged within our own community. While learning from tends to maintain survivors at a reassuring distance, learning *with* supposes that survivors have not only a voice capable of attesting to a past, but also a say within the present of their interlocutors. The need to grant survivors agency and a transformative power of interruption within their interlocutors'

community is a crucial premise for envisioning listening as a form of community engagement. In our testimonial encounter with survivors, refusing to disconnect the disturbing pain to which they bear witness from the present demands they pass on to us defines then both an ethic of listening and the promise of a shared space where heterogeneous views seek to coexist with their differences.

For an academic community, learning *with* presupposes a pedagogical shift in how we consider the acquisition of knowledge, as it requires a willingness to be interrupted by survivors' lives, a readiness to be transformed by their demands and an openness to find ourselves estranged while still at home. Ultimately, learning *with* forces us to rethink the relationship between our will to know and our sense of belonging and hospitality. As Wendy Hui Kyong Chun (2002) highlights in her attempt to define "a politic of listening," our first duty as interlocutors "is to feel the victim's victories, defeats, and silences, know them from within, while at the same time acknowledging that one is not the victim, so that the victim can testify, so that the truth can be reached together. In this model, distance must be maintained between listener and speaker" (p. 162). Thus, to learn with survivors of traumatic violence is to negotiate the possibility of a common project without negating the uniqueness of each other's trajectories. To become a listening community by learning *with* survivors therefore constitutes a departure from a socially neutral position of learning that requires us to move beyond pity and compassion in order to face a series of thought-provoking demands. Here the learning community who asks the questions and listens is asked, in return, to respond not only to but also for those who find the means to testify.

In "The Responsibility of Responsiveness: Criticism in an Age of Witness," Ross Chambers (1996) affirms that the emergence of testimony as a prevalent genre within the literature of the twentieth century invites us to rethink what it means to read testimonies since "the writing of witness has not completed its task unless it finds a readership" and "it is necessary also for the tale itself to survive if the survival of the individual witnessing subject is not to prove futile" (p. 11). As a literary critic, he reflects upon the ability of commentary to generate pertinent forms of responsiveness to histories of pain aware that it "is always and inevitably inadequately responsive, because it is subject to all the effects of deferral" (p. 24). Therefore he comes to "recommend not responsiveness as such—an impossible ideal—but reading that is anxious about

the quality of its responsiveness to the extent that it is conscious that reading participates in a history of pain and has a responsibility of witness” (p. 24). Reading and listening to survivors’ testimonies should no longer be envisioned as a neutral practice disengaged from any social implications. Pertinent forms of responsiveness presuppose then that listeners see themselves as indirect witnesses whose responsibility is to develop a critical self-awareness regarding their own inadequacy as they respond to survivors’ stories. As such, learning *with* survivors constitutes an ethical gesture that aims to inspire, within our respective communities, forms of responsiveness where their histories of pain and ours reciprocally shape each other’s. Once a community recognizes that survivors’ histories and its own have been interwoven by the testimonial encounter, new pedagogical and civic challenges arise. How differently do survivors and their interlocutors perceive the process of learning *with*? How does the gap between our will to know and survivors’ will to testify impact on the possibility of belonging to a same community? What pedagogical and civic shifts are needed to ensure that those who bear witness to the violence they have suffered do not see themselves silenced once our will to know or duty to remember has been fulfilled? Aware that listening to testimonies of traumatic violence is an unpleasant and disturbing responsibility, how transformative can or should the emergence of such a space of encounter through witnessing be? Within academia, how is it possible to reconcile the transient nature of any pedagogical relationship and the long lasting demands of surviving trauma? Finally, what interruptions must occur within the listening community for the testimonial encounter to remain, in spite of it all, a mutually empowering experience synonymous with shared agency and a sense of belonging that does not silence the disruptive power of survivors’ demands for social recognition, justice, financial compensation, and opportunities to rebuild themselves?

Initial Approach to the Testimonial Encounter

These issues related to social responsiveness to others’ histories of pain were pivotal to two courses I designed at Bates College within the French and Francophone Studies curriculum. Both courses offered multiple opportunities for direct exchange between Rwandan students who survived the genocide in 1994 and U.S. students. As a former Belgian colony after World War I, Rwanda promoted French as the major foreign language in schools until 2009, when English was

declared the foreign language of upper education. This cultural and linguistic legacy explains, in part, the attempt to create a space of encounter between American students learning French and young Tutsi survivors who found the resilience to pursue their education. In these courses, like never before, the students’ mastery of French and Francophone history was a key premise to establishing dialogue. Obviously, the fact that survivors must speak in French—for them a foreign language—about their traumatic experience is not without incidence on what can be expressed and might lead to potential misunderstandings, not to mention feelings of alienation. While it is important to keep these risks in mind, they are not exclusive to the use of a foreign language since they also exist between Rwandans for other reasons such as self-censorship, shame, social status, power relationships, and cultural codes, not to mention suspicion about their interlocutors’ motivations in regard to their actions during the genocide. At the same time, having to translate a traumatic experience into a foreign language has proven to be, at least for some survivors, a beneficial constraint as it imposes a certain distance that allows them to bear witness without it being a retraumatizing experience. As we can foresee, the required linguistic proficiency in French did by no means guarantee our mutual ability to establish a transformative dialogue and, for us, to become a listening community. We had to grapple with many other cultural, ideological, and psychological assumptions throughout both courses in order to foster a shared and mutually empowering space. Before describing in more detail how these courses were conceived around the transformative experience of testimony to foster civic skills such as critical thinking, social listening, collective action, civic judgment, imagination, and creativity, to name a few (Battistoni, 2002), it is important to expose some additional dynamics at play when learning *with* survivors.

What forms of hospitality are required from us, as a learning community, as we are interrupted and estranged by the testimonial encounter and seek to learn with survivors? First, envisioning testimony as a mutual space of encounter requires us to think about how and why survivors bear witness as well as to reflect on how and why we listen to others’ pain. According to Shoshana Felman’s (1992) analysis of the testimonies of Holocaust survivors in Claude Lanzmann’s film “Shoah,” to bear witness constitutes a gesture that not only refers to a unique position, but also to a performance of positioning through which the witness reasserts the

presence of his or her difference without having to negate the pain that is at the core of his or her sense of self:

What does testimony mean, if it is not simply (as we commonly perceive it) the observing, the recording, the remembering of an event, but an utterly unique and irreplaceable topographical position with respect to an occurrence? What does testimony mean, if it is this uniqueness of the performance of a story constituted by the fact that, like the oath, it cannot be carried out by anybody else (p. 206)?

To be aware of this performative dimension through which survivors reaffirm the uniqueness of their position is to realize that the value of the testimonial encounter does not solely reside in an exchange of knowledge fulfilling academic criteria. What does it mean, then, to become knowledgeable of our interlocutors' stories since we cannot identify with their suffering? Second, what kind of civic engagement and academic responsiveness are we, as a listening community, trying to nurture when survivors' past sufferings and current challenges become part of our respective communities through testimony? As we try to answer these questions, we must keep in mind that one of the major dilemmas for an academic community in learning *with* resides in the institutional time frame in which the testimonial encounter occurs. For survivors, the pain to which they bear witness does not cease when they stop speaking, while, for students and the instructor, there is always the option of putting the demands generated by this shared suffering on hold, not to mention of turning the page and going on at the end of the semester—uninterrupted—with the other solicitations of our lives. We, therefore, need to acknowledge that for survivors, the testimonial encounter represents more the beginning or continuation of a process aiming toward the recognition of their trauma and the daily negotiation of its present challenges rather than the fulfillment of a duty to remember, an academic performance, or a therapeutic exercise. Paradoxically, it is this very discrepancy that opens up the possibility of civic engagement since it forces both communities to negotiate what can be shared through the testimonial encounter within the present, to define how learning *with* ought to be a mutually empowering experience, and to evaluate the civic demands that passing on and receiving

disturbing knowledge generate. Encouraged by the testimonial process to reexamine the social implications of becoming knowledgeable with those we cannot identify, academic communities must explore their role as cultural vectors through which related communities can redefine their sense of hospitality and their responsiveness to others' pain. Ultimately, what is at stake in this testimonial encounter is the willingness of a learning community not so much to speak for but to be interrupted by voices and expectations other than its own and, in turn, to work to become a source of interruption, generating new dialogues within the broader communities that surround it.

Listening as Civic Engagement

Understanding testimony as a space of social encounter constitutes a crucial shift as it affirms that survivors' views cannot be reduced to judicial proofs, historical footnotes, or academic subjects. As Jacques Derrida (2000) has underlined, the "essence of testimony cannot necessarily be reduced to narration, that is, to descriptive, informative relations, to knowledge or to narrative; it is first a present act" (p. 38). Testimony thus dramatically engages the present that survivors and their interlocutors share and mutually shape in the light of a defining past. As members of a learning community and as American citizens,³ students and I had to define our role within the historical awareness Tutsi survivors sought to provoke as they agreed to bear witness. In our desire to be civically engaged, it was also imperative for our community to take into account that, for survivors, testifying does not automatically put their suffering at a more tolerable distance, nor does it necessarily amount to a personal resolution. As Chambers (2004) suggests in *Untimely Interventions*, survivors, rather than "having survived a trauma," are "still surviving experiences that were already themselves an experience of being, somehow, still alive although already dead." What is here at stake is the social acknowledgment of an aftermath defined as a state of "out-of-jointness" (p. 43). Paradoxically, it is by bearing witness to this state of "out-of-jointness" while testifying about a traumatic past, that survivors call for and open a space of encounter. To become civically aware about survivors' present "out-of-jointness," forces us to define the civic role we ought to play as we give a say to survivors

³ Regarding the responsibility of the U.S. government in the genocide against the Tutsis of Rwanda in 1994, see Samantha Power, "A Problem from Hell": America and the Age of Genocide, New York: Perennial, 2003.

within our present. The hope here is that this form of hospitality, where the “other” has agency, might contribute to alleviating somewhat the feeling of being estranged and the pain it generates.

As an academic community, we clearly cannot change the traumatic past whose history of violence is passed on to us but, as we become heirs to this history, we have the opportunity to become engaged listeners and to develop a responsibility of responsiveness in many other ways. We can respond to the social desire to be heard, use our symbolic capital to increase the social visibility of the histories of pain that are passed on to us, generate within our communities conversations on what it means to acknowledge that the history of our community and the witnesses’ histories are intertwined, act upon the state of “out-of-jointness” in which many trauma survivors live, or engage in reflecting on how such awareness impacts our conception of hospitality. Learning *with* survivors of traumatic violence demands that we put into question the social values and imagery that contribute to survivors’ “out-of-jointness”—an exclusion that we tend, willingly or not, to reinforce if left unexamined. As Richard Battistoni (2006) suggests in his essay on civic engagement, an “added benefit to defining civic knowledge in this broad manner is that students and community members become co-creators of knowledge, rather than simply relying on ‘expert’ texts or professors” (p. 16). To become an engaged community by aiming to be co-creators of knowledge through the testimonial encounter demands that we identify and promote a sense of citizenship within academia capable of fostering mutually transformative dynamics that might enable both survivors and their interlocutors to have not only a voice but a renewed sense of agency and belonging.

In our attempt to evaluate the socio-historical forms this co-creation could take and how our anxious responsiveness could be implemented, we need to remain aware of the privilege that defines our academic position in regard to the trajectory and place from which survivors speak. In her first testimony about the genocide against the Tutsis in Rwanda, Esther Mujawayo (2004) emphasizes the painful censorship that the listening community can generate—despite its proclaimed will to know—if it disregards the gap that defines the survivor’s position of enunciation:

As the survivor of the genocide, you don’t have the luxury of putting the horror aside: you are in it, in it. Meanwhile the

other, the one who listens, he just receives the horror through words and he, he has the luxury, or the choice to be outside it, to declare that he is unable to bear this and say: “Here stops the horror.” Myself, I do not have this choice not to bear it because I had to bear it and still have to bear it (pp. 20-21, my translation).

For us, to whom histories of pain are passed on, the option always remains to turn the page, while those who are surviving a trauma that is never over do not have this luxury. One of our first duties as a listening community is then to nurture a civic willingness to be interrupted and to refrain from interrupting those who bear witness when their words and demands no longer allow us to go on as usual. A second challenge is that we cannot speak for the survivors. We need to give them a say in the social recognition of their past trauma and in determining what paths are pertinent to respond to its aftermath. At stake once again is the resonance and agency we are willing to give to these haunting voices that question our conception of hospitality by passing on to us transformative demands in order to meet their needs. As survivors respond to our will to know, they ask in return that we translate into concrete actions our aspiration to be a responsive community where different trajectories can coexist and nurture each other to alleviate the suffering generated by a traumatic past. If demands such as justice, material compensation, and trauma counseling clearly exceed the resources of most academic communities, other demands, such as being heard, recognized, and valued as a human being without having to negate the trauma of one’s past, can and must be met. The genocide in Rwanda not only killed one million people between April and July 1994, but also killed within many survivors the belief in belonging to a community and the ability to project themselves into the future.

Equally important for a learning community that wants to become co-creators of knowledge and civically responsive is the valorization and development within academia of a “civic knowledge,” as defined by Battistoni (2006):

...[W]e have learned from students engaged in community-based experiences that civic knowledge...comes from multiple sources, including community members. It involves a deeper knowledge of issues, or what some might call the

root causes of public problems, and an understanding of how different community stakeholders perceive the issues. An understanding of “place” and the community history that provides a context for service and public problem solving—including learning about how individuals and community groups have effected change in their communities—is another key element of civic knowledge (p. 16).

Learning *with* survivors of traumatic events might then be described as a crucial venue for exploring our role as agents of democracy, as this venue not only exposes students and faculty to radically different views, but also demands that we identify with our interlocutors the social transformations needed within our community so that heterogeneous trajectories, perceptions, and needs might nurture each other.

Developing Self-Critical Awareness

In both courses, the analysis of the competing cultural representations of the genocide against the Tutsis allowed students to develop a self-critical awareness regarding their understanding of political violence in Africa. Many came to realize how much their perception was shaped by stereotypes inherited from the colonial gaze and defined by the priorities that govern Western media’s production. Furthermore, by focusing on the various mediations through which filmmakers, authors, and survivors confer a visibility and intelligibility to the factors that led to the genocide in Rwanda, this comparative approach forced students to be actively engaged in the production of meaning. In the absence of a single master narrative capable of asserting the ultimate truth of this genocide, students had to analyze the choices, silences, rationality, and materiality of their sources according to criteria such as context of production and reception, socio-historical positionality, cultural bias and rationale, targeted audience, genre, use of legitimate speakers, rhetorical appropriation of archives, and willingness to give survivors a say or to subject them to a voice-of-God. Through this analysis of the formal and contextual constraints defining what is archived—and thus declared knowledgeable and worthy of memory—students critically evaluated the discrepancies between various mediations focusing on the ideological roots of the genocide. They positioned themselves among the competing narratives identifying

which historical causes favored its genesis and implementation, and, equally important, weighed in the (im)pertinence of the political responses to the genocide’s aftermath within Rwanda and by the international community.

The civic intent of focusing on the issue of representation was to think critically about the social discourses and political (in)actions through which the imaginary construction of an “other” within a society is achieved. This awareness regarding the roots of genocide and the role identity politics play in the “othering” of certain members of a society gave students the means to reevaluate their own responsibility when facing discriminatory discourses that cast some as strangers or outlaws within their own community. Furthermore, as students discovered through their dialog with Rwandans, for survivors, the feeling of living in a stage of “out-of-jointness” is not foreign to their social construction as “others” and the feeling of being illegitimate that existed prior to the genocide. All our Rwandan interlocutors grew up facing violent discourses that equated them to historical invaders or cockroaches who needed to be exterminated. This realization placed students before a new imperative, namely to acknowledge that no mediation—or study—of a past genocide can be neutral since each actualizes how respective communities respond to the genocide’s aftermath and the demands for justice of those who have suffered traumatic violence. While crucial, this analytical work on the genocide’s competing mediations only constituted the first stage in developing an ethic of responsiveness and the possibility of civic engagement. Indeed, by learning only from rather than with and within the shared present instituted by the testimonial encounter, students and myself could still, very easily, see ourselves as observers and citizens whose histories and communities remained immune to the histories of pain that we had the luxury of studying at a safe distance.

From Academic Reluctance to Responsive Partnership

What then does it entail and require to listen to a survivor of genocide? To what extent can we as listeners be implicated in and through the act of listening to survivors? As Susan Sontag (2003) has shown in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, it is insufficient to document the horror humans can inflict on other humans if one does not address the ethical demands of remembering, the implications that remembrance of the past generates for our

present actions, and their intent:

To designate a hell is not, of course, to tell us anything about how to extract people from that hell, how to moderate hell's flame. Still, it seems a good in itself to acknowledge, to have enlarged, one's sense of how much suffering caused by human wickedness there is in the world we share with others. ...Let the atrocious images haunt us. Even if they are only tokens, and cannot possibly encompass most of the reality to which they refer, they still perform a vital function. The images say: This is what human beings are capable of doing—may volunteer to do, enthusiastically, self-righteously. Don't forget.

This is not quite the same as asking people to remember a particularly monstrous bout of evil ("Never forget"). Perhaps too much value is assigned to memory, not enough to thinking. Remembering is an ethical act, has ethical value in and on itself (pp. 114-15).

In order to challenge this academic reluctance to link the acquisition of knowledge through remembering with forms of civic engagement, during a research trip in Rwanda I built a network of young Tutsi survivors who were fluent in French and, for the majority, studying in Rwandan universities. In locating potential correspondents, the fact that both groups could engage with someone close to their age and relate to each other through popular culture and academic lifestyle was important. My students were between 18 and 22 years old, while our Rwandan partners were between 18 and 30. Meanwhile, everyone remained aware that they needed to engage with someone whose experience would always remain somehow foreign to their own. In *Documenting the Genocide against the Tutsis in Rwanda*, each American student was paired with a survivor who was willing to testify. The intent was to give students and myself the opportunity to explore through a confidential and semester-long correspondence how the traumatic events whose mediations we were studying had been lived, what scars they had left, how they had impacted survivors' lives and views, and what kind of challenges they were still generating. Thanks to weekly emails, students and survivors got to know each other's stories, valorized

each other's opinions, and progressively nurtured a relationship of trust and mutual appreciation.

In *Learning with Orphans of the Genocide in Rwanda*, following the introductory week on campus, American students and I traveled to Rwanda and spent three weeks with survivors who had become orphans in 1994 and were now living in reconstituted families within the association Tubeho. Here again, each American student was paired with one Tutsi survivor fluent in French who was willing to share his or her personal journey in a private setting. During the two first weeks of our stay, we went to our Rwandan interlocutors' universities, we visited various memorials with them, explored different regions of Rwanda together, met with members of other survivors' associations, non-governmental organizations, and Rwandans involved in the reconciliation process. These numerous meetings and discussions exposed American and Rwandan students to contrasting views about the causes of the genocide and the responses to its aftermath. This shared framework of inquiry fostered not only a sense of complicity, but also helped everyone involved in this oral history project to realize that no one possesses the ultimate truth about the genocide. Everyone had to take a position regarding sensitive issues such as identity politics in post-genocide Rwanda, the implementation of justice, the role of the international community, the duty to remember, the challenges of rebuilding one's life, and the role each of us could play in this process. These two weeks allowed us to build a relationship of trust and to acknowledge that learning about the genocide requires a dialogic process that allows a diversity of views and trajectories to coexist while we individually and collectively forge our responses to the legacy of pain left by this traumatic past. These conversations also made us realize that though we were talking about the same events, the impact of this same past within the present was not only radically different between us and survivors, but also wildly heterogeneous among survivors. This awareness forced us to refrain from generalizations and to keep in mind the plurality of responses to the genocide's aftermath. Furthermore, this experience constantly reminded us of the difficulty of making a difference on a broad scale and encouraged us to value more modest and personalized venues and outcomes.

Indirect Witnessing and Co-ownership

The civic knowledge or competence that my students and I acquired through the testimonial

encounter with survivors did not only concern the past and present of our interlocutors, but also equally important, our own history and present responsiveness to others' pain. Testimony as a social encounter engages a process that forces the listening community to become more than a witness to the testifying individuals' experiences. It forces that community to become a witness to its own anxious ability to listen and to respond to the challenging and often disruptive experiences passed on to its members. As Felman and Laub (1992) have shown, engaging oneself in the practice of soliciting testimony calls ultimately for a practice of indirect witnessing and co-ownership:

By extension, the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself. ...While overlapping, to a degree, with the experience of the victim, he nonetheless does not become the victim—he preserves his own separate place, position and perspective. ...The listener, therefore, has to be at the same time a witness to the trauma witness and a witness to himself (pp. 57–58).

To become civically engaged presupposes then for an academic community to develop within the testimonial encounter a kind of teaching that allows students to become aware of the inadequacy of their responsiveness toward local and foreign communities and to encourage forms of agency in association with those who remain too often culturally voiceless. Civic engagement resides, therefore, in a willingness to acknowledge that we, as an academic community, must identify what transformative dialogues need to be implemented both at a local and global level to become engaged listeners and what crucial role we ought to play in the social recognition and circulation of the histories of pain that community partners share through testimonies and oral history projects.

To address the challenges of co-witnessing and being co-creators of knowledge, in both courses students carried out a collective final project in which survivors had a say. In each case, after having gathered survivors' stories in French, students had to define how to publicly translate and document the histories of their interlocutors in order to relay their voices within our academic community and beyond. In *Documenting the Genocide* against the Tutsis in Rwanda, students created a

polyvocal recitative performance based on the correspondence they had maintained throughout the semester with survivors. This campus-wide event, entitled "Voices from Rwanda," forced students to apply to their own project the critical awareness they developed during the semester about the rhetorical and ethical choices behind any mediation of the genocide. Now it was their turn to define how to document the histories of pain that had been passed on to them in order to confer to these stories an unprecedented resonance within our academic community. To provide some context to this recitative act of indirect witnessing, students created a series of informative posters about Rwanda's history and culture that the public could read before the performance. After having selected excerpts from survivors' testimonies, students organized them around a series of themes, with the opening section corresponding to the beginning of the genocide: "April 6, 1994," "My Family," "Before the Genocide," "Try To Imagine," "The Importance of Testifying," "Try To Imagine... Today," "Living Together," and "Our Words."

The Rwandan survivors read the draft and amended its content according to their sense of appropriateness and how they desired to be perceived. This co-editing process offered them the ability to voice their history on their own terms, share the challenges they still face today, and articulate their aspirations with more accuracy. The setting for the performance was the following: Students relaying the words of their Rwandan interlocutors were dressed in black and surrounded the public from behind. Except for two light sources, the room of 80 seats was dark to minimize visual distraction and help the public focus on survivors' words. On a screen, the portrait and the first name of the Rwandan survivor from whom the public was hearing a testimony was projected.⁴ In the last section of the performance entitled "Our Words," students shared their views about the transformative potentiality of learning *with* survivors:

In learning about the different ways to document the Rwandan genocide, I have discovered the difference between pity and compassion. Feeling pity can be a detrimental approach whereas compassion provokes one to create social change. Having a link with a real

⁴Voices from Rwanda was performed March 30 during the 2007 Mount David Summit at Bates College, Lewiston, Maine.

person in Rwanda who went through this experience was what truly cemented this mind-set for me. (Katie)

My correspondent was Jean-Jacques. When he said “because you have become my friend, I want to tell you my story,” it was as though I was directly affected. Someone that I cared about came face to face with hatred and suffered immense losses. He is suffering even now, trying to deal with the return of those who killed his friends and family. He is struggling against hate, while immersed in sorrow. I feel now that I carry a bit of this weight on my shoulders. Carrying this bit of weight is my gift to my friend. (Kate)

By sharing their mutual views and divergent expectations, American students and their Rwandan interlocutors learned from each other about the relational dynamic of remembrance, belonging, and identity. By negotiating together their differences, they were able to craft a mediation of the genocide that did not exist prior to the course and, furthermore, to generate a dialogue about this traumatic past whose aftermath was now inscribed in each other’s history and community—though in very different ways. The fact that both students and their interlocutors were given a say and an agency within the testimonial encounter, allowed everyone to use their critical awareness about testimony and the representation of pain to negotiate various forms of responsiveness according to their respective situation within the testimonial encounter. As Battistoni (2006) highlights:

Research and practice in service-learning has established the importance of giving students a voice...in the resulting discussions/reflections that accompany the community-based experience. But we are also finding that student voice means enabling students to be involved in public problem solving connected to the issues that they determine to be important (p. 23).

Ultimately, by exploring the mediations of the genocide against the Tutsis, students had to question the responsiveness of various communities—including their own—to others’ histories of pain through the relationship they sought to establish with the voices of this traumatic past, while

remaining aware that they will never fully meet the demands passed on to them by survivors.

Oral History as a Space of Hospitality and Advocacy

In Learning with Orphans of the Genocide in Rwanda, the final project offered Tubeho’s members the opportunity to record their testimony on video for themselves, if they wished to do so, without their having to choose beforehand the future use of these archives. After having shared their lives for two weeks, discovering numerous regions of Rwanda, experiencing side-by-side the challenge of visiting memorials, and exchanging many views with guest speakers and among ourselves, we wanted to open for our Rwandan interlocutors the opportunity to bear witness to their past experience as well as their present views and aspirations. No one was forced to speak about the past if they wished to focus solely on the present. Furthermore, before testifying, each survivor told his or her American interlocutor the topics and periods he or she didn’t want to address. In the end, half of the members of Tubeho who were part of the project expressed the desire to testify before the camera. These six interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 2 hours—a seventh was begun but the survivor found herself overwhelmed and was not able to complete her testimony. Once everyone who wanted to be interviewed had a chance to do so, survivors asked us to create unedited DVD copies for their personal use and to select excerpts from the six testimonies in order to produce a series of short subtitled testimonies for their association’s future website. They wished to use this opportunity to voice their challenges and gain more social visibility in Rwanda as they planned to seek funding for creating collective projects for Tubeho’s orphans.

Naasson Munyandamutsa (2004), a leading psychiatrist who works with survivors in Rwanda, describes as follows the demanding hospitality we tried to offer through our oral history project:

Building peace with survivors of extreme violence, and therefore with the world, requires the determination to help them reinstitute their love for themselves, rebuild their trust in themselves, and by doing so, recuperate their self-esteem for those who have lost it—this is the supreme objective for those who have not yet been wounded (p. 166, my translation).

For those who have been spared, like my students and me, this objective can only be embraced by departing from the common perception of who we are as we agree to address the estrangement provoked by the testimonial encounter with a reality traumatic and alienating to most. This shift within the practice of listening is precisely what calls for a renewed conception of hospitality that can no longer rely on a principle of identification and transparency, since the interruption of oneself becomes the new paradigm allowing new forms of responsiveness within the testimonial encounter.

Responsiveness and Assessment

Often mutually transformative, the semester-long correspondence, as well as the three weeks spent with TUBEHO's members in Rwanda, forced each person to explore unprecedented modes of learning since here our interlocutors not only had a voice but also a say regarding the responsiveness we were individually and collectively negotiating as community partners. It was precisely this attempt to define pertinent personal and collective responses to a traumatic past while remaining aware of our differences within the testimonial encounter that allowed a form of civic engagement. In both courses, students were asked to write a final essay reflecting on their own experience of becoming a learning community and assessing to what extent they were able to respond personally and collectively to the implications of having been given the opportunity to learn with survivors and become heirs to these histories of pain. The students considered how they had to reposition themselves once they acknowledged that even though the violence of these traumatic histories would always remain foreign to them, the survivors' ongoing challenges had become an integral part of their own personal histories. While some economical, political, and judicial demands clearly exceeded the capacities of the listening community we sought to be, other demands—such as the desire to be acknowledged as a human being, the possibility of bearing witness, and, more concretely, the opportunity to rebuild oneself through education—were within our reach. Upon our return to the United States, students created an association on campus to increase awareness about Rwanda's post-genocide challenges and committed to raise funds to offer one scholarship annually to a member of TUBEHO who took part in the course.⁵ In both courses, facing the demands that had been passed on to our respective communities

through the testimonial encounter was then—and still remains—the major challenge to which we exposed ourselves because our responsiveness will always, to some degree, remain inadequate. While the correspondence with survivors forbids us from envisioning the study of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda as a distant and abstract event, the oral history project forced us to face the lasting consequences of genocidal violence and the active role we ought to play as a learning community. If we agree that testimony is first the performative reiteration of one's presence, then we can make it explicit for students that testimony is not so much about a past that is incomprehensible to them, but rather about the various positions and values that citizens claim within the present through the act of bearing witness or by listening to those who aspire to do so. It is at this juncture that testimony, envisioned as a space of encounter, can pedagogically and civically offer a chance to overcome our reluctance to envisioning these histories of pain as part of our respective communities. Thus, creating a testimonial relationship with survivors of traumatic violence represents one possible avenue for bridging the gap between communities who have radically different histories and priorities, as long as each community develops new forms of responsiveness to the demands generated by interweaving their histories. Engaged in the testimonial encounter, we—as an academic community working to become a listening community—had to define our civic responsibilities, knowing that our country bears some responsibility for the events that made this genocide possible. Furthermore, we had to envision the histories of pain that were conveyed to us as part of a common history whose consequences need to be shared within the present space opened by the testimonial encounter. Through our dialogue with survivors and the testimonies collected, students came to realize—at least this is my civic hope—that the pain suffered by others is not a past event, but represents for its survivors an ongoing process of negotiation in which we, the listening community, must determine our role. Since the signification of the violence of genocide and its traumatic effects has no epilogue for survivors, we must reflect on how our community can recognize this ongoing struggle and define which paths of action are pertinent within our respective communities.

Suddenly positioned by the testimonial

⁵ A scholarship of \$1,200 per year covers tuition in a Rwandan university.

encounter as heirs to a traumatic experience no longer culturally disconnected from our own, we found ourselves challenged in our belief that we should never have inherited this experience of genocide because it was supposed to be and remain a foreign reality. Listening to testimonies witnessing the genocide against the Tutsis questions then both our willingness to confront disconcerting human behaviors and our sense of cultural hospitality, when hospitality is understood as interrupting oneself. The encounter with the disturbing experience of genocide can thus provoke in us one of two responses. It may, on the one hand, impose on us a duty to rethink how we position ourselves within the present and among the living in relationship to this painful past in order to recognize both its long-lasting aftermath and its present demands. Or, on the other hand, this encounter may affirm us in our unquestioned belief that our order of things is immune to the possibility of genocide and, consequently, that survivors' testimonies are "too much"—a position that does not preclude feelings like pity or call for a duty to remember. The first response represents a venue for civic engagement as survivors and their interlocutors engage in a mutually transformative dialogue, while the second symptomizes a social and cultural monologue where survivors' voices are cast as interferences with respect to an exclusive social order that defines what is culturally audible and legitimate.

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About the Author

Alexandre Dauge-Roth is an associate professor of French and Francophone Studies at Bates College. Dauge-Roth is the author of *Writing and Filming the Genocide of the Tutsis in Rwanda: Dismembering and Remembering Traumatic History*. Lanham, MC: Lexington Books, 2010, on which he drew for this article.