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Daoudi, Anissa

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Testimonies and Literature as Alternative Transitional Justice in Algeria

Abstract

The article emerged from a practice-led project, in which Algerian women survivors of the Civil War of the 1990s narrate their first-hand testimonies in the presence of authors who endeavoured to translate them through literature. It explores Khatibi's novel *Hatab Sarajevo* (Firewood of Sarajevo) (2019) which combines the unheard voices of these women survivors as well as survivors of the war in Bosnia. In it, first-hand and secondary witnesses are communicated through the medium of *testimony* as a genre and through language in its literal and figurative forms. The article aims to influence the debate around transitional justice, symbolic reparation and the role of literature in the provision of remedy for historical injustice, particularly in a situation where processes of transitional justice have been absent, aborted or misused, as in the case of Algeria.

This article brings approaches from a variety of disciplines to explore the power of literature in challenging established narratives through testimony. It compares and contrasts the different forms of witnessing produced by first-hand eyewitnesses with those communicated and translated through literature, in this case Khatibi's novel *Hatab Sarajevo* (2018), to present a practical case of a survivor-centred approach. It will illustrate how 'translated' stories go beyond the traditional way of representing the past and searching for truth, to empowering survivors. I argue that this collective writing project gives agency to survivors to create a corpus of 'mnemonics literature' (i.e., of mnemonic collected works). In doing so, it generates 'alternative archives', which could be either a contested or a confirmed version of history, as well as enabling the empowerment of 'mnemonic communities' (Jones, 2014)¹ as a whole. I conclude that testimonies in their different forms both promote healing

¹ Many thanks to Professor Sara Jones for her critical reading of early drafts of this article and for her useful comments. I am ever grateful to her. I also would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments and suggestions. Many thanks to Professor Robert Young for encouraging me to submit this paper to *Interventions*.

processes and symbolic reparations and shape socio-political debates surrounding collective memory.

Key words: Transitional Justice, Memory, Literature, Algeria, Bosnia, survivors, sexual violence, empowerment, alternative history, survivor-centred approach and in-justice

1. Introduction

The direct cause of the Algerian Civil War was the unexpected victory of the *Front Islamique du Salut* (FIS) at the National Assembly elections in December 1991. The military abruptly halted the process and cancelled the elections. The indirect causes were mainly socio-economic, such as unemployment, shortage of housing, and decline of oil revenues, which preceded the 1990s. For example, in the 1980s, there were protests, like the ones in Kabylia or protests by women against the 1984 Family Code, in which the Islamists called for a total implementation of the Shari'a and the institution of an Islamic State in Algeria. The country slipped into war marked by bloodshed for more than a decade. The Civil War² cost the lives of thousands of people and the disappearance of thousands more, costing the country billions of dollars (Daoudi, 2017, 2018, 2020). After Abdelaziz Bouteflika won the presidency in April 1999, he launched a programme to promote peace and national reconciliation through the adoption of amnesty actions, which developed into what became later known as the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation (CNPR)³, adopted in 2005.

When the amnesty project started in 1999, it aimed at ensuring most guerrillas return to normal life in exchange for giving up politics and surrendering to the state. In practical terms, this has meant that it was almost impossible, for example, for women to denounce the acts they suffered, both for fear of retaliation by the perpetrators and because of the Amnesty Law. Later in 2005 the (CNPR) included amnesty to members of the army and became a law that forbids

² Naming the 1990s in Algeria as a 'Civil War' remains contested. For more information, see Mundy (2015: 31), 'Civil War: a name for a war without a name' in *Imagining Geographies of Algerian Violence*. Stanford University Press.

³ For a thorough discussion on the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation (CNPR), see Joffe, G. (2008). 'National Reconciliation and General Amnesty in Algeria' in *Mediterranean Politics*. Volume 13, 2008 - Issue 2: The Politics of Violence, Truth and Reconciliation in the Arab Middle East

Algerians from, as article 46 states clearly: “instrumentalizing the wounds of the national tragedy in order to detract the institutions and weaken the state, to harm the honourability of its agents (...) or to internationally tarnish the image of Algeria” under the legal threat of up to five years imprisonment and a hefty fine⁴. This meant that a state of denial was imposed on the people, including criminals who were allowed back to their homes, often living at close proximity to their victims. An example of the real effects of the amnesty comes from one of the survivors interviewed by the researcher (AD, 01.11.2017). Safia; a name given to her to protect her privacy, tells of an incident when she found herself face to face with the perpetrator at a wedding, where he was working as a photographer, after changing his physical appearances from long Afghani Kamees to a fashionable shirt and jeans. The incident involved the survivor’s father hitting the perpetrator and ending up imprisoned for one year. While testimonies such as this are particularly powerful in highlighting the actual impacts of the amnesty, in reality the imposed form of institutionalised silencing meant that first-hand testimonies related to the 1990s in Algeria are scarce, fragmented and restricted directly or indirectly by the state.

Other Algerians chose collective action to hold perpetrators to account. One such case is the association *Djazairouna* (Our Algeria), which was founded by Cherifa Kheddar, whose brother Mohamed Reda and sister Leila were assassinated on the 24 June 1996 by Islamist terrorists. It represents an example of Algerians who refused to give in to the Islamists and later rejected all forms of amnesty, including the CNPR. Through this association, she and other survivors and their families, bravely set up a support network in the same year (1996), initially helping with basic needs such as accompanying victims to funerals, which at that time might result in being put on the death list (AD, 01/11/2016). Cherifa and the survivors have taken to the streets of Algiers for years demonstrating against the Amnesty Law, even at the most difficult times and despite being arrested several times. They stood up for the values of peace and most importantly for their right to remember and commemorate their loved ones. This is one example of grassroots action, followed by others in different towns, drawing upon a long history of activism and struggle for freedom and justice in Algerian society (Northey, 2018). In the face of such silence, these voices and actions deserve more academic attention. The present essay attempts to do that.

⁴ Article 46, See: <https://www.hrw.org/fr/news/2006/02/28/algerie-la-nouvelle-loi-damnistie-assure-limpunite-aux-responsables-des-atrocites>.

Indeed, the purpose of this article is present part of the researcher's project entitled "Narratives and Translations of Violence against Algerian Women during the Civil War (1990s)", which involved a collaboration with *Djazairouna*. The collaboration was in the form of a writing workshop held on the 1st November 2017. The choice of the 1st November has a symbolic significance, as it represents the commemoration day of the Algerian Revolution. The aim of the whole project is to analyse testimonies in different media, showing their role in challenging official narratives. The workshop gathered survivors and their families alongside journalists, e.g., Hmeida Layachi and Malika Bousouf and artists, such as Denis Martinez, who experienced the Black Decade first-hand; psychologists who worked with survivors for decades like Cherifa Bouatta, and filmmakers and activists. Among the writers was Said Khatibi, who put into practice his 'translation' or his re-narration of first-hand testimonies in a creative and innovative novel entitled *Hatab Sarajevo* (Firewood of Sarajevo) (2018), discussed in this essay. The gap in literature about eyewitness testimonies on Civil War in Algeria as a whole made the writing workshop a unique opportunity to collect first-hand testimonies of survivors and to gather Algerian intellectuals who share a mission to unravel the untold stories of Algerian women survivors, and to confirm the idea of resistance. Furthermore, this essay engages directly with the daily lives of survivors and their representation in different media. In this essay, the media of testimony and literature are considered as 'mnemonic literature' which helps the creation of 'alternative archives' as alternative forms of transitional justice.

The article begins with a contextualisation of the Algerian literature on the 1990s, situating it in relation to similar projects like "Devoir de Memoire" writings. It then focuses on the writers' workshop and the project as a whole, highlighting its methodology and discussing the nature of the genre in question. The analysis section is divided into two parts, the first discussing *Hatab Sarajevo*'s themes, focusing on rape in conflict and the concept of justice in the novel. The second part deals with the narratives and discourses that Khatibi included in the novel which the eye-witness testimonies did not discuss, always with a focus on the relationship between memory, fiction and transitional justice.

2. Narratives of Violence and Transitional Justice

Writing and documenting the history of Algeria through fictional and non-fictional narratives can be considered an Algerian obsession due to of the lack of trust in the official narratives and the experiences they have gone through, where history has been distorted and manipulated. Khalti⁵ Zohra, a name given to a woman in her late eighties who survived the Civil War highlights the need for these stories to be documented in writing. This first-hand eyewitness testifies in an interview (AD, 01/11/2017): “I am here to tell my story for you to write and it is what will help me die in peace, as I know that you will make sure that my voice is heard”. The quote highlights the significance of making one’s voice heard and, most importantly, in a written form, as a mode of resistance. Khalti Zohra’s first-hand testimony acts like a verbal will (*wasiyya*), which has the same importance as a written legal document in the Muslim culture. The survivor chose to present her will publicly, which is uncommon, as the nature of a will is usually done privately. By disclosing her will publicly, the responsibility is transferred to the addressee and becomes a duty to be fulfilled. She is aware that the will can be oral or written and by asking for the inclusion of her story in the written form of history, implicitly, she aims for her story to be included in the re-writing of the history of her country. The re-writing of history testifies to a refusal to accept the version made available by the authorities, i.e., the official narratives. Khalti Zohra probably has in mind a direct and faithful written account of her story. But this is not the only form of writing serving such purpose.

Literature has also historically played a crucial role as witness-bearer to massacres and incidents of mass violence, especially when other forms of documentation have been missing (Oscar, 2015; Benoune, 2013; Daoudi, 2018). In Algeria, in particular, literature has been a possibility for documenting the two wars (Algerian War of Liberation (1954-1962) and the Civil War of the 1990s). Literature has often been used as a medium through which writers can express their views without confronting the authoritarian regimes under which they live. Amine Zaoui and many other Algerian writers (, e.g., Arabophone writers Bachir Mufti, H’meyda Layachi, Fadhila al Farouq, Mourad Boukerzaza and Francophone writers, Rachid Boudjedra, Assia Djebar, Yasmina Khadra, Maissa Bey, Adlene Meddi, Wahiba Khiari, Hafsa Zinai-koudil, Leila Marouane) have used literature as the vehicle to challenge official narratives. Most importantly, their aim was to document the atrocities that took place at a time where the regime actively confiscated any form of archive on the Civil War. Parallel to that, academic studies (e.g., Salhi, 1999, 2010; Daoudi, 2017, 2018; El Nossery, 2012; Khanna, 2008; Longou,

⁵ Khalti: in English ‘auntie’ is a polite form of addressing an older woman.

2009; Ireland, 2001, 2011, Orlando, 2017; Cowley, 2017 and Leperlier, 2018) have indirectly helped in documenting and analysing the Civil War from various angles, e.g., violence, gender, Islamism, multilingualism as well as transnationalism. This literature is known in Francophone studies as 'l'écriture d'urgence' (Leperlier, 2018; Bonn and Boualit, 1999; Ford, 2016). The important aspect to remember is that this literature reflects a society which has undergone extreme violence and its writers are using literature as a medium to represent a glimpse of what happened.

It is within this context that the novel studied in this essay is located. One of the challenges remains is how to define this text in relation to the types of Algerian literary output mentioned above. The use of the word 'novel' to refer to *Hatab Sarajevo* by Khatibi is not straightforward. While the researcher debated whether it could be considered a *testimonio*, the author avoided engaging in this discussion and referred to it as a novel, not even a testimonial novel. "Testifying to horrors is a national duty" argued Khatibi in an interview (AD, 16.07.2020). His view is in line with other writing projects designed to commemorate genocides, such as "Ecrire par Devoir de Memoir", a project led by ten African writers from eight different countries, who wrote about Rwanda and the Tutsi genocide. "Devoir de Memoire" represents an innovative form of commemorating wars and genocide and a way of 'performing history', using Hayden White's terminology (1973). Collective writing is another form which aims to testify to atrocities. In 2016, the journal *Europe* published a special issue called "Témoigner en Littérature", which discussed the different writing projects including the Tutsi genocide in Rwanda, the Armenian genocide, the Holocaust, the Hiroshima Bomb and so on (Lacoste, 2016). As far as the MENA region is concerned, narratives of violence and trauma linked to political repression are often called 'prison literature'⁶. Testimonies by Moroccan prisoners of Tazmamart represent one example of first-hand testimonies. They consist of survivors' testimonies during the 'Years of Lead' (1956-1999), demonstrating a cry for justice (El Guabli, 2018). Tazmamart was a secret jail where the Moroccan state held dozens of soldiers found guilty of involvement in a *coup d'état* against King Hassan II in 1971 and 1972. The world got to know about the cruelties suffered by prisoners from the survivors' primary and secondary testimonies. Archiving the perpetrators' cruelties through testimonial literature is a step for a forward-looking accountability, "beyond the political and consensual limits of both retributive

⁶ prison literature' for which EGuela Elimelakh (2014) wrote *Arabic Prison Literature: Resistance, Torture, Alienation, and Freedom*. Harrassowitz Verlag.

and transitional justice” (El Guabli, 2020: 1). What is common about Tazmamart testimonial novels is the insistence on archiving that period for the collective memory and claiming rights, even if in the end transitional justice in Morocco was mostly aborted. Similar to Morocco, Transitional Justice in Algeria was also aborted and with the imposition of the CNPR, it failed to address CNPR justice (Mecellem, 2018). Survivors are left with no answers to who killed whom and why they were targeted? The workshop was an attempt to answer those questions and many more.

3. Practice-led research project: ‘Narratives and Translations of Violence against Algerian Women during the Civil War (1990s)’

Other forms of documenting testimonies involve writing workshops. The Iraqi Kurdish writer Haifa Zankana’s latest project involves creative writing of testimonies by female prisoners in Palestine and in Tunisia. While giving women agency over their stories and documenting these in order to contribute to collective memory of their countries is a similar aim to that of the writing workshop that I describe in the present essay, the processes are different. Zankana’s role in the process was minimal, she selected the participants and empowered them by teaching them creative writing skills, and the final product was theirs. The originality of the present project consists in three aspects. Firstly, it is practice-based where the outcome was not as important as the process. Secondly, it contributes directly to breaking silence and giving a platform to the survivors to testify and to be in an environment where they are surrounded by either people with whom they are familiar, such as psychologists, or with other survivors who went through more or less similar experiences. The researcher never interfered at any point in the process of writing or gave any opinion concerning what to make of the testimonies. The third contribution is the translation of first-hand testimonies into diverse artistic media and different languages. One of these is the novel form. A full description of this process will illustrate these points.

Methodology

The project started in 2017 and continued in 2018 where the researcher co-organised a writing workshop in collaboration with *Djazairouna*. The 1st November was purposefully chosen due to its symbolic significance as it recalls the eruption of the Algerian revolution

against French colonialism in 1954. It symbolises the will of Algerians to fight against French brutalities and the inhuman way in which they were subjugated. The date also coincides with the International Remembrance Day. Believing strongly that individuals do not live in isolation, and that most of their actions take place within a societal setting, the workshop was carefully designed in ways that allowed the act of remembering in a collective site that is familiar and at the same time has a symbolic significance to the survivors. Remembering never occurs in a vacuum, but it is a social and collective phenomenon, with individual memory being filtered through emotions and group experiences.

The workshop gathered 30 women survivors; some came accompanied by members of their families. The groups of ‘experts’ whom we call *participants* were divided into four groups. In each group, there was a writer, two journalists (one Arabophone and one Francophone), a Berber speaker (translator), a psychologist known to the survivors, an artist and a film maker. The interviews were semi-structured and were video recorded. Each participant was asked to listen to the eye-witness testimonies and translate them into the medium that she/he deems appropriate. *Hatab Sarajevo* (2018), is the re-narration of that workshop. In 2013, Said Khatibi decided to write about the Balkan War and moved to live in Slovenia in order to learn its language. This decision was taken after discovering in one of his visits to a war museum in Sarajevo the names of Algerians who came to fight for what was framed as the holy war ‘jihad’ (AD, 05/20/17). The names of the Algerians were the start of the journey Khatibi undertook to unravel two similar histories: that of the violence in Bosnia and that of Algeria in the 1990s, a time when Khatibi’s colleagues were being assassinated nearly every day. In 2017, the researcher met Khatibi and discussed the writing workshop project on women survivors of the Algerian Civil War. As testimonies of the Civil War survivors at that time and even today are not easy to secure, the workshop was an opportunity for both projects; re-narrating the stories of how people lived the wars in the two countries is one way to dismantle official narratives about these events.

One of the dilemmas faced by the researcher is differentiating between the testimonies the researcher is working with. In other words, differentiating between the different types of testimonies i.e., eyewitness, secondary and tertiary testimonies. Jones (2014, 187) argues that using testimony in other media invites what is known as secondary or tertiary witnessing, which comprises those who did not experience an event first-hand, but who have heard and bear witness to the testimony of those who did. Jones (2019, 270-271) adds “secondary

witnesses in this understanding did not ‘witness’ that event in the passive sense, but they can ‘witness’ the mediation of that event and consider themselves to have knowledge of the event through that mediation. Moreover, they can bear witness in the active sense by recounting/presenting this knowledge to an audience”⁷. The word ‘testimony’ has been used to mean different things. For example, as Winter (2009, 91-92) argues with reference to the term *testimonio* the concepts covered by this term are diverse. She gives examples: “Latin-Americanists (e.g. Beverley, 2004; Sklodowska, 1996; Sommer, 1996; Yúdice, 1996) refer to the literary genre of testimonial literature. Holocaust researchers also use testimony predominantly referring to written documents (e.g. Waxman 2006)”. She adds that “in some cases, the term is also used to describe survivors’ video or audio testimony as collected by the Fortunoff Video Archive”. The term has also been used by human rights organizations, which “have also begun to collect video- and audio testimony from survivors of violent conflicts, e.g. the project IDP Voices, led in Columbia by the Norwegian Refugee Council in cooperation with the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center”. This means that the term *testimonio* is a form of testimony, which itself is the umbrella term to various forms of testimonies.

As this research is about a community of marginalised Algerian women survivors of the Civil War, the concept of ‘mnemonic communities’ (Jones, 2015) is specifically relevant. The concept highlights “the fact that people do not act only according to strategic calculations, but in the light of the memories and narratives they have adopted and that make sense to them as members of a particular ‘memory group’” (Barahona de Brito cited in Jones 2015, 158). Transitional justice is seen as an aspect of the ‘politics of memory’, used by different mnemonic communities and which is part of “much broader processes of socialisation and identity formation” than the temporally limited policies and actions that constitute the focus of political science approaches (158). However, what is missing from this approach, which is relevant to this study, is an understanding of the dynamic nature of memory, including personal memories (ibid). They are constituted not only by past events, but also by contemporary context. Jones notes “while mnemonic communities are formed on the basis of shared memories, the meaning ascribed to these memories is constructed through their narration and representation in the

⁷ For more details, see Sara Jones 2019. “Testimony through culture: towards a theoretical framework”. *Rethinking History*.

present moment” (ibid). Adding to Jones’ ‘mnemonic communities’ the concept of ‘mnemonic literature’ which represents the outcome or the body of the narratives in different forms, e.g., audio testimonies, to create what the researcher calls ‘alternative archives’. ‘Mnemonic literature’ is an ever-evolving dynamic site where survivors produce narratives that unsettle the hegemonic ones’. The concept of ‘mnemonic literature’ helped the researcher in categorizing the various types of testimonies.

Therefore, the use of testimony in this article refers to two types of testimonies: a) the data collected in the form of video-recording of 30 female survivors, which the researcher calls ‘mnemonic literature’ referring to eye-witness or first-hand testimonies and b) the novel *Hatab Sarajevo* containing the data processed by the author/mediator, which cannot definitively be called ‘fictional testimonies’ because of the blurred lines between facts and fiction. As Jones, argues, texts (especially literary texts) can never ‘reflect’ reality in any straightforward way (Jones, 2019). Therefore, going back to the question of whether *Hatab Sarajevo* can be considered as a novel or a *testimonio*, the researcher considers *testimonio* as per its definition; “the word *testimonio* in Spanish carries the connotation of an act of truth telling in a religious or legal sense-*dar testimonio* means to testify, to bear truthful witness. *Testimonio*’s ethical and epistemological authority derives from the fact that we are meant to presume that the narrator is someone who has lived in his or her person, or indirectly through the experiences of friends, family, neighbours, or significant others, the events and experiences that he or she narrates” (Beverley, 2004, 3). The fact that the author Khatibi lived the atrocities of the Civil War in Algeria gives him that ethical permission to report on what he lived and what he listened to. Furthermore, Beverley clearly states: “because in many cases the narrator is someone who is either functionally illiterate or, if literate, not a professional writer, the production of a *testimonio* generally involves the tape-recording and then the transcription and editing of an oral account by an interlocutor who is an intellectual, often a journalist or a writer” (31). The only difference is that *Hatab Sarajevo* contains some elements of fiction and as mentioned above, the lines between what is fictional and non-fictional are blurred.⁸ One important element this research takes into consideration is the use of word ‘testimony’ rather than ‘oral history’ to refer to the fact that as Beverley (2004, 32) states the difference between the two relates to intentionality: “In oral history it is the intentionality of the recorder (...) that is

⁸ The question of fluidity of boundaries between fiction and non-fiction is discussed in detail in a forthcoming publication.

dominant, and the resulting text is in some sense “data.” In *testimonio*, by contrast, it is the intentionality of the narrator that is paramount. The situation of the narration in *testimonio* has to involve an urgency to communicate, a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, imprisonment, struggle for survival, implicated in the act of narration itself. The position of the reader of *testimonio* is akin to that of a jury member in a courtroom”. The conscious decision to consider *Hatab Sarajevo* as *testimonio* is linked to its purpose, its mission, its audience and its context, which is similar to Latin American countries coming to terms with a violent past, as is the case in Algeria.

At the core of *testimonios* are memories, which according to Francesca Lessa argues (2013, 17), “are not simple recollections but rather their meanings are fiercely contested. Both public and private memories make claims about the past that are not acceptable to everybody”. It is about taking the past forward and appropriating it, as Lazzara (2006, 2) states “a flexible process of composition and re-composition, of casting and recasting the past in its relation to present circumstances and future expectations”. ‘Memory narratives’, a concept developed by Francesca Lessa’s contribution to understanding the links between memory and transitional justice, can be of use. By ‘memory narratives’, Lessa refers to “a blend of individual and collective memory” (2013, 19). She adds that “memory narratives set out specific interpretations and understandings of the facts, and they acquire different levels of legitimacy and appeal within society depending on how compellingly such narratives present a contested past” (ibid). Certainly, “the power of collective memory does not lie in its accurate, systematic, or sophisticated mapping of the past, but in establishing basic images that articulate and reinforce a particular ideological stance” (Zerubavel, 1995, 8). What is important to remember is that “memory narratives are likely to go on over generations”. Lessa (2013, 19) emphasises that “several memory narratives are likely to emerge, and they will continue to evolve into the present and future, across decades, for as long as events remain subject to contestation, even affecting several generations. Therefore, it is necessary to trace memory narratives both at the time at which they originated and their later articulations”. It is important to mention that analysing ‘memory narratives’ helps shed light on the range of motivations driving transitional justice choices, allowing us to see beyond political decisions in order to comprehend the reasons behind specific transitional justice policies (19). The remainder of this essay explores these issues through close study of Khatibi’s novel, the conditions of its making in relation to the workshop mentioned above and the implication of both to politics of memory in Algeria.

***Hatab Sarajevo* (Khatibi, 2018)**

Khatibi's *Hatab Sarajevo* makes a different and original use of testimonies of real people, which represents the primary source of knowledge about the crimes of the Civil War, against which the government tries to impose an amnesia. The difference lies in the writing process, the data collection and the research included. The researcher proposes that *Hatab Sarajevo* represents an alternative way of 'doing' transitional justice through the medium of "collective" testimonies – testimonies of victims and specialists that are combined in *Hatab Sarajevo* in a single form. The purpose of combining testimonies and comparing them is to see whether or not writing testimonial literature in this practice-led research reveals anything that other forms of bearing witness cannot. This question preoccupied the minds of the three parties involved in this project, namely: the researcher, the writer and the witnesses. More so, it is of interest to the researcher whose aim is to not only to compare 'mnemonic literature' by first-hand survivors with those of the writer, but to dig deeper into what kind of transitional justice may be appropriate in Algeria? What and how does Khatibi re-narrate the untold stories? How does he deal with concepts of 'justice' and 'transition'? What is the author's motivation other than testifying to the trauma he has gone through, as a journalist, at a time where his colleagues were killed?

a. Hatab Sarajevo: Facets of Violence, Torture, Resistance and Fragility

Firewood of Sarajevo is divided into equal chapters, one about Salim (Algeria) and another about Ivana (Bosnia). I argue that Khatibi's novel can be read as a performative example of testimony, as a text, which, through fictional accounts, provides testimonial evidence of the trauma experienced by the characters and by the broader Algerian and Bosnian societies. By *performative history*, I go back to what Austin (1962, 47) calls 'doing' something as opposed to just saying something. Khatibi uses literature as a medium to challenge layers of 'unspeakable' concepts. As Franklin (2011, 13) argues: "literature, by virtue of its ability to make difficult ideas easier to contemplate, also increases the possibility of the listener's or reader's empathetic response". In support of this argument, Franklin uses Jorge Semprum, the author of *The Long Goodbye* who advocates for the use of literature to communicate the experiences of the others, saying "only artifice of masterly narrative will prove capable of such testimony" (13). Franklin adds: "Semprum does not believe naively in the power of literature

as a humanizing impulse...Semprum also recognizes that literature, while not perfect, is the best chance survivors have”.

Despite the fact that most of the women survivors were either illiterate or of modest education, they aspired to the novel and said that each one felt that the stories in the novel can be hers. This resonates with Khatibi who insists that the stories he translated in his creative work could have happened in Algeria or in Sarajevo. They represent human fragility and human resilience (AD, 02/11/2018). In fact, time is also fluid, in a way referring to the similarities of impact of war on the human being. The continuum of war and violence is presented in the interrelated way of dealing with the two wars in Algeria presenting it as an intergenerational phenomenon. For example, the way Salim’s describes the War of Liberation is not that different from the way Salim describes the Civil War (1990s) and the way older and younger women survivors did at the workshop.

Hatab Sarajevo is about two countries separated geographically but united in trauma; Bosnia and Algeria went through similar civil wars in the 1990s. Both cost the lives of thousands of people dead and disappeared. The novel narrates the lives of two characters Salim; an Algerian journalist and Ivanka, a Bosnian young woman who runs away from the war, seeking a place where she can write her dream play. The two characters’ testimonies meet through trauma, destruction, death and writing. Ivanka lost her father to the war and Salim lived through the Civil War where death was around the corner, particularly for journalists and intellectuals. Khatibi makes sure that he inserts the names of these individuals and the date of their deaths, in an attempt to archive their history. The narration of the stories of the characters’ lives, reconstructs and performs the historicity of the two countries and brings to life buried stories that survivors kept secret for decades. This is a process also seen at the project workshop: Samia, one of the survivors said, “I kept my secret for nearly two decades and my daughter heard my story for the first time with the audience at the workshop”. (AD, 01/11/2018).

The problematic issue of rape at wartime, which is the overarching theme of the project as a whole is present in the plot in relation to a few characters; for example, on the Algerian side, Salim goes to one of the war veterans, Al Hadj Lazrag, who was suspected of torturing Si Ahmed during the war of liberation. Al Hadj Lazrag tells him of Si Ahmed’s betrayal of the *khawa* (the brothers, a word used to refer to veterans of the War of Liberation) by denouncing

one of them called Boualem, leading to his death under the torture of the French. As a form of local justice, Si Ahmed was forced to marry Boualem's only daughter Zohra; in the end, the reader realises that Zohra is Salim's biological mother: "Zohra died of a bullet in her head, from my father's gun, who wanted to get rid of her to live a new life. He invented the story of her suicide, after spreading rumours about her rape by Mudjahideen (war veterans) during the War of Liberation" (Khatibi, 2019, 288). The quote is complex, as demystifies that rape happened not only by the coloniser but also, by the so called 'brother'; the Algerian war veteran who is seen as a 'living legend'. The glorification of war veterans goes to point out that there is a law⁹ which forbids Algerians from saying anything negative that might tarnish their reputation. The sacredness of the war veteran figure is part of the glorified official history of Algeria. The reference to rape in the novel as something that happened in the War of Liberation shows that rape is a recurrent issue. His use of "memory narratives" (Lessa, 2013, 19), highlights that "the power of collective memory does not lie in its accurate, systematic, or sophisticated mapping of the past, but in establishing basic images that articulate and reinforce a particular ideological stance" (Zerubavel 1995, 8). By using the War of Liberation instead of the Civil War, Khatibi reinforces the idea of re-emergence over generations (Lessa, 2013, 19). What is important to retain is the reference to the continuum of violence, showing at least two generations going through similar destinies.

Khatibi's allusion to Zohra's case in the novel shows that memories are not simple recollections of events and stories but, rather their meanings are fiercely contested, as they might not be acceptable to everybody (Lessa, 2013). Khatibi is basically taking the past forward and re-appropriating it, demonstrating what Lessa describes as "composition and re-composition, of casting and recasting the past in its relation to present circumstances and future expectations" (2). In the same vein, the marriage of Si Ahmed in the novel with his victim's daughter is perceived as part of practising 'justice'. This is a controversial practice in most of the Arab world, as there are countries (including Algeria) where the crime of rape is dismissed if the perpetrator decides to marry the victim. Here again, it is a case of re-appropriating the past to serve the present.

⁹ For reference on the Law, see: <http://www.majliselouma.dz/index.php/ar/2016-07-19-12-56-20/2016-07-19-13-25-03/1013-08-19-17-1429-15-2008>

b. First-hand testimonies versus secondary and tertiary ones (in the novel?)

In this section, I compare the first-hand testimonies with secondary and even tertiary ones to analyse what happens when testimonies are translated into literature. What does Khatibi tell us in the novel that the eyewitnesses missed out? When does Khatibi switch from being a secondary witness, to becoming a first-hand eyewitness?

The researcher's project is a direct reaction against amnesia. However, the survivors' forgetting of dates, seasons or even the years in which events happened was striking. Most of the survivors said that they forgot these details, which one assumes could not be forgotten. One of the reasons could be that most of these women were illiterate and the notion of time is related to the season (e.g., winter or summer) and/or the traumatic event and its details are more important to them. Khatibi used loss of memory in reference to Salim's father (p. 30, 158) and his uncle Si Ahmed. The idea of forgetting is prominent and is introduced by the character Salim in the first few pages (11) and weaved throughout the novel. However, Khatibi insists on naming each person with the date of his assassination as a reaction against forgetting. He says: "I don't forget the years in which writers, intellectuals, journalists, artists, friends or colleagues left us: Mouloud Mammeri, 1989. Jillali Elyabess and Tahar Djaout, 1993. Abdelkader Alloula and Chab Hasni, 1994. Rachid Mimouni, Bakhti Benouda and Rabah Belamri, 1995. Chab Aziz, 1996. Mustapha Belgharbi also left us in the same year". At the workshop (AD, 01.11.2018), Khatibi said: "I was young, I grew up with the war and the sound of guns...I am a journalist by profession and lived through the time when my colleagues were being killed". The problematisation of the traumatic experiences of the 1990s consists in the fact that the participants (e.g., the writer, the psychologist...etc) became eyewitnesses. In other words, the articulation of traumatic experience helps the process of developing recognition of the suffering of others, as well as generating empathy (Assmann and Detmers, 2016), which is the purpose of testimonios in the first place (Beverley, 2004). Khatibi is both first-hand and second-hand witness, albeit to different stories. In addition, and importantly, Khatibi's performative usage of stories is a way of archiving the 'intellocide', insisting on inscribing the names one by one. It is his way of fighting against amnesia.

Fascinatingly, at the writing workshop, Denis Martinez, the Algerian artist who took part as observer, revealed he was an eyewitness and started by listing the same names:

Hamza Assla, directeur de l'Institut des Beaux Arts, who was assassinated in 1994 as well as other friends and comrades like Alloula and Tahar Djaout. I was a member of the committee looking into Djaout's assassination. A day later, a list of members of the same committee to be assassinated was published. The first on the list was doctor Boucebsi... We had to find ways of hiding, I used to change route... I was asked by Ahmed Assla to leave and to go for exile... few months later, he was assassinated" (AD, 1.11.2017).

In the same way, Malika Bousouf, the well-known Francophone journalist says: "it is difficult to remember colleagues mentioned in the workshop like, Djaout, who was a friend and a colleague, Boucebsi, in whose house I dined few days before his assassination...". The pattern of naming those assassinated during the Civil War seems like a deliberate act by the eyewitnesses participating at the workshop (the mnemonic community). In addition to be an act against amnesia, the act of "naming"¹⁰ in this case is also in defiance of the Amnesty Law.

In Khatibi's book, through Salim, we are introduced to other minor characters, such as Malika, his girlfriend, the teacher who was forced to wear the veil out of fear of being killed. She embodies the life of the majority of Algerian women who were unveiled, who feared for their lives and opted to wear the veil in the public spaces. Malika's story resonates with a first eye-witness testimony given by Malika Bousouf, who testified how she used to disguise herself in public spaces, particularly at the time when her male colleagues were being assassinated. Bousouf said: "I received my condemnation letter of death issued by the MEI (Mouvement pour d'état Islamique) at home, because the other death threats I used to receive them through the radio... After authentication of the letter by the Algerians and the French, I was offered refugee status in France, which I rejected, as it meant not coming back to Algeria for 10 years. I also believed that the combat should take place here in Algeria" (AD Interview, 1.11.2017). She

¹⁰ Assia Djebar used the same act in her novels written in the 1990s, for example, *Le Blanc de l'Algerie*. Also, for more information, see Lazhari Labter's book (2018). *Journalistes Algériens 1988-1998 : Chronique des années d'espoir et de terreurs*. Chihab Editions.

adds that she went to Bentalha¹¹, after the infamous massacre, to investigate the state of children only to find herself talking to women survivors who had never in their lives set foot in the capital city, Algiers (ibid). This idea of the disconnection between the centre and the periphery has also been repeated by one the survivors when describing her participation in one of *Djazairouna* commemoration events in the centre of Algiers. She says: “we were summoned by the police and put in a police van to take us to Blida, when we arrived, the policeman warned us by saying if he sees us again in Algiers, he will use harsher measures”. She continues: “Algiers is my capital like yours and if I see you again in Blida, you will also see harsher measures”.

The idea of centre and periphery appears in the novel in different ways. Firstly, it is used when describing what it was like living in Algeria during the 1990s; Khatibi was more direct. Salim, the main character in the novel, for example, is an Algerian journalist, through whom we get to sense and to imagine what it was like and how it felt living in Algeria during the 1990s. Through him, we get to know the life of Said Khatibi, the author and journalist who comes from one of the inner cities of Algeria, Bousaada. Both Salim and Khatibi move to live in Algiers, in one of the popular neighbourhoods and archive the daily lives of Algerians. Through both characters, the history of Algerian journalists is performed. During the workshop, Khatibi testified about his life as a journalist coming from the South of Algeria, giving details of both cities, the capital Algiers and Bousaada. These cities differ in terms of military presence, which is much more visible in Algiers but are united by the state of fear imposed on the country. In the chapter titled *Heading South*¹², Khatibi describes the ways people live their everyday lives, giving context to historical events, what White (2014) refers to as *practical past*, in a way that historians would not do. He says: “features of ‘a normal’ life change as soon as you leave Algiers, the concrete, which changed the capital into human barracks disappears and is replaced by forest and mountains”. This does not mean that the rest of the country is unaffected. He describes the scene of taking a taxi going to Bousaada, where the driver warns the passengers that he would not stop until he reaches his final destination, bearing in mind that it is a four-hour journey (Khatibi, 2019, 78). He then describes a discussion

¹¹ For more information, see: *Kepel, Gilles, Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam. (Harvard University Press, 2002). ISBN 978-0-674-01090-1.*

¹² The article in Arabic is called: صوب الجنوب

between the driver and a passenger who asks about Bousaada. The driver says: “the acorn was trilling between the military and the others, but now things are calmer”. The acorn is part of a coded language referring to bullets. This performative use of language (White, 2014) gives the narrative a local flavour, which distinguishes it from other parts of Algeria and which Modern Standard Arabic cannot convey.

Documenting the history of the periphery is also shown in his description of two major incidents that happened in Bousaada. Khatibi deliberately wanted to use it in his performative representation of the city; these are the burning down of the oldest hotel in the region ‘Hotel Caid’ and of ‘Etienne Dinet Museum’. These two incidents are minor events in the larger discourse and might be missed out by a historian writing on the Algerian Civil War. Khatibi’s aim is to document the history of his town Bousaada as a way of responding to the divide between what Algerians call ‘the capital versus the rest of the country’ and at the same time communicate and represent the state of fear throughout the country. The two incidents have direct reference to the ‘imported’ ideology which considers art and hotels where alcohol is served, as sins. By burning the only two important places in Bousaada, the town is not only cut off from the centre (capital), but also from the exterior world. He says after describing another small town on the way to Bousaada called Sidi Aissa, which for him looked grim: “fear is not restricted in the capital only, it grows and matures higher than carob trees, which decorate those empty roads”.

Khatibi challenges a number of contradictions. One case of his rewriting of first-hand testimonies from the workshop is revealing. During the workshop, the survivors’ clear idea about the Islamist as the perpetrator was exposed. However, when we asked the survivors whether members of the army had any links to incidents of sexual violence, unanimously, they denied any wrongdoing. The stories about rape were an opportunity for the survivors to detach from the issue; the othering of the perpetrators as Islamists was used to dismantle the Islamists’ propaganda of being pious. The only reference to rape was made by one of the survivors, who said: “the cases of rape we heard about were done among the Islamists. They were cases of revenge”. This same idea of revenge came up in reference to the Islamist groups, particularly, at the time when the military infiltrated their groups. Khatibi’s reconstruction of the information comes not in relation to the Islamists in the Civil War, but in reference to the war veterans during the War of Independence. He played with the idea of the ‘brother’ to say that sexual violence is one crime that happens in conflict. In one of Khatibi’s interviews

(16.07.2020), after his novel got shortlisted for the Prize of International Arabic Fiction, when I asked about the selection of the first-hand testimonies and the way he reconstructed them, he said : “there are cases where I took the story as it is, as my imagination was incapable of matching what happened to the survivors. However, in other cases I selected the sections about what it was like living in the shadow of the war, I was not interested in the war, it was there as a décor”.

Khatibi’s survivor-centred approach goes beyond the traditional way of representing the past or searching for the truth. By re-narrating their stories, the novel gives the opportunity to survivors to perform their side of reality, using their own language; for example, the story of the young flower vender in the novel is taken exactly as it has been narrated by the first-hand eyewitness at the workshop. Khatibi did not add any fictional elements to the story in terms of actions. The only fictional side is in the development of the narratives through the fictional characters. For example, the vendor’s story has been narrated by Malika (fictional character) who told Salim about how her uncle’s wife Battoul left her house in the morning, leaving her four daughters (fictional), and going to the market carrying an empty basket, hoping to buy sweets for her younger daughter. The story is weaved together in a way that leaves the boundaries between truth and fiction fluid. He then links this to the story of how the daughters were not able to recognise their mother’s corpse in the hospital, as the bodies were burned to ashes and it was only the eldest daughter who identified her from her long soft legs (Khatibi, 2019, 160). Khatibi’s technique is in line with the nature of testimonios, “one of the more powerful attributes of testimonio is that, as a genre, it intentionally blurs the lines between fact and fiction” (Smith 2011, 22).¹³ As Franklin (2011, 11) argues, “to consider any text ‘pure testimony’, completely free from aestheticizing influences and narrative conventions, is naïve”.

Conclusion

The present study addresses the process of testifying and the importance of creating testimonies in different media. The empowerment and the agency survivors achieved is in making their ‘mnemonic literature’ a dynamic site, open to contestation or confirmation, which contributes to what the researcher calls ‘alternative archives’. This is part of the survivor-

¹³ For more insight, see: Smith (2011): <http://home.fau.edu/peralta/web/FACS/testimonioresistance.pdf>

centred approach which is the focus of the novel and the project as a whole. Mnemonic communities are empowered through collaborative work like this and are the way forward to defying the Amnesty Law (1999, 2005). The underlying motivation of the research was exactly this: to challenge the Amnesty Law and empty it of its contents. It was an attempt to say to the world that the transition imposed by the regime is ineffective.

Throughout the project, the collection of the first-hand testimonies at a time when a fine and imprisonment might be a possibility, is in line with other alternative projects, in which citizens as well as civil society organisations have been working on in order to deter the regime's move towards amnesia of the Civil War. The novel, *Firewood of Sarajevo* is a practical move towards empowering survivors, towards owning their own narratives and creating 'alternative archives'. Being given the opportunity to be heard furthers the objectives of transitional justice in post-conflict setting. Analysing the data which includes the videos of first-hand testimonies as well as secondary ones through the novel, exposes the complex relationship between these media and highlights how testimonies in their different forms have lives of their own. They bring to light different aspects which provide coherence to narratives about a difficult past and are part of transitional justice. *Hatab Sarajevo* is a concrete example of the agency of literature used by a mnemonic community 'doing' alternative transitional justice.

The project as whole promises new ways of tackling the complex problem of unfinished or aborted transitional justice in Algeria in three ways. By putting together first-hand eyewitnesses with cultural producers working in a variety of media (literature, cinema, painting), it has made it possible for untold stories which would have otherwise gone unnoticed to be translated in widely available means. The novel *Hatab Sarajevo* is evidence of that. It is a text in which first-hand and secondary witnesses are communicated through literature, through the medium of testimonio, as a genre, through the language in its literal and figurative forms and through culture in general. Secondly, it served as a bridge between two types of witness of the Algerian Civil War who would not have had a chance to meet, namely members of the cultural establishment and illiterate women from marginalised areas. The article gives evidence of the type of solidarity and mutual recognition which took place during the workshop. Thirdly, by providing a forum for illiterate and low-educated survivors to tell their stories and traumas to writers, it allowed closer links between lived experiences and imagined narratives of them. This raises other issues relevant to Algerian women survivors, which is the

need to create a platform through which they can be heard. While the article highlights the different types of testimonies, it equally emphasises the importance of the workshop, organised by the researcher, as a platform where the Civil War was discussed at length and which resulted in the production of testimonies in forms in which they will be heard. This gives literary practice a kind of archive to work with. It also reconciles it with potential readers who would not have otherwise taken literature as a form of history and memory relevant to their lives and the lives of Algeria as a whole.

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