

**WITNESSING THE SOCIALLY DEAD: TESTIMONY, VIOLENCE, AND
SARAH**

by

Hannah van Voorthuysen

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FUFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

The Faculty of Graduate Studies
(Political Science)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
(Vancouver)

September 2011

Abstract

This paper critiques the assumption, common in academic studies on survivor testimony, that trauma or pain renders the witness speechless. Through an in-depth analysis of Sarah, an extremely marginalised, socially dead, survivor-witness of multiple violences during times of war and peace in northern Uganda, I consider how such witnesses *communicate in embodied ways* to outline the nature of violences that they experience. Given that witnessing is a relational practice, I then explore the creative, empathetic, and imaginative ways that researchers or listeners should respond to such testimonies in order to do justice to the testimony told.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Table of Contents.....	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Dedication.....	v
Introduction.....	1
Northern Uganda’s Wars.....	3
Sarah’s Story.....	7
The Socially Dead Witness	17
Embodied Witness	21
Listening to Sarah.....	25
Conclusions.....	30
Bibliography.....	33

Acknowledgements

The successful completion of this thesis owes thanks to many people without whom this project could not have been accomplished. First, from a purely pragmatic point of view, thanks is owed to the New Zealand Ministry of Defence who awarded me the Freyberg Scholarship, which allowed me to come to Canada and complete a challenging, but deeply rewarding, programme.

Next, thanks is owed to my amazing supervisor, Dr Erin Baines, whose support and guidance was of considerable aid. Without her assistance, insights and contributions to my argument, this thesis would have been sorely lacking. Likewise, Dr Brian Job is owed significant appreciation for his mentorship through my participation within the UBC political science department, and his wry questioning during the defence of this thesis allowed for a much better understanding of this project to be developed in its final form.

Third, the work of Liu Institute scholars, Pilar Riaño-Alcalá and Juliane Okot Bitek, was deeply inspirational and largely informed the theoretical basis of the second part of this thesis. I am very grateful to them for allowing me to use their unpublished work in this thesis.

Finally, this thesis relies on the testimony of one woman, Sarah. Words cannot express the immense gratitude and honour that it has been for me to be allowed work on your testimony. For that, I thank you.

This thesis is dedicated to my friend, classmate, and victim of a cowardly attack of gender-based violence during the course of our programme, Rumana Monzur. May your pain not amount to nothing as we continually strive towards a world free of violence against women with hope, optimism and friendships.

Introduction

Sarah is a young Acholi woman, a survivor-witness of gross violations at the hands of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the victim of wider structural violence affecting northern Uganda more generally. Advancing the argument of Hirsch and Splitzer, who reject claims that survivor-witnesses are rendered speechless by trauma, this thesis will unpack Sarah's testimony to consider how the socially dead witness.¹ Navigating through uncertain terrains of war as an abused daughter, abductee, rebel, unwilling bush-wife, scorned returnee, reluctant mother, prostitute, and survivor, Sarah's multiple experiences of war take place amid a context of ongoing poverty and social marginalisation. Testifying about her life through local forms of witnessing, Sarah's tales highlight the nature of violence affecting the marginalised poor in conflict zones and demonstrate how various overlapping violences combine to position the witness into a physically hyper-visible, but socially invisible, site of liminality and social death. Sarah's testimonies offer a remarkably clear account of abjection and demand an empathetic, creative and imaginative response from the listener.

In this thesis I will first outline the situation in Northern Uganda in order to situate Sarah within the decades-old violence affecting the Acholi population. Next, I examine Sarah's testimony in depth, exploring how her stories reveal the nature of multiple violences combining to severely curtail the options available to the socially dead in war. Following this I outline the current state of witnessing discourses on the socially dead to argue that although some pain is not easily communicable, survivor-witnesses are able and willing to tell their stories and reveal experiences of violence and injustice that would be impermissible in formal prosecution-based justice settings like a war crimes trial. Finally, I reflect on how we, as researchers

¹ Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, (2009), 'The Witness in the Archive: Holocaust Studies/Memory Studies', *Memory Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 2

and listeners, are to respond to a testimony like Sarah's. I argue that a creative and empathetic response is needed in order to begin to unpack such testimonies and begin to understand the drastically oppressed lives of the socially dead.

Witnessing is an essential component within transitional justice projects as, without the testimonies of survivor-witnesses, bringing perpetrators to justice is an impersonal enterprise that lacks the humanised and individual perspectives offered by survivors. Debates on witnessing within transitional justice are heavily contested and wide-ranging. Numerous important issues have received considerable debate including: the role of the witness; the problem of testifying against gender-based or structural violence; the inabilities of justice-focused institutions to rebuild shattered communities or discover the truth; and finally the purpose of testifying in general – whether it is to find meaning, bring perpetrators to justice, or expose the truth. I will deal with a very small component of this debate, examining an area that has not received great academic attention, but which offers important implications within the larger field of transitional justice.

My thesis focuses on the socially dead witness, arguing that survivors of atrocity, relegated to a position of extreme marginalisation by their experiences, are *able* and *willing* to testify, in a claim that speaks against the grandiose assertions of those who argue that pain or trauma reduces a witness speechless or incomprehensible. Instead, this thesis argues that through utilising an empathetic, creative, and imaginative approach, the pain of those like Sarah can be understood, and her insights concerning the injustices she faces are made visible. Such insights highlight the nature of structural violence combined with direct violence that overlaps and combines to seriously impede the ability of the socially dead to transition into a more just and fulfilling existence. By listening to Sarah, we begin to address some of these issues and are forced to rethink both the way that survivors witness, and the types of injustices that demand attention. Thus, although a small component within a larger debate on witnessing within transitional justice, a better understanding of

the socially dead witness promises to provoke transitional justice proponents into re-examining the ways that survivors witness and the messages they convey to us.

Northern Uganda's Wars

The civil war in Northern Uganda, in its current form, has stretched on for over twenty years, ever since the current Ugandan President, Yoweri Museveni, first seized power from an Acholi dominated government in 1986.² The LRA, under the leadership of Joseph Kony, is the latest armed anti-government group operating in Acholi sub-region during this time. It resembles its predecessor, Alice Lakwena's Holy Spirit Movement, in that it evokes spiritual as well as political ideologies and motivations citing a politically marginalised and morally impure region in need of salvation. The strict pseudo Christian spiritual order within the LRA serves as a means to maintain group control, reinforces a new social order for overwhelmed abductees, and legitimises violence done unto civilians.³ As Kristof Titeca notes, "absolute adherence to the many, and frequently changing, spiritual rules is in this case the only way to survive life in the bush."⁴ Under Kony's leadership the LRA employs small bands of rebels to maximum effect by engaging in a war of terror against the civilian population and spreading fear through tactics like forced abduction of children, amputations of limbs, massacres, murders, looting, rapes, and the cutting off of noses, lips and ears.⁵

The government troops also engage in brutal tactics against civilians including rape, torture and forced displacement, all of which has resulted in the widespread dislocation of the population into poorly protected Internally Displaced Persons

² Adam Branch, (2007), 'Uganda's Civil War and the Politics of Intervention', *Ethics and International Affairs*, Vol. 21, No. 2, p. 180

³ Kristof Titeca, (2010), 'The Spiritual Order of the LRA' in Tim Allen and Koen Vlassenroot (eds.) *The Lord's Resistance Army: Myth and Reality*, London: Zed Books, p. 62

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Adam Branch, (2010), 'Exploring the roots of LRA violence: political crisis and ethnic politics in Acholiland', in Tim Allen and Koen Vlassenroot (eds.), *The Lord's Resistance Army: Myth and Reality*, London: Zed Books, pp. 10-11

(IDP) camps. Chris Dolan explains how the population in northern Uganda consequently live in a state of “social torture”: a low intensity, wide impact, time indifferent and geographically extensive phenomena where multiple actors are complicit in a self-perpetrating system of torture against society as a whole.⁶ Unlike individual torture, “you are not whisked away from your daily life to be tortured; daily life is your torture.”⁷ Sverker Finnström meanwhile describes the daily environment of the Acholi to be one of *piny marac* (bad surroundings) where “the whole thing is out of hand, the entire apparatus of the culture cannot cope with the menace anymore.”⁸ This is a social state where “sickness is abundant, children are malnourished, cattle are gone, crops fail, bad spirits roam the surroundings, and people are killed or die at an early age and in large numbers.”⁹

Although a cessation of hostilities, mediated by South Sudan, was signed in 2006, peace remains shaky and uncertain, partly due to the internationalisation of this war. In 2005 Kony and three other top commanders were indicted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for their crimes against civilians, but remain at large at camps in Sudan or the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Many commentators believe the ICC involvement is an impediment to peace as it undermines a 2000 government initiative that gave a blanket amnesty to LRA defectors, takes justice solutions away from the local level, internationalises an already complex and multi-actor conflict, and finally, ensures that a military solution to the conflict is given priority.¹⁰ Moreover, the LRA was included on the post-9/11

⁶ Chris Dolan, (2009), *Social Torture: The Case of Northern Uganda 1986-2006*, New York: Berghahn Books, p.12

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 14

⁸ Okot p’Bitek quoted in Sverker Finnström, (2008), *Living with Bad Surroundings: War, History and Everyday Moments in Northern Uganda*, Durham: Duke University Press, p. 14

⁹ Sverker Finnström, (2008), *Living with Bad Surroundings: War, History and Everyday Moments in Northern Uganda*, Durham: Duke University Press, p. 14

¹⁰ Adam Branch, (2007), ‘Uganda’s Civil War and the Politics of Intervention’, *Ethics and International Affairs*, Vol. 21, No. 2, p. 184

global terrorist group list and the Museveni government employs the rhetoric of terrorism to great effect in getting international support of its cause.¹¹

These political conditions create a toxic environment for returnees who, in the absence of widespread local justice programmes, face intense societal stigma and are suspected of participation in massacres. Such suspicions are fuelled by a particularly brutal LRA practice of coercing children into committing violence against families, neighbours or communities during the abduction process, communities into which they must now return.¹² Women returning with children born from forced marriages in the LRA often face particular difficulties when these children are rejected and consequently these women are barred from their former social networks and resigned to poverty.¹³

Within this space of social torture and stigma, further cosmological concerns affect the ability of returned people to reintegrate into communities devastated by violence. As Erin Baines explains, in times of moral crisis people rely on local cosmologies to interpret unfathomable events, and “understanding this helps make sense of the way ordinary Acholi seek to repair broken relationships with one another and the spirit world.”¹⁴ Spiritual manipulation of broken relations includes the prevalence of *jogi*, ancestral spirits who cause misfortunes, including madness, injury or death, should social transgressions occur.¹⁵ In the IDP camps, widespread incidents of *kiir* (curses or abominations) occur and are linked “to the pervasiveness

¹¹ Finnström, *Living with Bad Surroundings*, p. 9

¹²Such a state is reminiscent of Kimberly Theidon’s description of Peru’s ‘intimate enemies’ problem, where in the lack of formal justice mechanisms, victims and perpetrators live side-by-side in an often uneasy relationship. See: Kimberly Theidon, (2006), ‘Justice in Transition: The Micro-politics of Reconciliation in Postwar Peru’, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 50, No. 3

¹³ Erin Baines. ‘The Saved: Responsibility and Militarized Masculinity in the Lord’s Resistance Army’. *forthcoming*

¹⁴ Erin Baines, (2010), ‘Spirits and Social Reconstruction After Mass Violence: Rethinking Transitional Justice’, in *African Affairs*, Vol. 109, Iss. 436, p. 412

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 419

of war-related suffering such as massacres and illness.”¹⁶ Finally, there is a problem of *cen* contaminations, which come about when the vengeful spirit of someone killed violently returns to possess those responsible. Formerly abducted people are particularly vulnerable to *cen* with many returnees complaining that “the spirits of those they killed [...] were choking them at night, forcing them to run mad and, at times, to try and kill others or themselves.”¹⁷ Fear of *cen* contributes to the social marginalisation and stigma towards formerly abducted children, now returned as adults into devastated communities.

Sarah is victim to a multitude of overlapping and unacknowledged violences: gender-based violences, the violence of poverty, the violence of marginalisation, the violent lack of opportunities, and direct physical violence at the hands of the LRA. The violences are relational and directly linked to her marginalised position within the community and her experiences of stigma from other victims of violence. They combine to position her as a socially dead witness, a person located on the peripheries of society and unable to fulfil normal social life projects. Hendrik Vigh in his exploration of youth in war-affected Guinea-Bissau explains social death as a situation where youth “are unable to attain the momentum and progress of life that is socially and culturally desired and expected, resulting in (temporary) social death – in a social moratorium.”¹⁸ Sarah’s social death is not temporary but is rather a feature of her life from childhood until the present. The following section explores Sarah’s testimony, illustrating how her social death is made manifest, and revealing the important insights on violence and survival from someone inhabiting the margins of society.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ *ibid.* P. 422

¹⁸ Henrik E. Vigh, (2006), ‘Social Death and Violent Life Chances’, in Catrine Christiansen, Mats Utas, Henrik Vigh (eds.), *Navigating Youth, Generating Adulthood: Social Becoming in an African Context*, Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, p. 46

Sarah's Story

In 2009, Erin Baines, a Canadian based researcher, began a series of storytelling sessions with formerly abducted women who had spent a decade or more in the LRA in order to document their experiences of life in the LRA and since their return. This project was done with the assistance and input of four locally based Acholi researchers, two of whom who had themselves been abducted and forced into marriages with senior LRA commanders. These storytelling sessions spanned more than two years and involved over fifty women, although each session was limited to approximately eight women. As part of this project, Baines and her research partners also documented the individual life stories of twenty-seven women during storytelling sessions. Sarah was the final addition to this project, joining the group of storytellers after a year. The original testimonies were recorded orally in Luo, and then transcribed, translated into English, and edited. As Baines' research assistant and later her supervised Masters student, I was given access to Sarah's story and began to interpret it. I have never met Sarah, who is based in Gulu, the administrative capital of northern Uganda, but Sarah is aware that I am working with her testimony. She chose her own pseudonym for this project, picking the name of her grandmother, a woman who does not feature in Sarah's testimony, but whom is very dear to her.

Sarah's testimony is one replete with violence, ambivalence, and lost hope. A thrice-abducted woman with children born from war and living in poverty, Sarah's story reveals the ways in which multiple violences and injustices combine to affect the world's marginalised. She begins her testimony with the sobering reminder to us that the violence she suffers has been a permanent feature of her existence: "You should know that my entire life – from childhood up to this very day – has revolved around misfortunes. I have never experienced what is called 'peace' ... All I know is living in anger and sadness." Sarah's life is one where this already acute structural

violence overlaps with gender-based insecurities and political violence that combine to render her socially dead. It is an existence immersed in what Nancy Scheper-Hughes, discussing the Alto region of Brazil, calls the 'violence of everyday life' or 'terror as usual' where "mundane rituals routines of humiliation and violence [...] assault the bodies and minds of the *moradores* [residents] as they go about the complicated business of trying to survive."¹⁹

Her troubles begin with her father, "an ill-tempered, cruel and violent man" whose abrasive manner excludes him, and consequently his family, from normal social networks: "He did not have a single friend." Extremely abusive, he tortured and starved his children, placing hot pieces of iron sheeting on them, standing on the iron sheeting, and beating them with *opobo* canes. Because of his aggressive reputation, the community did not challenge him: "all they [their neighbours] could do was say 'if he wants to kill his own children, let him do it'." When Sarah is five, her father marries a woman who resents Sarah and her two brothers and stops feeding them, leaving them to scavenge for plants to sustain themselves – an insufficient diet that leaves them starved. Eventually, resigned to an otherwise long death by attrition, the children decide to expedite the process and confront their father at the next available opportunity, risking an almost certain death through their obstinacy.

Using their preference of death over a life of suffering as a platform upon which to jolt their father's attention to their pain, the children demand that their parents to kill them rather than allow them to face the continuing indignity of their lives. Leading the confrontation, Sarah says:

Today I want to speak out the truth. ... my brothers and I have agreed to let today be our last to live on earth. Kill all of us so that we can find peace but before you do that, I will tell you the truth. Everyday we keep quiet but today I will tell you about

¹⁹ Nancy Scheper-Hughes, (1993), *Death Without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil*, Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 225-226

our suffering to your face – it is up to you to kill me if you want. I am tired. I have been suffering from the time I was very young.

Her accusations shock her father into recognising his daughters suffering, and he listens carefully to her long list of grievances against him and her stepmother. Blaming the stepmother for the children's suffering, he beats her until she flees and the children are left with a temporarily chastened father, who cares for them until, upon discovering he is HIV/AIDS positive, begins to 'misbehave' again. He abandons the children who then contract guinea worms, which begins, for Sarah, "the most painful moment of my life".

The worms leave deep psychological and physical scars on her. Guinea worms are a debilitating parasitic infection that can be caught through drinking contaminated water.²⁰ The worms, once fully grown, burn and burrow their way out through the flesh, leaving the host immobile. She says she suffers the disease for three years, a presumably exaggerated length of time that nonetheless demonstrates the extremity of her pain during this period. As psychoanalyst Dori Laub has explained in his writings on the Holocaust, what is important in understanding the testimony of survivor-witnesses is not their ability to factually recount their experiences, but rather the meaning with which they inscribe their experience. He gives the example of a woman who incorrectly remembers four chimneys being destroyed in Auschwitz when in reality only one was blown up. Laub explains that "The woman was testifying [...] not to the number of chimneys blown up, but to something else, more radical, more crucial: the reality of an unimaginable occurrence. [...] The woman testified to an event that broke all the compelling frame of Auschwitz [...]".²¹ Likewise, Sarah's emphasis on the lengthiness of this period underlines the

²⁰ Guinea worms were a major health issue during Sarah's childhood, although they have now been eradicated in Uganda. See John B. Rwakimari, Donald R. Hopkins, and Ernesto Ruiz-Tiben, (2006), 'Uganda's Successful Guinea Worms Eradication Program', *The American Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene*, Vol. 75, No. 1

²¹ Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman, (1992), *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, New York: Routledge, p. 60

extraordinary physical suffering that destroyed any sense of time, and provides us with a sense of her marginalisation within a community that was, at best, ambivalent to the children's pain.

Sarah's assertion that guinea worms represents the most painful time in her life is ever the more remarkable considering her subsequent experiences of intense physical and sexual violence. She is propelled her into a sphere of liminality due to the disabilities caused by the slow and painful progression of the worms through her body, leaving her situated in a space of ambiguity and marginality. Unable to walk, and lacking any social networks to help them, the children are forced to take turns dragging themselves to the well and eating wild plants. They face the scorn of their fellow villagers who cruelly taunt them, saying "are you still alive? ... We thought you were dead by now, are you still living?"

The children are eventually taken in by an empathetic neighbour who cares for them. They recover from guinea worms and are given a limited education. When their father dies of HIV/AIDS, an Aunt, who is no longer apprehensive of Sarah's father's rages, takes in the children. However, this is only a brief reprieve in Sarah's life, as she is soon caught up in the war between Ugandan government forces and the LRA and is captured by the rebel group along with her brothers. During the forced march to southern Sudan, many of the children are killed, or die of exhaustion. Sarah almost succumbs to a similar fate, as she is unable to carry the enormous load she is given on the cruel three-day march. She stops walking, and in a moment reminiscent of her childhood confrontation with her father, she tells the commander's wife threatening to kill her that, "I am not scared of anything to do with death. To me death is better than injury or the pain I am having now." She repeats her statements when the commander arrives to see what is going on and adds to her inability to continue living a list of grievances which the commander listens to attentively: "This woman gave me so many luggages that I was unable to

walk. My arms are all numb; I can't even lift them. She is beating me ... My legs are also hurting... Let her kill me."

In her challenge to the commander and his wife, Sarah shames them into alleviating some of the load, and they continue on to the camps in Sudan. Other children, including relatives captured along with Sarah are not so lucky: "Along the way, my aunt's grandson failed to walk. The rebels killed the boy." Once they arrive at the camp, she is 'distributed out' to a commander to be his 'bush-wife', who happens to be her uncle. This gives her momentary hope of protection: "I was overwhelmed with joy", which is soon dashed when her uncle discovers this familial connection and she is sent to another commander, "an old man with spotty grey hair on his head" instead.²²

Sarah was thirteen and completely unaware about what her new status as 'bush wife' meant: "at the time I had no idea what he was doing". Within a few days, the commander rapes Sarah who resists his assaults as best she can "he started his act and I started crying out aloud. I did not make a mild cry, I cried out aloud ... I was fighting him the whole time; I was crying and struggled against the man and he slapped me, pinned me down and strangled my neck." In the life of the LRA camp, such gender-based violence was not unusual as many girls went from being *ting-ting* [young female servants] to forced wives once they came of age and such violence was unremarkable: "he didn't care that he was hurting me and I was completely helpless to stop him." Life continues on in the camp. The social processes of war mean that relationships are relearned, behaviour is carefully modified to conform to the strict rules of the LRA, and people navigate through the morally ambiguous zone

²² Commanders in the bush were provided with *ting-ting* (young prepubescent girls) as servants who would eventually become their 'wives'. As Sarah was related to this commander, she was not permitted to become part of his household. On a more strategic level, the LRA was careful to break up family networks to ensure that newly abducted people were forced to renounce their pre-bush life and quickly adapt to life in the group.

exercising limited agency when possible.²³ Unable to break out of her bush-marriage to the commander who continues to rape her, Sarah refuses to ever smile at him despite his pleas for her to do so, and uses this refusal as a form of resistance and dignity: “I will die before I let you see my teeth. ... No one else in my life has ever done to me what you did.”

Eventually, after several years, she escapes from the LRA during a raid on a village in Uganda where she is able to sneak off and hide with the villagers in the bush. After the LRA retreat, she heads into the main trading centre of the town in order to officially defect and is taken to the Government army barracks. The Ugandan People’s Defence Force (UPDF) tries to convince Sarah and other defectors that they should join the military; they refuse and are detained for a month. Finally, Sarah is taken to World Vision where she is provided with limited vocational training in Gulu. She wants to stay in Gulu, but World Vision refuses, “all they did was rehabilitate and send people to their parents if they were alive, or to another living clan mate.” She tells them she has nowhere to go and lacks living relatives, but is taken back her old village regardless: “they took me back to the IDP camp that had been set up in my home village but could find no one to leave me with. So they off-loaded my things and placed them under a mango tree by the roadside.” The involvement of World Vision in Sarah’s narrative attests to the internationalisation of conflict as well as the complex and diverse range of actors that combine to affect her life.

Lacking options and faced with pressing survival needs, Sarah decides to ‘find a man’ to support her, and seeks out a former boyfriend, now with four wives. This decision is justified by Sarah who says, “if it requires sex that ceased to be a problem long ago, in fact nothing else is a problem except food. I need to stay alive.” Such a choice is exercised under a culture embroiled in a hegemonic militarised

²³ For an excellent discussion on how people improvise new social networks during times of crisis see: Chris Coulter, (2008), ‘Female Fighters in the Sierra Leone War: Challenging the Assumptions?’, *Feminist Review*, No. 88

masculinity that creates conditions where the space for manoeuvring was tightly constrained by a structure that severely limits the options available for women.²⁴ As Chris Coulter explains in her study on Sierra Leonean female fighters “sometimes the only choice was between becoming a fighter/lover or dying, which is not really much of a choice at all.”²⁵ Similar structural constraints, compounded by her lack of social networks, circumscribe the range of possible choices available to keep Sarah alive.

Living in a state of acute instability in the IDP as the insurgency intensifies in her region, Sarah is re-captured, attacked, and raped by the LRA. She says she was “beaten until I was clueless – I still can’t remember it clearly [...] while they held me, they sexually harassed me and left me with a pregnancy.” Children born of rape in war in Northern Uganda often face societal stigma as the shame and pain of the community is placed on the child. Sarah’s baby is no exception and is rejected by her boyfriend, who claims the baby is “typical of a bush child.” Although he allows her to stay in his compound with the child, he refuses to support her, which pushes Sarah into a state of insecurity and starvation.

Within the village, Sarah faces ongoing stigma because of her time in the LRA. Returnees face suspicions that they have been tarnished with *cen*, and Sarah, easily recognisable through her physical injuries seems to embody misfortune. Communities attempt to separate themselves from those contaminated by *cen* in the belief that it is transmittable. Consequently Sarah is forced to walk ahead of the others when gathering crops outside of the protection of the IDP camps in case “something bad happened, it would begin with me.”²⁶ This treatment by the other villagers leaves her bitter and angry, “To be frank with you, I will find peace the day

²⁴ Coulter, *Female Fighters in the Sierra Leone War*, p. 67

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 68

²⁶ Erin Baines, (2010), ‘Spirits and Social Reconstruction after Mass Violence: Rethinking Transitional Justice’, *African Affairs*, Vol. 109, Iss. 436, p. 423

I die.” As she walks out ahead of the other villagers, she is captured for a third time by the LRA who surprise her in the fields. The other villagers flee to safety.

The LRA rebels take her and her baby to an abandoned homestead where she is told: “woman, I regret that you will die today.” Sarah answers in return that she accepts such a prospect; death holds no fear for those already dancing at the borders. She says, “from my perspective, death is there and it is unavoidable. I want you people to kill me [...]” They begin to torment her and beat her severely over a long, protracted period with blunt *pangas* [machetes] and canes, but Sarah does not die. She lies there calmly throughout the attack, embracing death and talking to God, saying, “I will not go anywhere else but to you, God. I did not call for this death but here I am dying. It is up to you to know this and what to do with me.” Her failure to die frightens her perpetrators who assume that she is a witch or protected by *cen*. Their efforts to kill her are renewed, as they club her, jump on her, whip her and cane her. During the attack, Sarah begins to become disassociated from her body, “everything else they did to me was more like a dream. I did not know whether or not I was dead. It was like I was narrating what was happening to me to a friend [...]”

Finally, the rebels leave her and her baby for dead. She wakes up in the hospital a week later where she learns that a hunter passing by had rescued her. She wants to interact with people as before, but her attack leaves her mentally and physically disabled. “I was not yet speaking clearly and my memory was still very poor. If someone needed to talk to me, he or she would have to whisper very quietly. If they shouted, I would collapse because it felt like the rebels were back. During that time I was more of a mad person.” Her physical wounds remain critical, “I tried lifting my arms but it was impossible. I tried lifting my entire body but still could not. I felt as though sand was packed into my head which felt like a child’s play ball with no life in it at all.” She is unable to care for her child or remember things clearly, and is completely isolated in her ‘madness’ until she begins to learn how to speak again.

The structural violence of poverty ensures that the vicious attack Sarah underwent by no means the end of her suffering. She embodies the violence that she has suffered to the point where people are uncomfortable and stare fearfully. Upon release from the hospital, still suffering from the physical and mental affects of her attack, Sarah returns to her husband who forces her to work off her apparent 'debt' to him before leaving: he tells her, "when I got you, you were healthy but now you are disabled. ... You are just useless. The very child you have, you got from the bush and it's a rebel's child. It has become impossible for you to stay here." She works for this man until he is satisfied she has 'repaid' him enough, before leaving to find her mother in Gulu. She finds it difficult to get a ride there because of her appearance. She appeals to people passing her as she waits by the roadside for a life, "I am not mad, but the problems and injuries that I have been through are what has made me look like this now."

Eventually she arrives in Gulu and settles down in a termite-ridden shack that had been abandoned. She survives by begging for leftovers from restaurants and eventually finds her mother. However, Sarah's mother's new partner refuses to allow her to stay because of her perceived *cen*, calling her "that spirit haunted daughter", and asking her mother, "do you want her to kill and finish off all our children?" She returns to her shack and soon finds herself the caregiver of her brother's two children who had escaped the LRA and found their way to her after her brother's death in the bush. Faced with the prospect of attempting to sustain herself and three children with only leftover scraps, she goes about finding a new husband to support her. She finds a man who she reveals her past difficulties to and settles down with him for three years, during which time she gives birth to a child. However, this man begins to accuse her of participation in massacres during her time in the LRA, harmful accusations that threaten Sarah's ability to live in the community. The ongoing suspicion of returnees is a violence experienced by formerly abducted youth. In the case of Sarah, she had been forced to kill in battle,

but reminds us that “outside of that, I haven’t killed anyone. In fact, I was the one whom they committed violence on.”

Sarah leaves her husband because of his accusations, unable to live with someone who views her as a murderer. Soon after she leaves their baby becomes sick and dies. Her former husband accuses her of killing the baby: “he said I was a serial killer”. After the burial of the child, she is made to return to his compound, but again must survive on leftovers as the man will not support her. The indignity of her situation compels her to return to her old termite infested shack: “You insist that I stay, but with all these hardships how am I to handle it here?” During a brief reunion with this man some time later, she becomes pregnant once more, however, “the man rejected the baby, saying it was begotten out of my prostitution along the road side.” Thus, a pregnant Sarah is left to care for three children and with little other choice, again looks to find a new husband to support her.

She finds another man eventually and again becomes pregnant. He is overjoyed at this news, but wants her to abandon her other children. She refuses, “I have worried for so many years, cried for many years and felt bitter about what has happened to me. I do not want that anymore and I will look after these children.” She recognises that her children increase her hardship, but lacks access to adequate birth control. Looking ahead she worries about how she will be able to take care of five children without male support, “I have not got any man’s money”. She also worries about finding a more permanent place to live as “with all the hatred in my village, I cannot go there” and she knows her mother cannot take her in. She is unable to afford her children’s school fees, and can only pay for them to sit their exams. Propelled into a space of social death, lacking social networks, and facing reduced opportunities to advance her life projects, Sarah testifies from a space of tremendous pain and disappointment.

Sarah's social death is partly a pre-existing condition reflecting her childhood suffering and invisibility, but is combined with the social stigma that formally abducted returnees encounter, exacerbated by fears of *cen*. The marginalisation of returnees is somewhat reminiscent of Nancy Scheper-Hughes' discussions on transitional objects – those “neither of this earth nor yet fully spirits.”²⁷ She examines the “angel-babies” of the Alto in Brazil who were slowly starved to death by their mothers and who were ghost-like in appearance, “pale, wispy haired, their arms and legs stripped of flesh, their bellies grossly extended, their eyes blank and staring”.²⁸ Like the angel-babies, Sarah occupies an ambiguous state between life and death. Suspected of participation in massacres and notably physically scarred from her wartime experiences, Sarah is set apart. Already embracing death, she accepts her position as socially dead, and seems to continue living in this state only as a difficult interlude before the rest she has desired since childhood.

She finishes her testimony with her thoughts on her life and her future prospects. Just twenty-five, she summarises her past despondently, “all in all I persevered”. The violence of poverty curtails her life projects, and those of her children. She ends her narrative with the following bleak assessment:

I am just on a time bomb; there are times when I say it is better if God takes away your life. Life on earth has become so hard. You can persevere but there comes a time when you give up. It becomes so painful and unbearable.

The Socially Dead Witness

The compulsion to bear witness by survivors of atrocity is often described as an urgent impulse or obligation, with the feeling that survivors “are speaking for the ones who did not return, and their suffering would be meaningless if this story was

²⁷ Nancy Scheper-Hughes, (2008), ‘A Talent for Life: Reflections on Human Vulnerability and Resilience’, *Ethnos*, Vol. 71, No. 1, p. 28

²⁸ *ibid.*

silenced.”²⁹ The rising use of survivor testimonies after violence gives victims a space to construct a narrative that, according to Dori Laub, gives “form, structure, and intelligibility to the *incomprehensible past that does not have an ending*” [emphasis in original].³⁰ Such accounts have moved understandings of violence beyond the traditional documentary archival tools available to researchers and have created a “new idiom” of memory that has drastically changed how the effects of violence on a person or community are understood.³¹

As a contested project, the rising use of witness testimony has been critiqued and questioned from several different angles. These include: the political ramifications of bearing witness,³² the personal or institutionally-enforced difficulties of talking about sexual violations in formal settings,³³ the goals or purposes of testimony,³⁴ and the relevance of personal experience to understanding a violent event.³⁵ Nicola Henry makes an excellent critique of the way popular understandings of trauma are co-opted in legal settings to “essentially treat all victims of traumatic history as voiceless.”³⁶ She suggests, but does not elaborate further, that narratives of pain should be allowed greater creative expression in a trial setting.³⁷

²⁹ Nora Strejilevich, (2006), ‘Testimony: Beyond the Language of Truth’, *Human Rights Quarterly*, Vol 28, No. 3, p. 702

³⁰ Dori Laub, (2005), ‘From Speechlessness to Narrative: The Cases of Holocaust Historians and of Psychiatrically Hospitalised Survivors’, *Literature and Medicine*, Vol. 24, No. 2, p. 245

³¹ Shoshana Felman, (2002), *The Juridical Unconscious: Trials and Traumas in the Twentieth Century*, Boston: Harvard University Press, p 106

³² Fiona Ross, (2003), ‘On Having a Voice and Being Heard: Some After-Effects of Testifying Before the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission’, *Anthropological Theory*, Vol. 3

³³ Nicola Henry, (2010), ‘The Impossibility of Bearing Witness: Wartime Rape and the Promise of Justice’, *Violence Against Women*, Vol. 16, No. 10, p. 1106

³⁴ Laub and Felman, (1990), *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing*, p. 60; Inger Agger and Søren Buus Jensen, ‘Testimony as Ritual and Evidence in Psychotherapy for Political Refugees’, *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, Vol. 3, No. 1

³⁵ Annette Wieviorka, (2006), *The Era of the Witness*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, p. 144

³⁶ Henry, *The Impossibility of Bearing Witness*, p. 1112

³⁷ *ibid.*, p. 1113

Like the debates on trauma, attention to the socially dead witness usually presumes a voicelessness or inability to represent suffering. I will elaborate on this in the following paragraphs to argue that such claims are refuted through the testimony of Sarah and thousands of others who readily tell their stories when given a space to do so. Pain does render communication difficult, but if a creative, empathetic and imaginative approach is undertaken when listening, we can begin to understand the suffering of Sarah and other socially dead people.

Primo Levi's account of his time in Auschwitz first raises the question of whether the socially dead can witness. He describes one of the death-camps most frightening figures: the *Muselmänner* - a person so destroyed by the camp's conditions that they have become part of an anonymous mass of non-people: "One hesitates to call them living. One hesitates to call their death death, in the face of which they have no fear, as they are too tired to understand."³⁸ The *Muselmänner* for Levi represented the 'true witness', as it is only they who "saw the Gorgon [and] have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute [...] even if they had paper and pen, the drowned would not have testified because their death had begun before that of their body".³⁹ Thus, according to Levi, although the *Muselmänner* are the true witnesses, even if they survive, they cannot bear witness - they cannot speak. It is consequently left up to people like Levi, and others, to bear witness on their behalf in proxy.

Giorgio Agamben takes up Levi's heavily contextualised claim to argue that even if survivor-witnesses speak on behalf of the drowned, "they bear witness to a missing testimony" for "the drowned have nothing to say, nor do they have instructions or memories to be transmitted. They have no 'story'."⁴⁰ For Agamben then, survivor testimony is "the disjunction between two impossibilities of bearing witness" as "language, in order to bear witness, must give way to non-language, in order to

³⁸ Primo Levi, (1961), *Survival in Auschwitz*, London: Collier Macmillan Publishers, p. 82

³⁹ Primo Levi, (1988), *The Drowned and the Saved*, New York: Vintage International, pp. 83-84

⁴⁰ Giorgio Agamben, (2002), *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, New York: Zone Books, p. 34

show the impossibility of bearing witness.”⁴¹ For Agamben it is only in non-language or silence that the true nature of suffering can be revealed, yet it is precisely this inability to communicate this suffering that renders the testimony unknowable.

Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer refute the “hyperbolic emphasis on trauma and the breakdown of speech” that Agamben and others promote, arguing that such approaches risk “occluding the wealth of knowledge and information transmitted by thousands of witnesses who have been eager to testify to the victimization and persecution they have suffered.”⁴² This is an important point, for the silencing of survivor narratives risks denigrating the transitional justice goals achievable through the evidence-based collection and documentation of testimonies from survivors.⁴³ Hirsch and Spitzer argue that the human elements of testimony: affect, silence, and embodiment, are characteristics that link together the “diverse catastrophes of our time” in a form of cosmopolitan memory that speaks against the hyperbolic emphasis on muteness following trauma and rejects exceptionalist or uniqueness discourses on Holocaust memory.⁴⁴ The testimonies of survivors from current conflicts consequently “offer a political urgency for memory and testimony that reflect back to Holocaust remembrance and inscribe it into today’s global language of human rights.”⁴⁵

Hirsch and Spitzer suggest that survivor witnesses constitute a living archive of atrocity and survival and as such call for a greater recognition of the performative components of testimony provision such as silence, emotional outbursts, pauses, affect, and embodiment. By doing this, they argue, testimonies transmit a form of truth that is neither narrative nor historical, but memory based and meaning

⁴¹ *ibid.*, p. 39

⁴² Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, (2009), ‘The Witness in the Archive: Holocaust Studies/Memory Studies’. *Memory Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 2, p. 152

⁴³ Erin Baines and Pilar Riaño Alcalá, ‘The Archive in the Witness: Documentation in Settings of Chronic Insecurity’, *forthcoming*, p. 2

⁴⁴ Hirsch and Spitzer, *The Witness in the Archive*, p. 165

⁴⁵ *ibid.*

infused that is made manifest in an “embodied form of ‘truthfulness’”.⁴⁶ Embodied forms of truthfulness are most easily recognisable in oral and video testimony where the performative nature of memory becomes apparent. As Hirsch and Spitzer explain video testimonies show “how an event lives on, how it acquires, keeps and changes its meaning and its legacy ... Listeners must hear silence, absence, hesitation and resistance. They must look and listen, comparing bodily with verbal messages.”⁴⁷ I suggest that forms of embodiment are also present in written texts through experiences described by survivors, but such experiences are harder for the reader to engage with empathically in the absence of a visible survivor and consequently require an imaginative and creative response.

I agree with Hirsch and Spitzer that survivors of atrocity are able to bear witness to their suffering despite difficulties with communicating pain. Testimony holds an important place in human rights and justice discourses but also contains insights into the meaning with which events are inscribed and reveals ongoing injustices. Silencing such testimonies due to an exaggerated emphasis on speechlessness de-politicises the value of survivor accounts of violence, conceals their knowledge and insights, and artificially reifies the role of the researcher. In the following paragraphs I outline some of the difficulties that arise when reading the testimony of the socially dead and the challenges of expressing embodied experience in a text. I then turn to a discussion on the possible ways in which Sarah’s testimony can be listened to with Hirsch and Spitzer’s insights in mind.

Embodied Witness

Anthropological approaches have allowed the study of wartime violence to move from catalogues of death and destruction to a focus on the “unique and subtle survival and resistance strategies of those who are faced with terror and serious

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 161-162

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p. 163

human rights violations in their daily lives”.⁴⁸ Similarly, socially dead witnesses attest to different forms of violations that overlap on the person in debilitating ways. As Arthur Kleinman explains, it is inaccurate to speak only of physical violence in the aftermath of atrocity when violence is manifest in a variety of insidious and structural forms like the violence of poverty and engendered violence.⁴⁹ He explains how “breaks in physical bodies and social bodies are further intensified by violence done to female survivors by their own community, by their families, by the patriarchal ideology, and not least by their own inner conflicts [...]”.⁵⁰ Attesting to diverse and ongoing violences moves testimony from an event-based project to a recognition of profound and continuing injustice.

A major difficulty concerning the ability of the socially dead to bear witness is the issue of language. Especially problematic is the inability of language to convey pain. Pain, according to Elaine Scarry, defies language and indeed actively shatters it, bringing about, as she asserts, “an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned.”⁵¹ Such sentiments are not easily translatable into testimony. A single statement from Sarah reads: “When the baby turned nine months old, it fell sick. I was also down with chest pain. There was no one to take the baby to hospital, so it died.” It would be impossible for such numbing language, dragged through a transcription and translation processes, to express the deep sense of loss, community disconnection, fear, helplessness, and pain that rests behind this sparse and straightforward statement. Thus, as Scarry writes, whatever pain achieves “it

⁴⁸ Pilar Riaño-Alcalá, ‘Emplaced Witnessing: Sites of Enquiry and Commemoration in Conflict Zones’, *Forthcoming*, p. 6

⁴⁹ Arthur Kleinman, (2000), ‘The Violences of Everyday Life: The Multiple Forms and Dynamics of Social Violence’, in Veena Das, Arthur Kleinman, Mamphela Ramphele, and Pamela Reynolds, (eds.) *Violence and Subjectivity*, Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 227

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

⁵¹ Elaine Scarry, (1985), *Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, New York: Oxford University Press, p. 4

achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language.”⁵²

Such problems can be circumvented through an understanding of Sarah’s position as an embodied witness. Sarah bears witness to the violence she has suffered through her body in a local space of relational memory and encounter. Riaño-Alcalá explains the ‘local’ as “the social tapestry of relations and identifications” and a place that “provides common referents of suffering and memory that result from the shared experiences of terror, displacement and pain.” Sarah’s daily-lived experience of violence is inscribed upon her body in a permanent reminder of her struggles, both to her, and to other members of her community: “I had some injuries and ill-treatment that I was subjected to; it made me look like what you are seeing now.” Her body betrays her past “I have talked about what happened, the things I could not hide from anyone” and is the means through which she experiences the war and bears witness to violence.

Sarah has been pushed to the brink of death during her short life so many times that she has begun to physically embody social death. She understands that she looks different as a result of the overlapping violences she encounters. She has become a hypervisible, invisible figure within the community. Inhabiting a space of liminality, she is peripheral to justice efforts, marginalised even by other survivors and rendered invisible within the fraught post-war community. At the same time, she is extraordinarily visible due to her physical appearance and embodied experiences that act as permanent visible reminders to other survivors and community members of their collective suffering.

Her location as an embodied witness is poignantly illustrated by an incident she recounts in a group discussion organised by the researchers some time after her life-story has already been recorded. This incident links the ongoing war to the local

⁵² *ibid.*

and demonstrates how Sarah witnesses from a local site that reconstructs spaces “of destruction, providing meaning and importantly, establishing connections.”⁵³ Sarah explains how during her time in the LRA she was sent to get firewood by one of her co-wives. On her way she notices some Shea nuts and stops to collect them, but in doing so accidentally steps onto a freshly dug grave and sinks down, into the earth and through the middle of the body of a decomposing corpse. For Sarah, this is an instance of re-perpetration on the corpse; an act of re-violation that she will be punished for by spiritual retribution.

She is paralysed: “I pulled out my legs but had completely nothing else to do. I stood there still. I had no clue at all on what else I could do. I was energy less. ... My entire legs were covered in pus and some other elements of decomposing body. There was no water close by.” She worries that the corpse will seek revenge on her for her transgression and begins to speak to it, becoming in this act a witness to the violence and social disrepair wrought by war:

You person, I am not the one who killed you. I was just here wandering for my own things and bumped into you. Forgive me, I am not the one who killed you. I found you buried already. I do not know what happened to you and caused your death. Forgive me, let me go back in good health. Don't kill me.

Sarah's encounter is one that collapses the boundaries between life and death. In her conversation with the corpse, Sarah, already ambiguously close to a position as a socially dead person, becomes a mediator between two worlds, and is able to communicate to the dead the pain of the living. She demonstrates through her bodily intrusion into the sanctity of death how war tears apart the social fabric of communities and how violations are ceaseless and prosaic. Furthermore, this act of accidental violation re-establishes the local as a place of suffering, meaning, and loss.

⁵³ Riaño-Alcalá, *Emplaced Witnessing*, p. 30

In an attempt to remedy her intrusion, Sarah places leaves on the grave in an effort to placate the corpse, a common practice in her culture to show respect to the dead. She consequently recognises the anonymous corpse, providing a form of remembrance and atonement, as well as an attempt to repair the damage done. This contributes to notions of the local as a “site of social repair and place of reconstruction” that connects local witnessing practices and extraordinary human actions, but also, the local as a place where destruction and social disrepair occur.⁵⁴ This incident remains part of an unending past for Sarah, who continues to bear witness to the incident through the embodiment of *cen*, “Whenever I hear people say I might have returned with *cen*, my mind quickly reflects on that incident and I am like ‘oh, they might have seen that dead body’s *cen*. Maybe they see the person’s image in me.”

Listening to Sarah

Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman, writing about Holocaust testimonies, describe how testimonies are social processes that cannot take place in solitude or exist as monologues, but rather, warn that “the absence of an empathetic listener, or more radically, the absence of an *addressable other*, an other who can hear the anguish of one’s memories and thus affirm and recognise their realness, annihilates the story.”⁵⁵ Sarah herself acknowledges this relational aspect of her testimony: “I want to tell you about my life.” She addresses the reader, the witness, and demands that we listen to the story of her life, to acknowledge her suffering and understand the violences she encounters in everyday life. How then, are we to respond, as research witnesses, to the testimony of Sarah?

Clues as to how to begin to bear witness to the testimony of Sarah come from Antjie Krog, a journalist at the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission who wrote about her experiences covering the Commission. In one part of her book,

⁵⁴ *ibid.*

⁵⁵ Laub and Felman, *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing*, p. 68

Country of My Skull, Krog prefaces a chapter with a transitional lyric in her prose, but writing from the point of view of an imagined (presumably black) victim, that allows her to move from a journalistic account into a collection of unattributed violent accounts from survivor witnesses that swirl around on the pages, jumping from one account of atrocity to the next:

Beloved do not die. Do not dare die! I, the survivor, I wrap you in words so that the future inherits you. I snatch you from the death of forgetfulness. I tell your story, complete your ending – you who once whispered beside me in the dark.⁵⁶

This raises important questions about the range of witnessing practices and the degree to which researchers and academics constitute witnesses. By assuming the voice of an invisible victim, Krog asserts her authority into the narratives that follow her plea. She prefaces the pain that follows with her own imagined pain, which demonstrates a level of empathetic engagement and an understanding of the relational structure of testimonies. However, strategies such as these can come under attack for subsuming the real pain of an anonymous victim for the imagined pain of a privileged researcher that trivialises or minimises the pain of the victim.

Others have responded to the socially dead witness by recognising and drawing attention to local practices of witnessing that defy state-centric methods of remembrance, truth telling, and acknowledgement. Riaño-Alcalá, discusses how the local is a “site which shelters knowledges of the past” and seeks to bring attention to “*practices* that mobilize alternative and plural forms of testimony through storytelling, performance, and the remaking of everyday life”.⁵⁷ Dealing with witnessing acts that are located within the daily social life of witness-survivors in Colombia like physical re-occupation of sites of violence, Riaño-Alcalá views such forms of witnessing as “embodied and emplaced practices ... not bound by the

⁵⁶ Antjie Krog, (1998), *Country of My Skull: Guilt, Sorrow and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa*, New York: Three Rivers Press, p. 38

⁵⁷ Riaño-Alcalá, *Emplaced Witnessing*, p. 3

common strategies for re-representing terror in academic disciplines and in official truth-telling regimes dominated by concerns with facts, codification and universality.”⁵⁸ Such an approach is instrumental to expanding understandings of alternative witnessing forms practiced by the socially dead.

Riaño-Alcalá writes about the Bojayá massacre in Colombia, where over seventy people were killed in an explosives attack on a church, paying special attention the witnessing strategies of one woman, Miniela, depicted as *loca de la cabeza* (crazy) by the townspeople. Miniela stayed behind in the church after the attack, spending the rest of the day and working throughout the night to bring water to injured people and piecing together the body parts of those who had been blown up. When those who had fled the church returned in the morning, Miniela testified that “This is all they have left us with”.⁵⁹ By situating herself within the space of a site of extreme violence, and by reconstructing and making whole the bodies of those torn asunder by the explosion, Miniela “provided a partial bridge for repairing the broken connections between the living and the dead.”⁶⁰

As Riaño-Alcalá explains, Miniela’s embodied actions would not be able to be used as evidence in a trial, but are forms of witnessing and acknowledgement that create meaningful ties between the community and their violent past. By reconstructing the bodies, Miniela gives the community the basis on which to remember the massacre and humanise the victims. Her identity within the community as a ‘crazy’ woman enables her to embody a space between two zones: living and death, and act as a bridge between the community and its dead. I argue that, like Miniela, Sarah’s narrative, although a written document, illustrates within the text forms of localised embodied witnessing that draw attention to the way in which multiple violences overlap to profoundly impact upon the daily lived experience of the socially dead in conflict zones.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, p. 26

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

Another means to be an attentive secondary witness, is suggested by Dominick LaCapra who implores us to exercise “empathetic unsettlement” as a complement and supplement to empirical research or analysis, which “may (I think, should) have stylistic effects in the way one discusses or addresses certain problems.”⁶¹ This approach encourages an emotional response from the testimonies that does not displace the voice of the victim, but rather listens attentively to the account of violence and seeks to respond with feeling. Such an approach does not replace the initial testimony or subsume the victim’s voice, but rather recognises that testimonies, like that of Sarah, “brings about dissociation of affect and representation: one disorientingly feels what one cannot represent; one numbingly represents what one cannot feel.”⁶²

Empathetic engagement is most necessary for the parts of Sarah’s story that defy understanding and implore the listener to seek meaning for the suffering. Sarah’s episode with guinea worms is one such incident. The violence of disease is a seemingly depoliticised violence that lacks an easily identifiable human cause. This is of course an illusion, as the structural violence that shapes Sarah’s life places Sarah in a space peripheral to global efforts to eradicate guinea worms. In order to understand her pain it is appropriate to return to the insights of Elaine Scarry. Scarry suggests that a way to express the pain that shatters language is to bestow upon it a name, “to reverse the de-objectifying work of pain by forcing *pain itself* into avenues of objectification”.⁶³ One way of depicting pain as an event that falls outside of the realm of perpetrator-led violence is through a creative representation of suffering that allows injustice to become embodied.

⁶¹Dominick, LaCapra, (2001), *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, p. 41

⁶² *ibid.*, p. 42

⁶³ Scarry, p. 6

An example of such an approach is the work of Juliane Okot Bitek, a Canada-based creative writer originally from Uganda has turned the testimony of Sarah into a number of short creative pieces. Julie's reimagining of Sarah's testimony is an act of witnessing that attempts to draw out and respond to the pain hidden amongst the stilted lines of Sarah's narrative. This is a creative act of witnessing that seeks to build a bridge between unimaginable suffering and possibilities of engagement. On Sarah's episode with guinea worms, Bitek uses the image of the guinea worm as a representation of the social violence Sarah and her brothers suffer that has been compounded by their abandonment by their parents. She also demonstrates the embodied way in which Sarah witnesses; how her testimony of suffering is written on her body:

The guinea worm drags herself over the threshold and into a dark hut where there's a broken bit of pot, an old wooden mingling stick and a single metal plate with the rooster design on it almost completely faded away. No salt. Not even *kado atwona*, the traditional salt made from the ash of pigeon peas. No cups, no pots, no saucepans, no bedding, no clothes hanging to dry outside. There's no plate-covered pot waiting for hungry children to discover after school with nibbles of roasted meat, perhaps, or roasted potato, or even remainders of last night's dinner. There's nothing there but a handful of *otigo lweka*, lady finger okra waiting for that water from the well to steam it, dark and saltless for dinner. And nothing to go with it – no rice, no *kwon*, no potatoes, no bread of any kind – just *otigo lweka* in its sliminess running through the fingers of the children when they do sit down to eat. So the guinea worm moves in with her family and make the children's bodies her home.⁶⁴

The guinea worm is only able to access the compound and violate the bodies of the children because of the absence of social networks to protect the children. At one point in the story, the guinea worm follows the children home from the river, asking them persistently why their parents abandoned them until they become unnerved: "She makes her way to their homestead, at the heels of the children. *Kwarara!*

⁶⁴ Julie Okot Bitek, 'What Jah Bless', *forthcoming*

Kwarara! Kwarara! She drags herself by the belly after the children ... The guinea worm will not turn back..."⁶⁵ In this creative piece the guinea worm is an ominous representation of the persistence of unnecessary suffering in the poor and marginalised. The story testifies to the plight of the children in a way that does justice to Sarah's narrative by objectifying pain and giving it agency in the bodily destruction of the children.

Sarah's life is one of such extreme suffering and marginalisation that it is impossible for witnesses of her testimony to attempt to situate themselves within Sarah's world. The betrayals are so multiple and fused that any attempt to single out perpetrators is a meaningless and ultimately unrewarding enterprise as the oppressors of Sarah are themselves often victim to a cruel social order. Justice for Sarah then is not about naming and persecuting those individuals responsible for her physical or psychological pain, but rather, justice begins with a primary effort to listen attentively and empathetically to the stories Sarah tells us, to recognise her voice, and then to respond.

Conclusions

This thesis had two primary goals. The first was to refute claims that survivor-witnesses are not able to speak or represent their experiences. Through an interpretation of Sarah's stories I demonstrated how Sarah's social death does not mute her, but rather explored how her embodied form of witnessing attests to the multiple and varied violences she encounters in her daily-life. Sarah's experiences - originally recorded through oral interviews and then transcribed and translated into a written document, reveal how Sarah navigates through her violent world and highlights the continuous and intimate suffering that plague the global poor in conflict zones. Her testimony is an attempt to find meaning behind the violences she encounters and is a stark story of poverty, pain, desolation and survival.

⁶⁵ *ibid.*

The second goal of this paper was to suggest ways in which to respond to a text of abjection in a way that infuses an empathetic approach with creativity and imagination. I suggested that an imaginative and creative approach was necessary in order to begin to listen attentively to the pain unfolding in a sparse textual document. LaCapra's notion of 'empathetic engagement' as an approach that blended emotional responses with creative attempts to understand Sarah's pain was discussed as a possible means through which to begin to respond to Sarah's story. I discussed existing methods that are being used to give meaning to the pain in the text, such as Juliane Okot Bitek's creative writing reinterpretations of Sarah's stories that do not misappropriate her pain, but seek to use imagination and imagery to further make sense of an 'incomprehensible past'.

My conclusions sought to address an overarching assumption of speechlessness within transitional justice discourses on the socially dead or marginalised survivor-witnesses of atrocity and war. Tackling a small subset of the debate within larger arguments on witnessing that have absorbed proponents of transitional justice, this thesis spoke against a dominant assumption that pain or trauma rendered a witness mute. By listening with compassion and empathy, and recognising alternative forms of witnessing, Sarah's suffering is rendered comprehensible and her experiences demand a meaningful response. She is not mute, but rather imparts some deeply alarming messages to transitional justice practitioners on the nature of violence affecting the socially dead. The methods suggested in this thesis – creative and empathetic listening – combined with a greater understanding of alternative forms of witnessing, like embodiment, offer a substantial contribution to the ways in which survivor-witness testimonies are collected, understood, and responded to, within the field of transitional justice.

To conclude then, I argue that the stories of socially dead survivors like Sarah deserve greater recognition in academic discourses. Assuming that experiences of

intense and overlapping violences will silence survivors is an exaggerated assumption that Sarah's testimony resoundingly disproves. It is important to listen to stories of marginalised people in conflict zones because their insights and experiences speak to a tremendous global failure to attend to the pain of society's most vulnerable. It is hoped that, despite difficulties in making sense of the suffering inscribed within testimonies, a creative and imaginative approach, like those outlined in this paper, offer an initial first step towards recognising and responding to the outrages contained within Sarah's text. To end, it is appropriate to turn to Sarah for her final reflection on her life:

"I have talked about what happened, the things I could not hide from anyone. It is like when our stay in the bush becomes known to people, it can't be erased either. [...] All in all I persevered."

Bibliography

Agamben, Giorgio, (2002), *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, New York: Zone Books

Agger, Inger, and Jensen, Søren Buus, 'Testimony as Ritual and Evidence in Psychotherapy for Political Refugees', *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, Vol. 3, No. 1

Baines, Erin, 'The Saved: Responsibility and Militarized Masculinity in the Lord's Resistance Army', *forthcoming*

Baines, Erin, (2010), 'Spirits and Social Reconstruction After Mass Violence: Rethinking Transitional Justice', in *African Affairs*, Vol. 109, Iss. 436

Baines, Erin, and Riaño Alcalá, Pilar, 'The Archive in the Witness: Documentation in Settings of Chronic Insecurity', *forthcoming*

Branch, Adam, (2007), 'Uganda's Civil War and the Politics of Intervention', *Ethics and International Affairs*, Vol. 21, No. 2

Branch, Adam, (2010), 'Exploring the roots of LRA violence: political crisis and ethnic politics in Acholiland', in Tim Allen and Koen Vlassenroot (eds.), *The Lord's Resistance Army: Myth and Reality*, London: Zed Books

Coulter, Chris, (2008), 'Female Fighters in the Sierra Leone War: Challenging the Assumptions?', *Feminist Review*, No. 88

Dolan, Chris, (2009), *Social Torture: The Case of Northern Uganda 1986-2006*, New York: Berghahn Books

Felman, Shoshana, (2002), *The Juridical Unconscious: Trials and Traumas in the Twentieth Century*, Boston: Harvard University Press

Finnström, Sverker, (2008), *Living with Bad Surroundings: War, History and Everyday Moments in Northern Uganda*, Durham: Duke University Press

Henry, Nicola, (2010), 'The Impossibility of Bearing Witness: Wartime Rape and the Promise of Justice', *Violence Against Women*, Vol. 16, No. 10

Hirsch, Marianne and Spitzer, Leo, (2009), 'The Witness in the Archive: Holocaust Studies/Memory Studies', *Memory Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 2

Kleinman, Arthur, (2000), 'The Violences of Everyday Life: The Multiple Forms and Dynamics of Social Violence', in Veena Das, Arthur Kleinman, Mamphela Ramphele, and Pamela Reynolds, (eds.) *Violence and Subjectivity*, Berkeley: University of California Press

Krog, Antjie. (1998), *Country of My Skull: Guilt, Sorrow and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa*, New York: Three Rivers Press

LaCapra, Dominick, (2001), *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press

Laub, Dori, (2005), 'From Speechlessness to Narrative: The Cases of Holocaust Historians and of Psychiatrically Hospitalised Survivors', *Literature and Medicine*, Vol. 24, No. 2

Laub, Dori, and Felman, Shoshana, (1992), *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, New York: Routledge

Levi, Primo, (1961), *Survival in Auschwitz*, London: Collier Macmillan Publishers

Levi, Primo, (1988), *The Drowned and the Saved*, New York: Vintage International

Okot Bitek, Juliane, 'What Jah Bless', *forthcoming*

Riaño-Alcalá, Pilar, 'Emplaced Witnessing: Sites of Enquiry and Commemoration in Conflict Zones', *Forthcoming*

Ross, Fiona, (2003), 'On Having a Voice and Being Heard: Some After-Effects of Testifying Before the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission', *Anthropological Theory*, Vol. 3

Rwakimari, John B.; Hopkins, Donald R.; and Ruiz-Tiben, Ernesto, (2006), 'Uganda's Successful Guinea Worms Eradication Program', *The American Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene*, Vol. 75, No. 1

Scarry, Elaine, (1985), *Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, New York: Oxford University Press

Scheper-Hughes, Nancy, (1993), *Death Without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil*, Berkeley: University of California Press

Scheper-Hughes, Nancy, (2008), 'A Talent for Life: Reflections on Human Vulnerability and Resilience', *Ethnos*, Vol. 71, No. 1

Strejilevich, Nora, (2006), 'Testimony: Beyond the Language of Truth', *Human Rights Quarterly*, Vol 28, No. 3

Theidon, Kimberly, (2006), 'Justice in Transition: The Micro-politics of Reconciliation in Postwar Peru', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 50

Titeca, Kristof, (2010), 'The Spiritual Order of the LRA' in Tim Allen and Koen Vlassenroot (eds.) *The Lord's Resistance Army: Myth and Reality*, London: Zed Books

Vigh, Henrik E., (2006), 'Social Death and Violent Life Chances', in Catrine Christiansen, Mats Utas, Henrik Vigh (eds.), *Navigating Youth, Generating Adulthood: Social Becoming in an African Context*, Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet

Wieviorka, Annette, (2006), *The Era of the Witness*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press