

# Remembering the Dead: Testimonial Narratives and the Politics of Memory in the Representation of Boko Haram Terrorism

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...we cannot understand the field of representability simply by examining its explicit contents, since it is constituted fundamentally by what is left out, maintained outside the frame within which representations appear. We can think of the frame, then, as active, as jettisoning and presenting, and as doing both at once, in silence, without any visible sign of its operation.

Judith Butler, *Frames of War*, 73.

## 1. Differential memorability and its discontent

Using the 1972 massacre of unarmed civilians in Northern Ireland as a case study, Ann Rigney wonders why “some memories have a greater geopolitical reach than others, ... what gives some local events a greater transnational resonance than others?” (“Differential Memorability” 78-79). Returning to the role of the scarcity principle in the cultural production of memory—a phenomenon she theorized earlier—Rigney argues that “particular events, and particular figures, details, or moments within these events, must become the focus of disproportionate attention, and be recollected time and again, while others are sidelined” (“Plenitude” 79). Her argument is that this sidelining is inevitable, given that sharing would be impossible if all details were retained. It is, she argues, “by virtue of selection and recursivity that common points of reference can emerge” (“Plenitude” 79), a phenomenon she articulates as “differential memorability.”

Rigney’s argument captures a fundamental understanding in memory studies, as many memory scholars have consistently shown that a complete recall is simply impossible since our memory is highly selective and limited in capacity.<sup>1</sup> As Rigney puts it, the partiality of memory is not just a shortcoming but one of the very conditions that makes it meaningful to the remembering community in the present (“Plenitude” 18). Selectivity of memory, whether in collective or individual recall, is the very condition upon which any act of remembrance is articulated, circulated, and practiced.

While this argument and way of approaching practices of collective remembrance has been canonized, there is a flip side to the working of the scarcity principle as cemented within memory studies which troubles me. I am drawn to those “other” events, figures, details, or moments that are sidelined, forgotten, or to invoke Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, “disremembered” (1) in order for a singular dominant narrative to emerge. Given the far-reaching advances made within postcolonial studies and many other so-called fields of minority studies calling to re-center the historically othered, excluded, and subalternized (the real wretched of the earth in a Fanonian sense – those left out of the Hegelian scope of history)– I am troubled by the unexamined consequences of the politics of exclusion in memory studies. This paper’s investment, therefore, is in what/who is left out, sidelined, or forgotten in our cultures of remembrance.

Drawing from different testimonial texts, the article engages the kidnapping of Chibok Girls in Nigeria in April 2014 by the Boko Haram terrorist group and the testimonial narratives that emerged therefrom. As the article will show, while the emergence of the Chibok kidnapping as the central event in the configuration of the collective memory of Boko Haram terrorism underscores the workings of the phenomenon of differential memorability, the Chibok case at the same time makes evident the danger of this principle of selectivity. The paper argues that although differential memorability or the scarcity principle may be indispensable in allowing memory cultures to emerge, the Chibok Girls kidnapping as the touchstone upon which the global, transnational memory of the Boko Haram terrorism emerges shows that cultures of remembrance risk perpetuating a normalized and limiting perception and understanding of an event. Unlike the case of Bloody Sunday examined by Rigney, which, in building up “a long memory of civic massacres that is multi-sited,” preserves the singularity of “each Bloody Sunday,” the Chibok event has occluded and sidelined other memories of Boko Haram atrocities. But this is not peculiar to the Chibok case. Even when a few of the events analyzed in Rigney’s essay, which have come “structurally to be known as Bloody Sunday,” may retain their singularity (“Differential Memorability” 81-82), she also admits that many across the world who commemorate Bloody Sunday may not be aware of other associated memories that come before and after this paradigmatic Bloody Sunday. The principle of differential memorability, thus, ungirds the selectivity of our memory culture, showing that what is often remembered is a fraction of the actual event or similar recurrence over time.

There are several reasons why memory studies as a discipline needs to increasingly examine the inherent practices of exclusion or at least selectivity within memory cultures. I will advance just two that are relevant to our discussion in this paper. The first is that at a time

when different intellectual fields are confronting their own histories of exclusion, memory studies cannot ignore the histories and stories that are sidelined and excluded simply because selectivity, say exclusion, is the very foundation upon which collective memory is built. That our individual and collective memory is selective is one thing, but as history has shown and as minoritarian discourses have explicated, it also matters which/whose story is told or not told, as that choice is not always natural/neutral or uncontested/unimportant. This is even more urgent in the postcolonial world and within minority groups that are still contesting centuries of oppression and exclusion.<sup>2</sup> The fact that the field of memory studies recognizes that collective memory is a zone of contestation not devoid of power and ideological relations makes it imperative that scholars do not only examine memory cultures but also extricate the power relations imbricated within practices of collective recall. I lean on the advances made in these other fields, especially in postcolonial studies, and gender and sexuality studies, to argue for the need to explore the behind-the-scenes stories of our memory cultures; that is, the power relations involved in constructing and maintaining practices of collective memory.

The second reason why this matters equally justifies why it is urgent. We are at a historic juncture which Arjun Appadurai has characterized as a moment of “radical social uncertainty” (226) in which the new media has instituted “a new order of uncertainty in social life” (228). As Appadurai recognizes, what makes our cultural moment so distinctive is the affordances of digital media that ensure instant re-mediation, historicization, archiving, and memorialization following historic events. If some versions/aspects of these events are highlighted, vigorously circulated and sedimented as they become the focus of vicarious recollection and re-mediation, what happens to other stories and voices left on the fringes, which are made, in Robert Hayden’s provocative phrase, “unimaginable” (qtd. in Appadurai 227)? How do we arrive at a *thick description*, say a *thick memory* of these events, when only one side of the story is re-told, circulated, and canonized just as in colonial archives? What happens to events, such as 9/11, in which memorialization began almost instantly as the event unfolds, with some biased and ethically problematic readings of the event following immediately? What happens when the narrativization as well as memorialization of these events has been hijacked by those that Avishai Margalit (2002) has called “memory agents,” whether governmental or non-governmental, as was the case in the aftermath of 9/11? How can we rupture the blind spots that make such a hegemonic narrative legible and uncontested? How can memory studies respond to the editor’s call for a more nuanced and complex discourse that transcends the simple binarism that dominates the existing discourses on global conflicts? The question is, to invoke Butler’s concern already

gestured towards in the epigraph, what “forms of social and state power are ‘embedded’ in the frame?” (Butler 72), especially when we are aware that political actors and interest groups are fervently invested in regimenting our perception and understanding of historical events and how they are memorialized? Attending to the processes involved in the emergence and continuity of a particular culture of memory may help us address these questions, perhaps enabling us to resist being “led to interpret the interpretation that has been imposed upon us, developing our analysis into a social critique of regulatory and censorious power” (Butler 72).

The emergence of #BringBackOurGirls (or #BBOG) as a global activist movement that succeeded in crystallizing the Chibok Girls kidnapping into a site of remembering Boko Haram terrorism is a good case study in articulating the stakes of this paper. Although Boko Haram has been rampaging communities in Northeast Nigeria and other border communities of Niger, Chad, and Cameroon since 2009 when a once local quietist Salafi group became increasingly violent (Kassim and Nwankpa 2018), the terrorist group was largely unknown on the international stage before 2014. This changed drastically following the kidnapping of the Chibok schoolgirls in 2014 and the international outcry it elicited.<sup>3</sup> The #BringBackOurGirls movement galvanized a global community of witnesses that congealed the memory of this event into the global public consciousness, thus turning Chibok into the site of remembering Boko Haram terrorism.<sup>4</sup> What is important to note here, pace Rigney, is that this crystallization of the Chibok schoolgirls event into a site of memory speaks to the phenomenon of differential memorability and the scarcity principle, as this event became the focus of “disproportionate attention,” heavily mediated and mediatized, and being “recollected time and again” (“Differential Memorability” 79).

With postcolonial studies’ resistance to a normalized and singular(ized) account of historical events recently popularized by Chimamanda Adichie in her TED talk, *The Danger of a Single Story*, it becomes paramount that memory communities in Africa and elsewhere do not reproduce the practices that normalize certain narrations, voices and experiences while erasing, sidelining or trivializing others. As Adichie accurately noted, the danger of normalizing singular(ized) narratives is not that those narratives are untrue; it is that they are incomplete and thus offer incomplete pictures of events (Adichie 12:55-13:15). I am domesticating this danger of a single story – to borrow Adichie’s formulation – within memory studies. My aim is to show that by sidelining certain stories, voices, and experiences, we risk replicating the danger of making “one story become the only story” (Adichie 13:05-13:09).

## 2. Can the subaltern speak now?

In the final chapter of their short history of Boko Haram terrorism, Brandon Kendhammer and Carmen McCain lament that, although the BBOG movement drew attention to Boko Haram terrorism, it also “raised important points about how the Western media prioritize the victims of certain sorts of violence over others” as the picture presented to the world “imperfectly captures the diversity of responses offered by Nigerians who experience it every day” (156-157). Such a concern is not new to Africa, and scholars such as Bhakti Shringarpure have continued to scrutinize the misrepresentation of the continent that sustains digital solidarity movements such as BBOG and Kony 2012 before it (180). But their concern, which extends the implication of the single narrative problematics, touches on an important dimension of the Chibok Girls kidnapping. Let us briefly examine the implication of the media representation of the Chibok Girls kidnapping and of what Temitope Oriola (“Framing” 1) calls the *master frames* adopted by the actors in the BBOG movement for our (mis)understanding of Boko Haram terrorism.

Analysis of the events on the night the Chibok schoolgirls were kidnapped seems to suggest the possibility that Boko Haram had no prior gendered calculation when they carried out the attack. As different accounts have shown, even the kidnapping of the girls was not premeditated (see Habila, 2016, for example). But nine days after the kidnapping, Dr. Obiageli Ezekwesili, who later became the international face of the BBOG movement, spoke to a UNESCO forum in Port Harcourt, Nigeria, where she called for the government to acknowledge the kidnapping of the Chibok schoolgirls and to “bring back our daughters.” Ibrahim Abdullahi, who was watching Dr. Ezekwesili’s speech on television, thus tweeted the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls, which went on to become an international media sensation.

The critical point here is that the Western media and their penchant for a hackneyed and stereotypical portrayal of Africa hijacked the protest by resorting to the old image of the helpless African woman suffering from the violent African men, thus necessitating –to invoke Spivak– *white wo/man to save African women from African men*. Unfortunately, the BBOG activists adopted and advanced this narrative frame in a bid to rally international support (Oriola “Framing” 6). Successful as they were, that binary was enough to bifurcate the narrative into gender lines. To date, these binaries have continued to define how Boko Haram terrorism is understood globally. My position is that the significance of Chibok Girls for Boko Haram is intrinsically connected to the valorisation of the Chibok event by the global BBOG movement. Consequently, the gendered

binarism that has obfuscated its narrative is as much an invention of the movement's agents as it is the strategy of the terrorist group. The global movement inspired Boko Haram to see the girls as pawns to negotiate their interests and shore up their international profile. Not a few critics believe that the BBOG has, paradoxically, made the rescue of the Chibok Girls difficult (Oriola, "Framing" 13; "Unwilling" 110; Nwaubani "#BringBackOurGirls" para. 8). The Chibok Girls indeed became the paradigmatic victims of Boko Haram terrorism, thanks to what Naminata Diabate calls "the paradoxical dynamic of globalization" that renders African women perpetual victims (25). This is not, of course, to say that Boko Haram does not kidnap and subjugate women—Hillary Matfess offers a comprehensive and nuanced account of the complex relation between women and the group in *Women and the War on Boko Haram: Wives, Weapons, Witnesses*. It is rather to say, as a reading of Matfess makes clear, that the Chibok case is neither singular nor exemplary—and that by singularizing it, the movement missed an opportunity to articulate a more nuanced and complex response to the group's reign of terror. Reflecting on the global BBOG campaign, one of its foremost writers, Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani, claims that the excessive focus on the Chibok Girls during the campaign to the detriment of other stories from children, men, and women was "a mistake" and has inadvertently prolonged the captivity of the girls even after they have been rescued from Boko Haram ("#BringBackOurGirls" para. 2).

The point is that the narratives of Boko Haram terrorism, as consciously framed by the global BBOG activists for all its affective power that served as a global rallying point, also succeeded in grounding a "single" and narrow understanding of the event. The binary construction adopted by the agents of the campaign not only relies on but reproduces biased and stereotypical images of Africa, which are deeply rooted in colonialist and imperialist discourses (Oriola, "Framing" 3). Worse still, it ended up silencing the stories and experiences of others, including women and girls, who are not part of the hyperinflated narrative of Chibok. It equally precluded the emergence of multiple voices, narratives, and experiences of Boko Haram terrorism, thereby rendering certain stories, voices, and experiences "unimaginable," and by extension, some lives "unmournable."

When extended to the field of memory studies, the single and homogenous narrative problematic casts a dark shadow on the assumption that contemporary cultures of remembrance attend to a multiplicity of voices and narratives in the aftermath of catastrophic events. Annette Wieviorka reads Frederic Gauseen's claim that the proliferation of testimonies had led to the idea that "all lives equally deserve to be told" as a sign of the "democratization of historical

actors, an attempt to give voice to the excluded, the unimportant, the voiceless” (391). This democratization does not seem to be the case within historical remembrance. As Rigney submits, collective memory has remained “the outcome of a fundamentally non-egalitarian process” (“Differential” 79). The fact that some voices are erased undermines any claims of the democratization of memory. However, I argue that witness accounts and testimonies have the potential to offer insights into historical events beyond what the memory actors perform for us. By this, I am reclaiming Gauseen’s claim that testimonies can lead to the democratization of experiences and historical actors, not just in the sense that “all lives equally deserve to be told” but that in listening to the accounts of those who survive, we can hear the murmurs and voices of those who can no longer tell their own stories—those who have lost their voices, metaphorically and literally. As the next section of this paper will show, literary testimony as a particular mode of narrative memory is capable of staging many voices simultaneously, thus minimizing the risk that comes from basing collective recall on a singular(ized) narrative. This can allow the voice of the subaltern to emerge, even if surreptitiously.

Before turning to the testimonial texts, it is important to note one more concern that the predominance of the Chibok Girls’ narrative as “the structuring structure” of historicizing Boko Haram terrorism raises. Boko Haram terrorism, like the other events explored in this issue, is a recent and ongoing event—and its archiving, historicization and memorialization are equally evolving. It is clear, even from an Internet search, that the current mediation of this event will dominate the archive, which is being constructed already. Given that in Foucauldian terms, the archive is “the law that determines what can be said,” or in Assmann’s rephrasing, “the basis of what can be said in the future about the present when it will have become the past” (Assmann, “Canon” 102), the danger of a homogenous reading of historical events that inhibits the multiplicity of experiences from emerging becomes glaring. I am paying attention to the politics and processes involved in the meaning-making and memory-making of this event, using it as a case study to underscore the politics of memorializing and archiving historical events.

### 3. Testimonial narratives and the politics of bearing witness to Boko Haram terrorism

Following the kidnapping of the Chibok Girls, writers and journalists around the world became invested in documenting and narrativizing the accounts of survivors of the incident. Subsequently, literary reportage, testimonial narratives, poetry, films, and documentaries based on survivors’ testimonies have emerged. Wolfgang Bauer’s polyphonic testimonial text, *Stolen Girls: Survivors of Boko Haram*

*Tell Their Stories* (2017), Patience Ibrahim and Andrea Hoffmann's collaborative testimonial, *A Gift from Darkness: How I Escaped with my Daughter from Boko Haram* (2017) and Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani's young-adult literary testimonial, *Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree* (2018) are part of the emerging testimonial discourse dedicated to bearing witness to the horrors of Boko Haram terrorism. These three texts also form the core of my analysis.

A literary history of the genre of testimony within cultural memory studies traces its prominence to the second half of the twentieth century following the Jewish Holocaust (Gilbert 21; Assmann, "History" 261). This historical bias—since a different historical trajectory is possible if we follow the testimonials of the slave narrative tradition, for example, which by the way, remains marginal in the Euro-dominated field of memory studies—shows not only the centrality of the Holocaust to memory studies but also the importance of testimony as a memory text, which is to say, as “a medium of cultural memory” (Erll 144). But the conspicuousness of testimony as a medium of collective memory is even more entrenched within postcolonial societies where it quickly emerged as the preferred genre of the subaltern subjects, “the voice of the subaltern” in John Beverley's phrase (“Testimonio” 27).

But what are the affordances of the testimonial narrative form, which can disrupt the single narrative problematic in memory studies? That is, how can the genre broaden the understanding of Boko Haram terrorism beyond what the BBOG activists framed? It is germane to state outright that the testimonial tradition that this article follows belongs to what Gillian Whitlock historicizes as “a postcolonial history of life writing” which is both historically and conceptually indebted to Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* of 1789 (Whitlock 4). However, I am particularly sympathetic to its Latin American Spanish tradition, where it is popularized as *testimonio*. The narrating subject of this tradition—and of testimony as a genre—“speaks on behalf of a collective rather than the singular authoritative ‘I’” (Whitlock 4-5); an “I” that “stands for a multitude” (Beverley, “Testimonio” 27). Testimonial narrative, more than any other literary genre, represents “a collective subject” (Beverley, “Subalternity” 578), thus making the witnessing voice in a testimonial narrative what Ariel Dorfman (15) calls “the voice of the community” (qtd. in Pinet 96). The form is in its very nature metonymic and polyvocal, meaning that it is capable of narrativizing multiple stories and experiences. Because the genre “does not require or establish a hierarchy of narrative authority, testimonio is a fundamentally democratic and egalitarian narrative form” (Beverley, “Subalternity” 573).



As the next section will show, it is these specific features of the genre that enabled other stories, experiences, and voices to emerge in Boko Haram testimonial narratives that supplant the unilinear binarism inaugurated by the global BBOG activism. The remainder of this article will stage the other voices that are occluded in the master narratives normalized in the extant literature on Boko Haram, not to supplant but to supplement the other narratives dominant in the texts. As cultural memory scholars, confined as it were to what Jakob Burckhardt characterizes as the “tendentious messages” staged by the carriers of power, the task is to attend to the “unintentional traces” (see Assmann, “Canon” 98-99) in the Boko Haram testimonial narrative texts by reading with and across the grain—that is, reading not just the dominant narratives, but also the *sub-versions* in the texts.

#### 4. Remembering the dead: Reading memory-texts with and across the grain

Despite its being one of the earliest published testimonials on Boko Haram, Wolfgang Bauer’s *Stolen Girls: Survivors of Boko Haram Tell Their Stories*, like most others, was written in the aftermath of the Chibok event and in the midst of the global BBOG campaign. Located within this history, it is easy to see how these texts not only participate in this global activist campaign but are also influenced by it. A case in point is in the hyperinflation of the Chibok case across global media and the blind spots that it introduced to the discourse of Boko Haram terrorism. I consider this central to the hierarchization of victimhood and the bifurcation of victim-perpetrator subject-positions along gender lines that appears in popular narratives of the group. Bauer’s *Stolen Girls* explicitly participates in this blind spot as a reading of this text will foreground.

Early in the text, he stages this binary when he invites his readers to “listen” to the actual victims of Boko Haram terrorists: “the women” (17). When we follow him on this journey, the narratives we encounter offer a more complicated picture. While the survivors in Bauer’s text are obviously traumatized by their witnessing of Boko Haram terrorism, they seem hesitant to claim the position of the prime victim accorded to them. The accounts of many of the narrators, even when focusing on their own experiences, tend to challenge the idea of victimhood that pervades the extant literature. How do the witness accounts nuance the claims and narratives canonized by the writers and activists involved in globalizing the Chibok Girls kidnapping via the BBOG campaign? What new insights on the politics and history of the Chibok Girls kidnapping and Boko Haram terrorism in general do these accounts offer us? If these survivors are skeptical of claiming the role of the prime victims of Boko Haram terrorism despite the intent of

the interviewers and writers, who, then, are they reserving these positions for?

Addressing a similar dilemma in the Holocaust context, Primo Levi argues: “We, the survivors are not the true witnesses –we are those who did not touch the bottom. Those who did so ... have not returned to tell about it” (qtd. in Sandomirskaja 248). As Levi pursues further, “the only and true witnesses” are “those who have died, and who by definition can no longer bear witness” (249). The survivors are not witnesses to themselves; they bear witness to the complete witness –the dead. Lanzmann shares a similar understanding with Levi by referring to survivors as *porte-parole des morts*– the vicarious voices, the stand-ins and deputies for the dead (qtd. in Assmann, “History” 267). A similar claim can be seen in the postcolonial context where Beverley argues that “the testimonial narrator is not the subaltern as such either, rather, she or he functions as an organic intellectual (in Antonio Gramsci’s sense of this term) of the subaltern, who speaks to the hegemony by means of a metonymy of the self in the name and in the place of the subaltern” (“Subalternity” 573). *Stolen Girls, Gift from Darkness*, and *Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree*, although burdened with the responsibility of bringing us to the knowledge of the survivors as the paradigmatic victims of Boko Haram, seem to paradoxically present these survivors as “stand-ins and deputies” for the silenced voices in the text.

Very early in Bauer’s text, one of the survivors, Sadiya, prepares us for this journey. She, like most of the female survivor-narrators in the texts, is haunted by the ghostly presence of the men massacred by Boko Haram. Describing the terrorists’ invasion of the community, she says: “At this point, most of the men had already fled into the bush. They left without the women, who might have slowed them down. Everybody knew that Boko Haram kills men without mercy” (30). A few lines later, her fourteen-year-old daughter, Talatu, begins to recount her experiences in the Boko Haram camp, noting how “they cut off the heads of two men in front of our eyes” on the second day of her abduction (30). Although Bauer explains the wanton massacre of men by noting that the insurgents “kill those who might pose a danger to them –young men who worked for security forces or refused to join Boko Haram” as well as “clerics who contradict their interpretation of Islam” (33), he seems caught up in the single narrative trope prevailing in both public and scholarly understandings of Boko Haram terrorism hitherto. But implicit in his statement as well is a quest for a more nuanced and thorough analysis of the crisis that includes the spectral presence of the dead in its explication of Boko Haram’s reign of terror. I follow Bauer’s narrators to reclaim these “other” lives and stories as grievable and memorable in historicizing and narrativizing Boko Haram terrorism. It seems important to say, in the light of Bauer’s

comment, that the male victims of the terrorists are not just security officers or clerics. As the narratives will show, most are ordinary unarmed civilians. Sakinah, a survivor, justifies her husband's act of running away without trying to protect his family thus: "I was not angry at them. We all knew what Boko Haram does to the men it [sic] captures. They shoot them dead. They *just* kidnap us women" (Bauer 88; emphasis mine). While Sakinah is definitely not trivializing her horrendous experience as a victim of Boko Haram, she seems to count herself lucky to have survived at all. These observations suggest that Bauer's commentary fails to account for the complexity of Boko Haram's reign of terror. As Batula's testimony confirms, you do not need to pose a threat to Boko Haram before they chop you down: "They shot at all the men, even if they were unarmed. I saw that. I saw how they shot at men who tried to flee on mopeds. The mopeds tipped over, and the men were dead. ... With my own eyes I saw forty-three corpses" (56-57). Batula's abduction would come from her crime of attempting to bury these bodies—trying to mourn and grieve their lives—when she could no longer bear to "let the dogs devour them." But Boko Haram soon captures her and the other women involved in this ritual, asking, "who told you that you are allowed to dig graves?" (59).

The seventeen-year-old Lydia narrates one of the most harrowing accounts in *Stolen Girl*:

So many Boko Haram stood in front of our house. [...] 'Are there any men in the house?' the one with the soft voice asked. He was still very young. Handsome. Another one searched the house, and then we had to follow them out into the street. [...] We went to the main road, where we saw corpses. They had simply tossed the bodies one on top of the other. They were a heap. [...] Days later one of the militants told me that they had taken all the men they could catch to the same spot. This was the place in the street that we'd seen, the one with the corpses. That's where they shot them (131-132).

Recounting how Boko Haram invaded Sukur, Batula again tells how they "shot at the men who tried to break through the circle of the siege." The remaining men, including her husband, "were tied up" and "loaded onto pickup trucks" (61). These men were never seen again. Rabi, who is the thirteen-year-old daughter of Batula, and also a survivor, pleaded with her father while he was bundled into the truck to "please come back to me," but "so much fear in his eyes"—a sight which haunts Batula such that she can "never forget this sight"—confirms to Batula that her husband might never return. The man is himself aware of this, for just before he is taken away, he confirms the precariousness of his fate by pleading with his wife to "take care of the children" because "I cannot promise you I will survive this" (Bauer 61). Batula's husband perhaps did not survive because, later in the narrative, we become aware that those who are loaded into the truck might be heading towards their death camp. Batula's account of her

experiences of how men were massacred in the camp supports this speculation:

They decapitated the men with long swords. They pushed a man down. One held the body firmly and another cut. It took a long time. I do not know how long. They then held the head high so that we could all see and threw it into the street. Then they dragged the next man out. [...] Blood sprayed from the necks. The bodies quivered. Once the blood drains out, the body stops shaking. Before they had their heads cut off, their eyes were blindfolded. I knew all of the men. My oldest daughter's husband was among them. His name was Musa. Also kneeling in front of us were Haruna, Abdullah, Baba, Mai, Goro. I can also tell you the other names (62).

The offense of these men is their attempt to escape Boko Haram's invasion. But their punishment is a gruesome death. Batula's naming of the dead is particularly significant in *Stolen Girls*—a text deeply invested in naming the victims of Boko Haram. Like Bauer who insists on naming the victims as a testimonial strategy, Batula rescues the dead from oblivion by naming them properly. Bauer's text becomes a monument not only to the sufferings of the women subjugated by Boko Haram as he intended, but also of the many others who do not survive. Interestingly, Batula completes within the space of the text the mourning and burying of the dead that was forbidden of her by the group. By calling them by their proper names, her narrative serves to counter the hegemonic narrative that seems to perfect the complete disappearance of these victims of Boko Haram terrorism.

Batula's investment in the dead is astonishing even in a narrative decidedly invested in her "survival." She would recount of the hole they came across while sourcing for water in the forest during their escape: "It was actually not a hole at all but a broad hollow. It was full of dead bodies. Most of them were men. Not only a few or a dozen. There must have been about a hundred" (75). Batula is, thus, haunted by the absences in her life, so much so that her narrative of survival is interspersed with the uncanny presence of the dead. She displaces the author's centralization of her as the paradigmatic victim by taking the witness stand, like Ka-Tzetnik in the Eichmann trial, to testify in place of the dead who cannot bear witness (Jarvis 56). Batula, thus, more than any survivor in Bauer's text comes closest to affirming her position as the vicarious voice of the dead. Her narrative affirms Beverley's claim that testimonial narration "evokes an absent polyphony of other voices, other possible lives and experiences ("Subalternity" 573). The task, therefore, is for memory scholars and political actors to listen to these testimonies and recognize these other lives.

Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani's *Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree* is structurally different from Bauer's text. Hers is a young-adult literary testimonial narrated through the perspective of an unnamed teenage

girl survivor, affectionately called Yaa Taa by her parents. Thus, while *The Stolen Girls* is polyphonic and dialogic, *Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree* is monologic and adopts the omnipresent first-person narrative style to centralize the protagonist's experiences of Boko Haram terrorism. Nwaubani, however, affirms and at the same time circumvents the singularity of the Chibok girls' case by making unnamed Yaa Taa representative of all the women and girls kidnapped by Boko Haram. Even at that, Yaa Taa shares Batula's preoccupation with the dead as her narrative foregrounds a nuanced account of the event that moves beyond the singularized narrative of the BBOG campaign that the text actively participates in.

Despite her family's awareness of the violence of Boko Haram transmitted via Papa's radio, the first to hit them personally is the Izghe massacre –because the community is a neighboring village. The radio announced that “the gunmen reportedly rounded up a group of men in Izghe village and shot them” (Nwaubani 72). Rosemary, the ice-block seller's daughter, would corroborate the story the next day: “They slay all the men and boys while they make the women and girls disappear” (73). These distant stories foreshadow the family's fate as Yaa Taa soon realizes when the “man on the motorbike fires his gun” at her father when Boko Haram invades her village (103). Witnessing the near annihilation of the men and boys of the village soon forces Yaa Taa to “thank God” that she is a girl:

I thank God that I am a girl. [...] it was the boys and men that got called to one side of the building when the Boko Haram men gathered all the villagers they could capture and led us to the mosque, those who were not fast enough to run towards the hills and hide.

It was the boys and men who were instructed to step outside.

It was the boys and men who glanced backward and told their mothers, sisters, and wives not to be afraid.

It was the boys who were lying in shallow puddles of red, while the girls and women and toddlers were marched into trucks” (108).

Mazza's afterword in Nwaubani's text supports these examples because they mirror what she heard from other witnesses she interviewed. When she visited a refugee camp in Yola in 2015, where she met several women rescued from Boko Haram captivity, she shuddered at how “everybody had a story about how the jihadists massacred the men ...” (Nwaubani 320). She gives one example from the ten-year-old Semo, who is also a survivor. According to Semo, “I saw them enter the houses and kill the men, cutting their throats, shooting or burning them alive” (321).

One comes away from reading these testimonies with the awareness that the killing of men in the communities haunts the

women and evolves as an integral part of their experiences. The trauma of witnessing such gruesome murders and the challenge of survival in the absence of their fathers, husbands, brothers, teachers, and community leaders in the patriarchal society of the Northeast of Nigeria have been scarcely acknowledged. But even more central to this article is that these accounts bring to the fore the lives of these silenced victims who cannot tell their own stories. Their accounts also complexify the straightforward binary constructions that draw a neat line between the male perpetrators and the female victims even when the authors/activists are fixated on such binaries. It is shocking that all the men in the lives of the major characters in all three texts we are dealing with do not survive. The second part of Nwaubani's story begins with Yaa Taa paying tribute to the men in her life who are in the community when Boko Haram invades them. In the chapter ominously captioned "Gone," she mourns:

Papa and his repertoire of tales [...]

Abraham and his plans to find a good girl to marry by next year, if the harvest was good, and Elijah and Caleb and Isaac.

Principal and all the knowledge from his dozens of books, his fluid English and his white-man ways.

Malam Zwindila and his intolerance of anything but the correct answer, his joy at being a groom and a new father.

Malam Isa and his love for Aisha [...]

All dead, slaughtered, gone forever, never to materialize again (Nwaubani 107).

In a text more interested in a broad representation than specific individuals, the naming of the dead by Yaa Taa is instructive. Like Batula, she seizes the space of the text to discursively tend to the dead (Sharpe 10) in the wake of Boko Haram terror.

I must admit that Nwaubani has always been involved in advocating for a more complex understanding of Boko Haram terrorism. In documenting the perplexing case of survivors who, to the chagrin of the BBOG activists, return to their captors in the forest; she insists on a robust engagement with the tragedy of terrorism in Northern Nigeria in a bid to learn how best to confront it. It is therefore not surprising that she strives to achieve that complexity in her text while remaining faithful to the quest to #BringBackOurGirls.

Patience's experience in *A Gift from Darkness* is similar to the examples already discussed. Published in 2017, the memoir documents the experiences of Patience Ibrahim as a survivor of Boko Haram terrorism. Twice she would get married, twice Boko Haram would murder her husband. While the narrative underscores her

sufferings in this insurgency, we cannot help but see how the suffering is exacerbated, if not caused, by Boko Haram's acts of terror that wiped away all the men in her life. Like Yaa Taa, her father, uncle and two brothers would fall to Boko Haram's gun or machete, as we will learn towards the end of her account (Ibrahim and Hoffmann 262). The memoir opens with the murder of her first husband:

My husband's corpse lies on the beaten-earth floor of our shop. [...] They came on motorbikes, killed him and disappeared as quickly as they came. I watch the last of the blood seeping into the dirt; but I can hardly understand what's just happened: Islamist Boko Haram fighters have murdered my husband, just like that (Ibrahim and Hoffmann, 1).

Although she begins her narrative by gesturing towards the complexity of Boko Haram's reign of terror, her Germany-based writer/interlocutor, Andrea Hoffmann, like Bauer before her, fails to pay attention. Despite Patience's own testimony and experiences, Hoffmann persists in advancing a stereotypical bias that endorses the male-perpetrators–female-victims binary. However, the fact that other experiences and voices emerge despite her underscores my argument so far. I recenter testimonial narratives as capable of subverting such binaries while engaging in a more egalitarian practice of remembrance that does not necessarily hierarchize suffering.

When Boko Haram invaded Patience's second husband's house in Gwoza and demanded the whereabouts of her husband, she lied that she had no husband, "because I knew that they always killed the men first" (95). Of course, she knew from her experience a few days earlier when Boko Haram invaded Ngoshe, her father's village. She had gone to search for her family; she had "seen the dead in Ngoshe with my own eyes," making her believe what she had earlier heard about the tragedy of June 2, 2014, when Boko Haram invaded the villages of Ngoshe, Attagara, Agapalwa and Aganjara: "We learned that on that day several hundred people had been killed. The male inhabitants in particular had been systematically slaughtered. The ones who had tried to escape by the main road had been intercepted by motorcyclists" (93). When she was abducted by Boko Haram and taken to a camp in the forest, she met Hannah, who came from Ngoshe. She demanded from Hannah to know about the raid in Ngoshe, if only to hear more about her own family. Hannah's narrative was short: "'I wanted to escape. I ran from the house with my brothers. But they caught us.' Her eyes glazed over. 'They shot my brothers straight away'" (128). Hoffmann's companion to the Northeast named Renate would find the same trend in the village of Sukur where Boko Haram killed "hundreds of men" "just as they did in Gavva, Ngoshe and Gwoza" (189) –an account Patience corroborates on the next page.

One of the most harrowing scenes in Patience's narrative appears in the chapter titled "Among the Butchers." Here, Patience gives a unique testimony found only in her account—that Boko Haram serves them human flesh as dinner. Here we would meet the vicar's wife, who was disappointed at the women who had agreed to marry the insurgents. Her laments are instructive:

'In Kauri,' she said. 'My husband was the vicar there.' [...] 'They killed him in front of my eyes [...] They murdered all our men. And these women here,' she looked at the fighters' wives with disgust, 'want to forget that. They have become accomplices of the people who murdered our husbands, brothers, fathers and sons. They have become involved with the butchers' (132).

When Patience first escaped from the camp at Kauri, where the above examples come from, she thought she had seen it all, but her experiences would prove her wrong. There is a very graphic scene where she narrates how she and many others are captured by Boko Haram, this time, as Boko Haram lay siege on their escape route:

I was seized with horror once more as I watched them behead their prisoners on the spot with their machetes. They did it in exactly the same way as the men in Kauri, by making their victims kneel on the floor and then slicing through their necks from behind. After a while several male bodies lay on the ground with heads beside them. But the fighters were seized with a genuine frenzy of violence. They were even licking the blood off their machetes. And some of them tried to catch it and drink it from the bleeding bodies. (178-179)

Patience's account is filled with several such extremely graphic scenes, and many of them are about how men are slaughtered like cows before their own wives (194), how men are made to dig their own graves and made to stand beside them as Boko Haram members behead them one by one (245), or scenes where several male bodies are dumped behind a tree, including Patience's second husband, Ishaku (249-250). These encounters haunt her and make survival nearly impossible for her even out of Boko Haram's physical captivity. Through her testimony, like that of Yaa Taa and Batula earlier discussed, she bears witness to these lives. Her experiences of terror are not in contradistinction with that of the male victims but appears simultaneously, thus allowing multiple voices and stories to emerge in a testimonial text.

## Conclusion

So far, I have intentionally foregrounded the voices of the dead, reading their stories alongside those of the survivors –not necessarily to counter but to supplement the existing knowledge of Boko Haram terrorism. The narratives grounded above are not the dominant stories in any of these texts, nor in the extant literature on Boko Haram; nor were they the intended stories of the interlocutors/writers whose own intentions and ideologies have enormous control over the texts. But my



readings contextualized the texts within the #BringBackOurGirls movement that birthed them while also paying attention to how they subvert or at least supplement the narrative frames adopted by the activists. The texts serve as testaments to the affordances of testimonial texts in narrativizing multiple experiences of a historical event, what Dorfman captures as *sub-versions* –that is, multiple versions of the narrative rather than a singular homogenized story. By reading with and across the grain, memory scholars can allow a multiplicity of voices and experiences to emerge. The accounts we have encountered here seem to accentuate the view that witnessing can be a commemorative act in honor of the lives of those who died and those who cannot tell their own stories (Rentschler 298). But they also reaffirm the point I made elsewhere that the challenge within postcolonial contexts might not be that victims are unable to narrativize their experiences, but that their narratives might be in search of listeners willing to empathically bear witness to their stories (Onah 145). The question is, to recenter Jill Jarvis’s concern in a postcolonial Algerian context, “is anyone actually listening?” (47).

That the women’s testimonial narratives ground our understanding of Boko Haram terrorism is important; it is even more important that the metonymic and polyvocal features of testimonial text permit it to embody different voices and experiences without hierarchizing the victims of violence. In this way, it can serve as an antidote to the selectivity of our memory culture and the exclusion/silences that memory scholars risk perpetuating. It is only by actually listening to the testimonies of survivors, such as those we have encountered in these texts, or even attending to “traces” rather than just the “messages” in our cultures of remembrance, that we can get a better, more nuanced, and perhaps more complete knowledge of events in order to challenge the (dangers of the) single stories of our memory culture.

## Notes

1. See Assmann (2008), Rigney (2016), Rigney (2005), Grabes (2008).

2. The latest example of this contestation of selectivity within memory studies can be seen in Jill Jarvis’s scathing critique of Agamben’s imperialist blind spot and “consequential silencing” (29) that renders Algiers absent in his theoretical appropriation of the figure of the *musulman* as the paradigmatic witness of twentieth-century violence while ignoring its colonial context. For France’s own politics

of postcolonial amnesia in Algeria, see Karima Lazali's newly translated book, *Colonial Trauma* (2021).

3. See Brandon Kendhammer and Carmen McCain's concise book *Boko Haram* for the history of the group. See also Hillary Matfess' book for a comprehensive picture of the group, particularly on the various roles women have played in the insurgency. Abdulbasit Kassim and Michael Nwankpa's *The Boko Haram Reader* offers a comprehensive translation of the group's primary documents and ideological positions.

4. I discuss the emergence of Chibok girls kidnapping and the #BringBackOurGirls movement as a global memory community in a forthcoming essay tentatively titled *#BringBackOurGirls: Literary Activism and the Transnational Memory of Boko Haram Terrorism*.

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