Textual Practice

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rtpr20

Challenging positions: agency and expectations in testimonial writing about genocide in Rwanda and war in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Anna Katila

To cite this article: Anna Katila (07 Aug 2023): Challenging positions: agency and expectations in testimonial writing about genocide in Rwanda and war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Textual Practice, DOI: 10.1080/0950236X.2023.2243896

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2023.2243896

TEXTUAL PRACTICE
https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2023.2243896

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Challenging positions: agency and expectations in testimonial writing about genocide in Rwanda and war in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Anna Katila [a,b]

[a]Comparative Literature, King's College London, London, UK; [b]Center for Conflict Studies, Philipps-Universität Marburg, Marburg, Germany

ABSTRACT

This article explores Yolande Mukagasana and Semezdin Mehmedinović's highly aestheticised testimonial writing about the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi and the Bosnian War. My analysis of Mukagasana's *Not My Time to Die* and Mehmedinović's *Sarajevo Blues* opens up a rich comparison that demonstrates the problematic nature of a social expectation and assumption that a survivor is active and strong in contrast to a passive and helpless victim. To unpack complexity of these categorisations, this article asks two questions: How do these two testimonies portray those who outlived violence and died as a result of it? What do these narratives tell us about the labels of a victim and survivor? After discussing the meaning of a victim and survivor in scholarship and local contexts, I will trace ways in which Mukagasana and Mehmedinović's writing balances expressions of agency and recognition of the uncontrollable. The discussion will also examine actions that may appear less valuable or less visible than others and the implications of depiction of victims as active agents. The comparative analysis of the two literary texts complicates the categories of a victim and survivor, challenging the distance between the reader and those who outlived genocide or war.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 1 September 2022; Accepted 30 May 2023

KEYWORDS Testimony; victim; survivor; witness; Rwanda; Bosnia and Herzegovina

When I reported my rape for the first time everybody was talking about me as a victim, and in the beginning I did not mind. When I noticed that people felt pity for me, referring to me as 'that poor woman' (*jadnica*), I could not accept it anymore, so I decided to embrace the label survivor, which was something powerful and something that tells people 'she is not some "poor woman", she is a fighter, she can handle this'. But over time I realized I could not handle

CONTACT Anna Katila anna.katila@kcl.ac.uk 22 Kingsway, London WC2B 6LE, United Kingdom

> it, I did not feel better, […] and yet everybody expects me to feel better and be courageous as a survivor. (Anonymous[1])

An anonymous participant in Zilka Spahić Šiljak's interview-based study distils the struggle of not fitting into the dominant discursive labels of a victim and survivor. The participant, who comes from Bosnia and Herzegovina and whose experience of rape took place during the Bosnian War between 1992 and 1995, proposes that she did not want to be pitied as a victim but also found the label of a survivor too restrictive due to outside expectations about recovery and strength. She feels uncomfortable with the characteristics attached to the labels of a victim and survivor, which raises questions about the meaning of these terms and ways in which lived experience differs from the two categorisations. This disjunction between vocabulary and self-identification functions as a starting point for this article that will turn to early and highly aestheticised testimonial writing about the Bosnian War and the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, analysing how Semezdin Mehmedinović and Yolande Mukagasana's narratives question and resist social expectations attached to being a victim or survivor.

Mukagasana's *Not My Time to Die* (2019 [1997]), translated by Zoe Norridge from the original French, is a memoir that recounts Mukagasana's experiences and encounters with various people from the night when the genocide started in April 1994 to the liberation of Kigali in July that same year. During these 100 days, over a million Tutsi, Twa and Hutu who opposed the genocide were killed by Hutu extremists.[2] Mukagasana, who worked as a nurse before the genocide in the Kigali suburb of Nyamirambo, lost her husband, three children and many members of her extended family. She wrote her memoir together with Patrick May, and this process has been discussed by Catherine Gilbert who identifies that May had a role of a mediator who put Mukagasana's voice in writing and offered a platform for reaching European Francophone readers.[3] However, Mukagasana states in the afterword of the English translation that she held authorial control, and I follow here Norridge's example by referring to the text as hers.[4] Rwandan Huza Press published the English translation in 2019, making the memoir available for young Rwandans educated in English alongside other Anglophone readers. The process of translation was enrooted in dialogue between the translator and author who was also involved in editorial decisions, retaining control over her testimony.[5] The narrative, which chronologically describes Mukagasana's experience of the genocide, also shares her detailed memories of everyday life and family members. The text reflects on the author's past and present emotions in a forthcoming and frank manner, which makes the narrative powerful. My analysis of this memoir benefits from insights by Norridge (2013), Gilbert (2018) and

Hitchcott (2015), who have explored pain, trauma and the author's immense will to live.[6]

Semezdin Mehmedinović's *Sarajevo Blues* (1998 [1995]), translated by Ammiel Alcalay, offers glimpses of the author's life in sieged Sarajevo and his memories of encounters in the city before and during the Bosnian War, in which approximately 100,000 died and over two million were displaced.[7] Mehmedinović's writing, originally in Bosnian and published in Croatia for the Balkan audiences, alternates between prose poetry, short story and essay, sometimes blending these narrative forms in a single chapter. His work can be approached as 'testimonial writing', which Norridge identifies as a broad category that includes different forms of life writing, testimony or interview collections, hybrid genres as well as highly aestheticised texts.[8] Mehmedinović is a writer and editor who was born in Tuzla but lived in Sarajevo with his family through the siege that began in April 1992 and lasted for almost four years. The existing scholarship by Dragana Obradović and Michael Shapiro focuses on the author's depiction of destruction of Sarajevo.[9] The collection is critical of the Western media and particularly photographers reporting from Sarajevo, as Stijn Vervaet observes.[10] Despite being politically engaged, the collection records in a diary-like manner highly personal thoughts and experiences. Obradović suggests that the text is 'at its core a work of testimony of survival', which highlights that Mehmedinović's writing bears witness to life.[11] Written during the war, *Sarajevo Blues* conveys a sense of immediacy and urgency, features of which are also present in Mukagasana's account that she decided to write whilst hiding during the early days of April 1994.[12]

Mukagasana's memoir and Mehmedinović's short story and poetry collection are highly aestheticised testimonies, in which language is not simply a necessity for communication but strong and evocative. Mukagasana writes dialogically, incorporating different voices in her narration, and uses repetition, metaphor and simile to vividly convey her experience. Mehmedinović frequently places a word or phrase, such as traffic or freedom, as a chapter title and unpacks its (changed) meaning in wartime. He also uses in his poetic prose irreal components and literary devices, such as repetition, personification, simile and metaphor. Language appears to be an integral part of the authors' way of making sense of their experiences, which invites productive close reading. The translators have a significant role in conveying the essence of these texts to Anglophone readers, and their work enables my analysis based on the English editions. The two translators, Norridge and Alcalay, explain their approach to translation in their respective translators' notes. Alcalay suggests that reading can be a political event that changes consciousness.[13] For her translation is a form of literary activism.[14] Norridge reflects on her personal relationship with Mukagasana and the process of translation as a constant dialogue.[15] She also highlights that translating

allowed her to begin to understand 'some of the enormity' of Mukagasana's loss.[16] Despite approaching their tasks differently, the two translators share self-reflection over the nature of reading as translation. This resonates with Gayatri Spivak's thinking about a translator as an 'intimate reader' who 'has earned the right' to surrender to the text.[17] These acts of intimate reading now circulate in English and share Mukagasana and Mehmedinović's experiences.

While this article brings Mukagasana and Mehmedinović's testimonial writing side by side for a comparison to unearth resonances in ways in which the authors write about actions and decisions in the context of genocide and war, these texts exist within a corpus of testimonial writing about genocide in Rwanda and war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Writing about Rwanda includes journalistic work that reports interviews and discussions, such as Philip Gourevitch's *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families* (1998) and Jean Hatzfeld's Rwanda series, originally published in French, about the genocide and its aftermath (2007 [2000], 2005 [2003], 2010 [2007], 2018 [2015]). Besides these texts with an established position in the literary circulation in the West, there are other testimony collections, such as *We Survived: Genocide in Rwanda* (2006) edited by Wendy Whitworth, *Rwanda: Death, Despair and Defiance* (1994) from African Rights, *Les Blessures du Silence* (2001) edited by Mukagasana and Alain Kazinierakis, and most recently *After the Genocide in Rwanda* edited by Hannah Grayson, Nicki Hitchcott, Laura Blackie and Stephen Joseph.

Single-author writing includes memoirs, mostly by Rwandan survivor women, some of which are a result of a collaboration between a survivor and an outside writer. Besides Mukagasana's testimony, these include Annick Kayitesi's *Nous existons encore* (2004), Esther Mujawayo's *SurVivantes. Rwanda dix ans après le génocide* (2004) and Berthe Kayitesi's *Demain ma vie. Enfants chefs de famille dans le Rwanda d'après* (2009), amongst others. There are also novels and texts of hybrid genre written by Rwandans, such as John Rusimbi (2007) and Benjamin Sehene (2005) and by outside visitors, such as those who participated in Fest'Africa literary project (Diop, 2000; Tadjo 2000). These memoirs, testimony collections and fictional or hybrid texts all depict the genocide and bear witness to different temporal and social positions of people affected by it.

The corpus of testimonial writing on the war and genocide in Bosnia and Herzegovina differs from Rwandan testimonies in that there are fewer edited collections. Only two circulate widely in English: Selma Leydesdorff's *Surviving the Bosnian Genocide: The Women of Srebrenica Speak* (2011 [2008]) and Ann Petrila and Hasan Hasanović's *Voices from Srebrenica: Survivor Narratives of the Bosnian Genocide* (2020). Testimonies and memoirs by individual Bosnian authors include Zlata Filipović's *Zlata's Diary: A Child's Life in*

Wartime Sarajevo (1995 [1993]), Kenan Trebincevic's *The Bosnia List: A Memoir of War, Exile, and Return* (2014), Hasan Nuhanović's *The Last Refuge: A True Story of War, Survival and Life Under Siege in Srebrenica* (2019), and Emir Suljagic's *Postcards from the Grave* (2005). Additionally, there is a large corpus of hybrid writing and fiction, including Faruk Šehić's autobiographically inspired short stories (2019 [2004]) and novels (2016 [2011]). Many novels and other fiction have less direct connection to the authors' experiences. Writers of such texts include, for example, Aleksandar Hemon (2000), Dragan Todorović (2009), Dubravka Ugrešić (2004) and Téa Obreht (2011) who all were born in the former Yugoslavia.

In its analysis of Mukagasana and Mehmedinović's texts, this article draws connections to other testimonies, such as those in the collections edited by Hatzfeld, and Petrila and Hasanović, locating the texts within the wider corpus. I foreground the comparison of Mehmedinović and Mukagasana's writing that took place during and immediately after the events in the 1990s because they share a strong focus on encounters and aesthetics of language. While identification of resonances across the two texts highlights that the findings of this article are not limited to a single event or cultural context, there is no claim of universal applicability or suggestion that all testimonies from these contexts approach the categories of a victim and survivor in the same manner. The comparison of the two texts from diverse cultural contexts seeks to avoid creation of hierarchies of experience by allowing the narratives to speak to the concepts of a victim and survivor, the categories of which have local meaning and relevancy as I will discuss later.

What being a survivor or victim means is often examined in literature and media in relation to guilt or the extent of responsibility through concepts such as innocence, blame, complicity and coercion. This places the positionality of a victim and survivor in comparison to the role of a perpetrator on a guilt-innocence continuum. Michael Rothberg's recent monograph *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (2019) builds on writing about different positionalities of the Holocaust and outlines a previously ill-defined positionality on this continuum: an implicated subject. This label, which Rothberg discusses in relation to various contexts and events, refers to a beneficiary who is not personally guilty of wrongdoing but a part of systemic or structural power inequalities.[18] The categorisations of a victim-survivor and perpetrator as opposite ends of a responsibility continuum are based on the moral goodness of individuals' actions, or its absence, during a war or genocide. Helen Hintjens identifies this binary of 'victims' and 'victimisers' in Rwandan political identities, and Goran Basic observes a similar separation in social discourse in and scholarship on Bosnia and Herzegovina.[19] Recognising the prominence of the dyad but wishing to foreground survivors and victims, this article shifts away from

the guilt versus innocence spectrum of discussion to unpack the labels of a victim and survivor in terms of their impact on social position and perception of a person who has outlived a violent event or died as a result. I follow here Nicki Hitchcott's observation that a survivor is a person who outlived a violent event and a victim can refer to a target of violence who is dead or alive.[20]

Mehmedinović and Mukagasana's texts open a space for critically engaging with the question that frames my analysis: What do testimonial narratives tell us about the labels of a survivor and victim? After exploring these labels, their meaning in relation to testimonial writing and the local context, I will analyse the primary texts, first with regards to the question of how testimonies balance between the agency of an individual and the uncontrollable circumstances. Then, the discussion will unpack ways in which some acts or expressions of agency are visible or appear as more valuable or acceptable than others. Finally, I will consider how victims are perceived when narratives construct them as active agents. Together these sections offer insight into how individuals' actions and expressions of agency are at the core of socially positioning a witness as a survivor or victim. By challenging expectations of being a survivor or victim, Mukagasana and Mehmedinović's writing draws attention to the complex relationship between the first-hand witness and a reader who encounters the text in the original language or English, and from a distance or as a person affected by the depicted events.

Perceiving victims and survivors

The scholarly discussion about the categories of a victim and survivor is based on the Holocaust testimony. Rothberg's work on the implicated subject builds on this writing about the victim-perpetrator dyad, different complex positionalities and trauma. While this article draws from these insights on the social component of voicing and receiving testimony, as introduced in this section, I will not discuss conceptualisations based on guilt and innocence, such as Rothberg's or those included in Christina Morina and Krijn Thijs's edited collection on bystanders and complexity of categorisation (2018).[21] This approach foregrounds victims and survivors in a manner that decentralises perpetrators and their actions. Moreover, my engagement with scholarship on trauma testimony focuses on conceptualisations of testimony, which I argue, can be applicable to contexts in which trauma is not. As Stef Craps observes, the dominant conceptualisations of trauma stem from the Western experiences and epistemology, which raises doubts over its relevancy in other, particularly postcolonial, contexts, such as Rwanda.[22] I also concur with his call not to dismiss texts that deviate from the expected modernist, non-linear

representational practice.[23] However, since Mukagasana and Mehmedinović do not convey a lacuna of trauma or centre temporal disruption in their writing, the questions about trauma and trauma aesthetic remain outside the scope of this article that explores the labels of a victim and survivor. This focus also avoids medicalisation of the authors' experiences through their texts.

Testimonial writing about and by victims and survivors exists in dialogue with an audience, which positions it not as an act of dissemination but an exchange guided by expectations. Referring to witness testimony at the Eichmann trial, Annette Wieviorka proposes that the trial 'freed victims to speak' and created 'a social demand for testimonies'.[24] She argues that due to the public nature of testimony 'the survivors acquired the social identity of survivors because society now recognized them as such' and saw them as 'the bearer[s] of history'.[25] Even though Wieviorka is criticising what she saw as the blurring of the distinction between memory and history, she identifies the crucial social relationship between the person who testifies and an audience. The audience may label a witness as a survivor – or a victim – and assume one's identification with such a label, resulting in an imposed rather than a willingly assumed position for communication. In addition to reception, the social labelling may influence the content of testimony. Building upon Henry Greenspan's work, Meg Jensen maintains that in anticipating listeners' expectations regarding testimony, a survivor may 'further edit and construct' their testimony.[26] If the labels of a victim and survivor shape the audience's expectations and these expectations are anticipated by the first-hand witness, both testimony and its reception are influenced by the social context. The social context does not only apply to oral testimony but is also part of written accounts, of which imagined readership may influence the text, and the reader later engages with the text through preconceived ideas about the author. While Mukagasana and Mehmedinović originally wrote for the European Francophone and the Balkan audiences respectively, my article explores how the texts negotiate and challenge expectations of readers of the English translations.

The labels of a victim and survivor are perceived as distinctly different. Unpacking perceptions of these labels in relation to raped women, Papendick and Bohner found that the term '"survivor" was associated in the United Kingdom and Germany with positive valence, activity, strength and optimism, whereas "victim" was associated more with negative valence, passivity, weakness and helplessness'.[27] Despite some limitations in the sample in terms of size and diversity, these findings align with results from other literature on victims and survivors. Discussing the victim/survivor dichotomy, Liz Kelly, Sheila Burton and Linda Regan outline a similar division of associated characteristics but emphasise a victim as vulnerable and powerless in contrast to a survivor as resourceful,

courageous and powerful.[28] While they observe that the labels are sometimes perceived as stages or phases with a victim transforming into a survivor, the scholars criticise this as a misrepresentation of material and emotional reality.[29]

The distinction between the labels extends beyond raped women in research on Rwanda and Bosnia and Herzegovina. For example, Olivera Simić identifies that Bosnian women are perceived 'as thoroughly victimized – passive, abject, incapable of exercising any agency or will', which leaves no space for examination of agency during the war or for recognising these women as survivors.[30] Caroline Sinalo Williamson's research on testimonies from the Genocide Archive of Rwanda identifies that Rwandans are depicted in translations as victims who are 'passive, defenceless recipients of Western goodwill' instead of survivors who as active agents seek to hold international actors accountable.[31] The French vocabulary, which is distinct from the English terms and used in Rwanda where French is one of the official languages, includes *rescapé* that implies escaping or avoiding grave harm or death and *survivant* that embeds the idea of living the past. As Catherine Gilbert argues, Esther Mujawayo's *SurVivantes* plays with this vocabulary, suggesting an initial state of reliving the past followed by an ability to live fully again.[32]

The categorisations of victim and survivor have repercussions for those living in the aftermath of atrocity. Besides the labels shaping collective memory and discourse surrounding the legacy of war and genocide, peacebuilding activities and transitional justice measures can be targeted according to such labels of positionality. For example, being recognised as a victim or survivor according to specific criteria can embed a right to access financial, medical or psychological support. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the two entities of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska manage the eligibility for compensation and welfare support of victims and veterans separately through a complex system that distinguishes civilian victims and the families of the dead and missing from war veterans and their remaining family members, asking civilian victims to prove 60% bodily damage in addition to which this support is dependent on family income.[33] This categorisation of victimhood often excludes those who survived months or even years of beatings, torture and rape at prisoner camps, as Maja Šoštarić explains.[34] In the federation, those subjected to sexual violence and rape have been categorised separately and are exempt from means-tests, providing that there is a court conviction, whereas in Republika Srpska they are viewed as civilian victims.[35] The official recognition of victimhood is tied to post-war support, which shapes the vocabularies and perceptions of different war experiences, creating hierarchies of victimhood and survivorship.

In Rwanda, the right to compensation and access to support is similarly tied to positionalities and their definitions. In 1998, the Rwandan government established an assistance fund, *Fonds d'Assistance aux Rescapés du Génocide* (FARG), that supports all *rescapés* targeted by genocide who are 'in need', but this category is different from that of a victim.[36] There are also support organisations for specific positionalities, such as widows' organisation Avega that focuses on those women whose husbands were killed during the genocide. The categorisations and definitions exclude others, such as unmarried women or those who were harmed but not persecuted as a primary target. As Heidy Rombouts observes, the status of a *rescapé* was not granted by a single national body but depended on victim organisations, local authorities or institutions, or even neighbours, which makes access to support varied across different groups of survivors and victims.[37] This can partly be explained by the absence of a comprehensive legal framework. Some drafts of legislation were never approved and (national) court damage awards were most often not paid.[38] The definitions attached to compensation and other support highlight that besides being points of reference for self-identification the labels of a victim and survivor have social and economic significance.

While my analysis does not engage with the local social, economic or political categorisations of survival and victimhood, this context illuminates the circumstances from which many testimonies, particularly in edited collections, arise. Recognising the distinct meaning of being a victim or survivor in a local and international discourses helps ground the question of what it means to be a victim or survivor and how these meanings travel, shaping the outside audiences' understanding of war and genocide.

Balancing between agency and the uncontrollable

The perception of a victim as passive and a survivor as active ties the labels to ideas about agency. In literary studies on testimony and life writing, agency emerges in relation to power and ability to construct a narrative. For example, for Holocaust scholars, such as Cathy Caruth, Dori Laub and Geoffrey Hartman, construction of a testimony constitutes a process which helps genocide survivors overcome the unknowability of trauma.[39] Working in a broader context of women's life writing, Suzette Henke highlights that life writing allows the author to 'assume an empowered position of political agency in the world', which helps to 'reassess the past' and reinterpret social and cultural discourses.[40] While these scholars discuss testimony and agency in relation to trauma, their work on writing as an expression of agency that may be of personal significance to the author remains applicable outside the conceptualisation of trauma. Complementing this focus on the act of witnessing as a form of agency, my analysis in this section explores

how the authors describe agency to make decisions and act during war and genocide. In doing so, it seeks to challenge the separation between an active survivor and a passive victim through analysis of examples that demonstrate that perceiving survivors as strong and resourceful may be problematic.

Jean Hatzfeld's Rwanda series portrays interviewees in *Life Laid Bare* through a lens of inactivity and passivity. The inaction of these survivors is constructed in the language of the narrative, which includes very few verbs in the first person singular that describe action in the present of the genocide.[41] It is impossible to know whether the tone comes from the survivors, who were interviewed only a few years after the genocide and could have been vague due to distrust or a language barrier, or whether the voice has been added during the translation process or Hatzfeld's writing process, during which he has paraphrased and narrativised his interview notes. Nevertheless, the passivity of the narrative voice influences the way in which the reader engages with the content. For example, Édith Uwanyiligira explains her struggle when fleeing: 'It was a miserable task to find any scraps to eat. We were hungry and crawling with lice'.[42] The tone of voice is passive in this general statement about the challenge of finding food. Uwanyiligira simply exists and is not positioned here as an active agent who seeks, digs, begs, or steals either successfully or unsuccessfully. In a similar manner, discussion on lice positions Uwanyiligira as a target of a lice attack without suggesting that she did anything to stop them or to get rid of them. Here Hatzfeld depicts outliving a genocide as a passive occurrence which excludes agency and action.

Testimonial narratives often explain survival as a destiny or fate that is determined and controlled by a higher power. In Hatzfeld's collection of survivor testimonies, Francine Niyitegeka explains that while she does not know why God chose her not to die, she thanks him for her life.[43] In *Voices from Srebrenica* by Petrila and Hasanović, interviewees, who recount their journey from Srebrenica that fell into the hands of the army of Republika Srpska through the woods to reach Tuzla, the area controlled by the Bosnian government army, repeatedly note that they survived the Srebrenica genocide because of fate, *sudbina*, or thanks to God or Allah.[44] These narratives emphasise shared experiences between the living and dead. In them, Ahmo Hasić, Mevludin Orić, Nedžad Avdić, Hasan Sejfo Hasanović, Haso Hasanović and Ramiz Nukić all identify shared experiences of being imprisoned, transferred by bus, beaten and shot at, and decisions of walking towards Tuzla, crossing a road, river or a meadow, running and hiding.[45] They highlight that many of their friends, neighbours and family members died even though the actions and experiences of the dead followed closely those of people who survived. In addition to the testimony collections, Mukagasana's memoir includes an early scene in which her brother Nepo suggests that it is not Yolande's time to die, in other words, dying is not

her destiny.[46] This scene is evoked again at the end of narrative when the narrator suggests that death did not want Mukagasana.[47] Here the idea of a god in other texts is replaced by death, but they both appear as abstract entities that determine fate or destiny. In these scenes, those who testify and those who readers tend to call survivors and associate with power and strength position themselves not as agents of fate but at the mercy of abstract outside forces. This is one of the ways in which testimonies portray powerlessness as integral to survival.

The inability or unwillingness of those who remain alive to detail what could have contributed to their survival is understandable, because the topic is fraught with moral conundrums. Attributing survival to actions and decisions would appear to suggest that there is a reason, a form of agency, resourcefulness or a specific skill that enabled or at least considerably aided surviving. This proposition would imply that those who died did not do something, know something, or were in some way less active as agents of their own lives. Since this thought process approaches the disturbing idea that the dead could have avoided being killed, it is uncomfortably close to the phenomenon of victim-blaming, which is morally wrong and disrespectful of those who are alive and their loved ones who died. Being aware of this complex dynamic may offer one possible response to the question of why witness testimonies, such as those in Petrila and Hasanović's collection, balance between expressions of agency and suggestions of powerlessness.

Mukagasana's *Not My Time to Die* offers nuanced insight into ways of speaking about agency within the uncontrollable circumstances of genocide. Mukagasana is helped by those who accidentally encounter her or find her hiding place, such as Emmanuelle, a religious Hutu woman, who sees her running and offers to hide her, but she also negotiates and plots to ensure her survival.[48] For example, when she is hidden in plain sight in Colonel Rucibigango's house, Mukagasana addresses the Colonel, who actively participated in the genocide, in her thoughts: 'here's the game I'm going to play with you. […] It will look like we know each other so well that your staff will think you're hiding a member of your family'.[49] It emerges in this scene that Mukagasana only relies on others for her survival to a limited extent. Whilst others have organised her stay with the Colonel, she devises a plan, implements it and amends it, staying alive until the end of the genocide. Mukagasana is simultaneously passively and helplessly waiting for the end of the genocide and an active agent working towards her survival. The scene encourages the reader to critically consider whether it is worthwhile to try to distinguish between the circumstances and Mukagasana's ability to produce a plan and action it convincingly. This example highlights the limitations of associating passivity and agency as separate in relation to the positionalities of a victim and survivor.

In a similar manner, the narrator in Mehmedinović's *Sarajevo Blues* foregrounds helplessness, chance and unpredictability in contrast to his agency. In a chapter entitled 'Traffic' that discusses the challenge of moving around the city to fetch water and food, the narrator identifies 'feeling helpless, aware of the next second in which maybe I'll be, and maybe I won't'.[50] The narrator's helplessness derives from his inability to stop snipers targeting him. The author acknowledges the role of chance in whether a sniper sees him or not, but at the same time his actions can protect him to some extent. The narrator tries to remain 'hidden from the gaze of snipers' and notes that the paths he finds 'go through a metamorphosis to the same extent that shells alter the shape of the city'.[51] In other words, the safest possible route for fetching food or collecting water changes constantly, and the narrator plans his journeys continually anew. This demonstrates that agency and chance both play a role in the survival of the narrator who is neither inactive nor heroised.

In these texts agency, chance and destiny are used to explain outliving a genocide or war. Levels of action and opportunities of decision-making are not static but fluctuate, changing according to particular circumstances and events. Depicting those who have outlived atrocity and been simultaneously active and passive, powerful and powerless, reminds the reader that people with lived experience of genocide and war are fully human, which challenges the distance between an outside reader and eyewitnesses perceived in a single-dimensional manner. Thus, Mukagasana and Mehmedinović's narratives offer a complex picture of outliving extreme violence, complicating the expectations associated with the labels of a victim and survivor.

Discerning appropriate expressions of agency

Actions described in testimonies that highlight the fluctuation between agency and the uncontrollable are not perceived as neutral but through a lens of expectations and assumptions. Discussing the concept of a 'moral witness' in relation to the Holocaust, Sara Horowitz suggests that survivors can be perceived to 'have gained wisdom and moral stature from their suffering', which 'makes their suffering worthwhile, purposeful, ennobling' in contrast to 'random, outrageous and meaningless'.[52] She suggests that this perception of ennobling wisdom and heightened moral character responds to the audience's need to be able to explain extreme dehumanisation, suffering and violence.[53] For her, the imagined purpose and wisdom also 'makes the past easier for the rest of us to bear' and 'gives us, in other words, a survivor we can live with'.[54] Thus, the social expectations of testimony stem from the audience's needs and are attached to an idealised human being. However, suffering does not only become purposeful and a source of heightened wisdom afterwards; these are also expected

characteristics of a survivor's behaviour during a genocide and war. The perception of a witness' good and wise character and actions implicitly include an expectation of rationality. This section explores how Mukagasana and Mehmedinović's writing questions these expectations regarding characteristics of acts and agency.

Mehmedinović's *Sarajevo Blues* explores what expressions of agency and decision-making are seen as appropriate. Is it acceptable to want to look good even when in danger of being killed? Mehmedinović recounts his encounter with a young woman who was 'spreading a cloud of perfume' and wore a tight skirt.[55] This woman is accompanied by 'a freshly bathed dalmatian' and together they appear as a 'fantastic spectacle – like a spread in a fashion magazine'.[56] Being struck by their cleanliness and appearance, the narrator observes that the woman and dog are 'beautiful' and wonders about the contrast between the falling shells and beauty: 'Don't they care about the war?'[57] This scene invites the reader to join the narrator's surprise, which juxtaposes the appearance of this woman and her decision to dress up with how the narrator and reader expect someone to look like during a siege in a destroyed city with limited water and electricity. The expectation of ennobling character of suffering is contrasted here with the perceived superficiality of focusing on looks. Mehmedinović plays with the idea that people under extreme conditions should always be rational and practical. Such a demand would ask people not to be fully human with their desires, mistakes, wishes and flaws. This encourages the reader to question a hierarchy of actions that positions visibly rational actions that aid survival more valuable than others. Additionally, the narrator expresses that he enjoys the beauty of the woman and dog. This reminds the reader that an experience of war may not only be limited to pain, suffering and survival. Enjoyment can be part of life during war and manifestation of humanity and normalcy.

Mukagasana's *Not My Time to Die* also questions the relationship between beauty and genocide. In a scene, in which Mukagasana plots to use the Colonel's desire for her to save her own life, she puts on makeup and comments on her choice: 'I […] enjoy getting dolled up. And no, it's not just to seduce the Colonel, it's also because I've become a woman once more, a woman who likes to seduce.'[58] Emmanuelle is stupefied by Mukagasana's actions and starts crying.[59] While Emmanuelle's reaction suggests that she perceives Mukagasana's choice to wear makeup as dangerous and irrational, Mukagasana derives enjoyment from her looks. This moment of enjoying beauty foreground a form of agency beyond actions that strive towards survival, which is why they may seem frivolous and useless. However, overlooking moments of brief enjoyment or hiding them from the audience would reinforce the limited perception of what an experience of genocide can entail. The depiction of rational actions and enjoyment in testimonial

writing challenges the idealisation of a wise survivor whose ennobled actions are determined by purposefulness and a good moral character.

While the reader can assess actions and forms of agency that are clearly visible, not all forms of agency are equally perceptible. Mukagasana's memoir *Not My Time to Die* includes a scene that begins to explore the realm of thought-actions and their role in the perception of agency. Mukagasana hides underneath a sink in a small cupboard when she hears a discussion that transpires after a boy protests against some men who want to rape Mukagasana following the radio station Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM) claims that she is General Dallaire's mistress.[60] The men scold the boy because 'any Hutu who doesn't believe what is said on RTLM is a traitor'.[61] However, they excuse him due to his young age but laugh at the absence of beard on the boy's chin, humiliating him.[62] Witnessing this exchange from her hiding place, the author states: 'Curiously, I feel I'm in a better position than this young man: at least I'm still master of my thoughts'.[63] There is a stark contrast in this scene between the armed boy who has no freedom to question the genocide and Mukagasana who hides, fearing for her life, but still feels more powerful than this boy. Even though Mukagasana cannot remove the danger of death, she appears as a figure of strength and integrity. This scene raises the question of whether expressing an opinion silently can be perceived as an act or a manifestation of agency. Since Mukagasana outlived the 1994 genocide, this depiction of her can exist, and the recording of it makes this action real and visible to the audience. Thoughts as a form of agency are often overlooked particularly in the case of those who died because their resistance remains unrecorded. The invisibility of mental and emotional actions feeds into the misconception that victims who died were not active and powerful.

The expectation of rationality and invisibility of thought-acts have impact on the perception of survivors and victims. Mukagasana and Mehmedinović's writing includes frivolity and enjoyment of beauty, which reveals a hierarchy of action and forms of agency and reminds the reader of roundedness of being a human. Thoughts are integral for actions and evaluating their rationality. However, the reader or listener always has a highly limited and selective access to thoughts, which deems some actions invisible or produces an appearance of irrationality. Prioritising not only witnessed or experienced violence but also a range of other experiences and emotions could help widen the understanding of what it means to live through a genocide or war.

Victims as active agents

While the social expectations about being a victim or survivor affect the lives of the living, they also shape how those who died are perceived. Mukagasana and Mehmedinović's testimonial writing portrays courageous and

determined victims who die. Calling the dead of war and genocide victims emphasises the violent nature of their deaths and their powerlessness to avoid being killed. The term thus overlooks the forms or dimensions of agency that can be visible in the lead up to death. Because the dead cannot claim a voice of their own in the aftermath of violence, their agency may become lost. While human remains can posthumously be examined and read in a way that tells the audience about the cause of death and other violence, these forensic insights are constrained in their temporal and spatial scope. This foregrounds perpetrators' actions and only those actions by victims that directly relate to violence, such as an attempt protect oneself. Since other actions of the dead are only reported through the living, knowledge of their experiences and positionality remains limited. Accounts of actions, decisions and the determination of those who were to die invite the reader to reconsider assumptions surrounding victimhood.

In *Not My Time to Die,* Mukagasana outlines chains of decisions by those who prepared for death, which suggests active agency within the parameters of the ongoing genocide. For example, Mukagasana recounts that a man named Télesphore tries to organise his affairs, having decided to give himself up at a roadblock to be killed.[64] Hiding inside a sink cupboard, Mukagasana hears how Télesphore asks Emmanuelle to give his money and the salary owed to him by the American Embassy to his cousins in Kibuye.[65] Even though Télesphore's mental state is not discussed, he has clearly made a decision and even provides Emmanuelle a document that authorises her to manage his affairs.[66] Since Télesphore has this paperwork prepared, his actions appear to be planned and rational. This demonstrates not Télesphore's passivity or total powerlessness but active agency within the limits of the situation.

In contrast to the planned nature of the death in Mukagasana's memoir, Mehmedinović portrays in *Sarajevo Blues* a man who acted with determination until his sudden death: 'A flustered young man begs to cut into the water line. He shows his plastic canister. The line in front of the cistern twists to make a place for him'.[67] After the man has filled his plastic canister, 'he hurries to the end of the street and gets hit by a grenade'.[68] The narrator observes that '[a]ll that's left of him is a bloody trail on the pavement that seems like sap but is easier to clean'.[69] Even though the young man is killed suddenly, unexpectedly to him and those watching, he is not helpless. He made the decision to come to collect water, seeing it as a priority, and negotiates to cut the line. He exhibits here everyday agency under the particular circumstances of wartime Sarajevo. This scene builds a contrast between the suddenness of the man's death and his determined actions. Yet, both components of the scene are portrayed as simple facts of life. Mehmedinović depicts here an event without trying to explain why it took place or guessing the man's thoughts or (mis)calculation of safety. By excluding

such details, the author foregrounds the limits of his knowledge and victims as everyday agents in their own lives in which mundane decisions are made continuously.

The discourse on victimhood in its emphasis on helplessness and powerlessness overlooks manifestations of normal life and planned human action as in Mehmedinović and Mukagasana's narratives. Although the extreme violence of war and genocide limit life, it does not automatically change people from active agents to helplessness, passivity and inaction. The assumption of passivity of dead victims is problematic since it threatens to reduce their lives to the moment of death. Even if the knowledge of the experience of the dead is limited and restricts narratives about them, these narratives also may help establish the dead as fully human. Building upon Horowitz, it could be suggested that the expectations of testimony are informed by the audience's wish to retain the testimony within the realm of bearable.[70] An active and resourceful victim who dies, as depicted by Mukagasana and Mehmedinović, may upset the audience's preference for listening to a bearable testimony by bringing them in contact with the dead who are similar to readers and behave like them. In demanding the reader not only to see and hear survivors but also fragments of actions and humanity of the dead, the authors draw attention to the emptiness and shortcomings of the binary labelling of a passive victim and active survivor.

Conclusion

I opened this article with an anonymous woman's rejection of terms victim and survivor.[71] She both refuses to be pitied and refuses to be always courageous and strong.[72] Her words encapsulate the connection between self-identification and social expectations and critique the vocabulary which builds on a binary between active and passive. Mukagasana and Mehmedinović's testimonial writing portrays individuals as simultaneously active and passive, powerful and powerless, which questions the prevailing expectations, drawing attention to the disjunction between the labels and lived experience that acknowledges a fluctuation between action and the uncontrollable. However, not all acts and manifestations of agency are perceived as equal. My analysis of Mukagasana and Mehmedinović's writing about beauty and thought-actions highlights that enjoyment can be a part of an experience of genocide or war. Overlooking these moments would threaten to reduce the understanding of the experience of outliving violence into a figure of an ennobled sufferer. Because the dead cannot narrate their own experiences, their actions and agency may remain unnoticed. Mukagasana and Mehmedinović convey in their testimonial writing the planned actions of those who will die soon, which challenges the reader to recognise the humanity of a resourceful and active victim. These insights highlight the

need to continue scholarly discussion about the terms of a victim and survivor, their use and meaning.

Depiction of people and their actions during genocide and war in a rounded manner deconstructs the distance between the reader and a survivor or victim that allows these experiences to remain bearable for the audience. The literary form of these testimonies as a memoir and short story and poetry collection and their highly conscious use of language allows the reader to listen to and hear the complexity of lived experience of genocide and war. Thus, these highly aestheticised narratives are well-placed to extend our understanding of the limits and shortcomings of the labels of a survivor and victim and how these labels shape reception of testimony. The issues in the existing terms highlight the need to re-imagine and welcome different self-identifications – be it a victim, survivor, victim-survivor, a term that establishes a type of violence, such as a raped person or a tortured human being, or something else that we are yet to encounter. These terms and their use in different discourses shape the collective memory and ways in which those who have outlived war and genocide are encountered.

Notes

1. Zilka Spahić Šiljak, 'Victim or Survivor? Choosing Identity After Wartime Sexual Violence', in Julianne Funk, Nancy Good and Marie E. Berry (eds), *Healing and Peacebuilding After War* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), ebook Chapter 8, no page numbers.
2. République du Rwanda, Ministère de l'Administration Locale, du Développement Communautaire et des Affaires Sociales, *Dénombrement des victimes du génocide: Rapport final (Version révisée),* Kigali, 2004, p. 21.
3. Catherine Gilbert, *From Surviving to Living: Voice, Trauma and Witness in Rwandan Women's Writing* (Montpellier: Presses Universitaires de la Méditerranée, 2018), pp. 152–5.
4. Yolande Mukagasana, 'Afterword', in Yolande Mukagasana with Patrick May, *Not My Time to Die*, trans. Zoe Norridge (Kigali: Huza Press, 2019), pp. 185–9, pp. 186–8. Zoe Norridge, *Perceiving Pain in African Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 137.
5. Zoe Norridge, 'Translator's Note', in Yolande Mukagasana, *Not My Time to Die* (Kigali: Huza Press, 2019), pp. 191–9, pp. 193–4.
6. Norridge, *Perceiving Pain in African Literature*; Gilbert, *From Surviving to Living*; Nicki Hitchcott, *Rwanda Genocide Stories: Fiction After 1994* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015).
7. Ewa Tabeau and Jakub Bijak, 'War-Related Deaths in the 1992–1995 Armed Conflicts in Bosnia and Herzegovina: A Critique of Previous Estimates and Recent Results', *European Journal of Population*, 21 (2005), pp. 187–215, pp. 207, 210. doi:10.1007/s10680-005-6852-5.
8. Zoe Norridge, 'Writing Against Genocide: Genres of Opposition in Narratives from and About Rwanda', in Patrick Crowley and Helen Hiddleston (eds),

Postcolonial Poetics: Genre and Form (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), pp. 240–61, pp. 242–3.

9. Michael J. Shapiro, 'Bosnian Blues', *Peace Review*, 24.4 (2012), pp. 490–7. doi:10.1080/10402659.2012.732477; Dragana Obradović, *Writing the Yugoslav Wars: Literature, Postmodernism, and the Ethics of Representation* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2016).
10. Stijn Vervaet, 'Empathic Vision? War Photography, Ekphrasis, and Memory in Bosnian War Literature', in Charles Ivan Armstrong and Unni Langas (eds), *Terrorizing Images: Trauma and Ekphrasis in Contemporary Literature* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), pp. 117–36.
11. Obradović, *Writing the Yugoslav Wars*, p. 3.
12. Yolande Mukagasana, *Not My Time to Die*, trans. Zoe Norridge (Kigali: Huza Press, 2019), p. 71.
13. Ammiel Alcalay, 'Translator's Introduction', in Semezdin Mehmedinović, *Sarajevo Blues* (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 1998), pp. ix–xvi, p. xiv.
14. Ibid., p. xv.
15. Norridge, 'Translator's Note', pp. 192–3.
16. Ibid.
17. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York: Routledge, 2008 [1993]), pp. 204–5.
18. Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), p. 1.
19. Helen Hintjens, 'Reconstructing Political Identities in Rwanda', in Phil Clark and Zachary D. Kaufman (eds), *After Genocide: Transitional Justice, Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Reconciliation in Rwanda and Beyond* (London: Hurst, 2008), pp. 77–99, p. 90. Goran Basic, 'Constructing "Ideal Victim" Stories of Bosnian War Survivors', *Social Inclusion*, 3.4 (2015), pp. 25–37, pp. 25–6.
20. Hitchcott, *Rwanda Genocide Stories*, p. 16.
21. Prominent work on voicing and receiving testimony Laub and Felman: Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992). Christina Morina and Krijn Thijs (eds), *Probing the Limits of Categorization: The Bystander in Holocaust History* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2018).
22. Stef Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of* Bounds (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 3–4.
23. Ibid., p. 43.
24. Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness*, trans. Jared Stark (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), p. 87.
25. Ibid., p. 88.
26. Meg Jensen, 'Testimony', in Colin Davis and Hanna Meretoja (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), e-book no page numbers.
27. Michael Papendick and Gerd Bohner, '"Passive Victim – Strong Survivor"? Perceived Meaning of Labels Applied to Women Who Were Raped', *PLoS ONE*, 12.5 (2017), pp. 1–21, p. 16. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0177550.
28. Liz Kelly, Sheila Burton and Linda Regan, 'Beyond Victim or Survivor: Sexual Violence, Identity and Feminist Theory and Practice', in Lisa Adkins and Vicki Merchant (eds), *Sexualizing the Social: Power and the Organization of Sexuality* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996), pp. 77–101, p. 91.

29. Ibid., pp. 90–1.
30. Olivera Simić, 'Challenging Bosnian Women's Identity as Rape Victims, as Unending Victims: The "Other" Sex in Times of War', *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 13.4 (2012), pp. 129–42, p. 137.
31. Caroline Williamson, 'Post-Traumatic Growth at the International Level: The Obstructive Role Played by Translators and Editors of Rwandan Genocide Testimonies', *Translation Studies*, 9.1 (2016), pp. 33–50, p. 45. doi:10.1080/14781700.2015.1101394.
32. Gilbert, *From Surviving to Living*, pp. 201, 204.
33. Maja Šoštarić, 'War Victims and Gender-Sensitive Truth, Justice, Reparations and Non-Recurrence in Bosnia and Herzegovina', *Impunity Watch Perspectives Series: Research Report* (2012), pp. 50–52. https://www.impunitywatch.nl/docs/ResearchReport_Gender_Bosnia_Herzegovina_2012_eng.pdf [accessed 25 January 2021].
34. Ibid., pp. 52–3.
35. Ibid., pp. 53–4.
36. Heidy Rombouts, 'Women and Reparations in Rwanda: A Long Path to Travel', in Ruth Rubio-Marin (ed.), *What Happened to the Women?: Gender and Reparations for Human Rights Violations* (New York: Social Science Research Council, 2006), pp. 194–245, pp. 200, 214.
37. Ibid., p. 215.
38. Ibid., p. 214.
39. Dori Laub, 'Truth and Testimony', in Cathy Caruth (ed.), *Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp. 61–75, pp. 62–70; Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 4; Geoffrey Hartman, 'Trauma within the Limits of Literature', *European Journal of English Studies*, 7.3 (2003), pp. 257–74, p. 259.
40. Suzette Henke, *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life-Writing* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), pp. xv–xvi.
41. The title of the English translation identifies Hatzfeld's interviewees as survivors.
42. Jean Hatzfeld, *Life Laid Bare: The Survivors in Rwanda Speak*, trans. Linda Coverdale (New York: Other Press, 2007), ebook, no page numbers.
43. Ibid.
44. God is capitalised in the text consistently, even though it is sometimes unclear who is being referred to and sometimes the term is used interchangeably by the interviewees with Allah. Ann Petrila and Hasan Hasanović, *Voices from Srebrenica: Survivor narratives of the Bosnian Genocide* (Jefferson, MO: McFarland & Company, 2020), pp. 24, 39, 41, 50, 58, 77, 85, 89, 101, 118, 122, 129, 149.
45. Ibid., pp. 37–41, 52–7, 63–7, 69–70, 72, 98, 115–17, 121.
46. Mukagasana, *Not My Time to Die*, p. 10.
47. Ibid., pp. 178, 180.
48. Ibid., p. 64.
49. Ibid., p. 122.
50. Semezdin Mehmedinović, *Sarajevo Blues*, trans. Ammiel Alcalay (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 1998), p. 56.
51. Ibid.
52. Henry Greenspan, Sara R. Horowitz, Éva Kovács, Berel Lang, Dori Laub, Kenneth Waltzer and Annette Wieviorka, 'Engaging Survivors: Assessing

"Testimony" and "Trauma" as Foundational Concepts', *Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust*, 28.3 (2014), pp. 190–226, p. 205, doi:10.1080/23256249.2014.951909.

53. Ibid., p. 205.
54. Ibid.
55. Mehmedinović, *Sarajevo Blues*, p. 44.
56. Ibid.
57. Ibid.
58. Mukagasana, *Not My Time to Die*, p. 153.
59. Ibid.
60. Ibid., pp. 70–1.
61. Ibid., p. 71.
62. Ibid.
63. Ibid.
64. Ibid., p. 66.
65. Ibid., pp. 66–7.
66. Ibid., p. 67.
67. Mehmedinović, *Sarajevo Blues*, p. 29.
68. Ibid.
69. Ibid.
70. Sara Horowitz suggests that it is the idea of a moral witness that 'eases our discomfort with Holocaust' and that seeing the survivors' suffering purposeful 'makes the past easier for the rest of us to bear'. Greenspan et al., 'Engaging Survivors', p. 205.
71. Šiljak, 'Victim or Survivor?', n.p.
72. Ibid.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD).

ORCID

Anna Katila http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1190-6161