“Graphic Content”
Interpretations of the Rwandan Genocide through the Graphic Novel

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“What we witnessed in Rwanda, surpasses words. There must be images to accompany the words.”
-Rupert Bazambanza

Survivors of genocide have often agreed that words cannot convey the horrors they witnessed and that language is sometimes seen as an obstacle in their attempts at telling. Finding the appropriate words to describe a harrowing experience might prove elusive, yet many survivors are resolved to tell their story through a medium that most appeals to them. Whether through oral interviews, written texts, or even artistic representations, understanding why some survivors decide to transmit their experiences and what they in fact transmit can be just as telling as their chosen medium. Rupert Bazambanza relied on the powerful interplay of image and text in his unique graphic novel about the Rwandan genocide because he strongly believes that images are necessary in conjunction with words to relate the events of the 1994 massacre of Tutsi and moderate Hutu in Rwanda. Rupert chose to tell the story of the Rwanga family rather than his own in his graphic novel entitled *Sourire malgré tout: L’histoire du génocide au Rwanda* in order to honour and memorialize the murdered members of the family. Yet the book’s inclusions and exclusions are revealing of the author’s self-imposed duty to bear witness. As such, Bazambanza mediated his desire to memorialize and witness throughout his work, an obvious negotiation at times. It is often through this process of narrating and negotiating what to tell, that emerges how survivors self-

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1 Rupert Bazambanza, Interview #4, (August 1, 2008).
3 For the purposes of this paper, I will primarily use the term ‘graphic novel’, coined by Will Eisner in 1978 who is universally acknowledged as one of the great master’s of comic book art. “Graphic novel” is a vague moniker that is applied to many extended forms of comics, including non-fiction and short story collections that follow a book-length format.
identify. Self-identifications can influence a survivor’s narrative and occasionally survivors’ motivations to recount. Do they view themselves as a ‘witness’, ‘spokesperson’ and/or ‘prosecutor’? As psychologist Henry Greenspan states, a survivor who decides to become a ‘prosecutor’, “looks back and prosecutes for them [the victims].” ⁵ This role is evident in many survivor narratives and throughout Rupert’s graphic novel due to his decision to identify Hutu perpetrators who took part in the killings. It has become clear to me throughout the course of my friendship with Rupert, and after conducting several oral history interviews together, that he has entered into the role of a ‘spokesperson’ as a survivor of the Rwandan genocide. As a spokesperson, Rupert’s efforts have been directed at educating others about the 1994 genocide through his comics, interviews and speaking engagements.⁶ But within this role, Rupert also acts as a ‘prosecutor’, condemning the perpetrators and the international community, a position that includes denouncing the genocide in Darfur through his drawings.⁷

In fact, Rupert and I first met in 2007 at an exhibit that featured Rupert’s cartoons denouncing the genocide in Darfur. His eye-catching and often controversial cartoons highlighted the continued failure of the international community to end the slaughter in Darfur, with unavoidable comparisons made to the Rwandan genocide.

⁶ Rupert has been interviewed by CBC Radio and Radio Canada, numerous local and national newspapers, and was a guest on TV5’s widely popular ‘dinner and discussion’ show Le 3950. Also see Ellen Yamshon & Daniel Yamshon, “Comics Media in Conflict Resolution Programs: Are they Effective in Promoting and Sustaining Peace?” Harvard Negotiation Law Review 11, no. 421, (2006): 423. Rupert’s work was included in Ellen Yamshon and Daniel Yamshon’s review which considered whether comic media can produce durable outcomes in the context of conflict resolution.
⁷ A selection of Rupert’s cartoons denouncing the genocide in Darfur are available to be viewed on the Montreal Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies’ (MIGS) website at http://migs.concordia.ca/BiographyofRupertBazambanza.htm
My interest in interviewing Rupert and discussing his memories of the Rwandan genocide was immediate, but the focus of this major paper has evolved since our first meeting to allow for a more concerted focus on Rupert’s graphic novel Sourire malgré tout. As a complete ‘newbie’ to the ever-growing popular medium of graphic novels, this required a sharp learning curve to familiarize myself with ‘graphic’ language.\footnote{Rocco Versaci uses this play-on-words in the title of his book, This Book Contains Graphic Language: Comics as Literature (New York: Continuum, 2007).} Although similar to the comic book in format, the graphic novel presents ‘weightier’ subject matter at a greater length, and includes a growing field of ‘scholarly graphic novels’ which are increasingly recognized by literary critics.\footnote{Scholastic graphic novels include works and memoirs that represent and aim to educate about genocide, war and oppression, human rights abuses, etc. See Art Spiegelman’s, Maus I: A Survivor’s Tale: My Father Bleeds History and Maus II: A Survivor’s Tale:.... And Here my Troubles Began (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992); Joe Sacco’s, Palestine (USA: Fantagraphics Book, 2002); Marjane Satrapi’s, The Complete Persepolis (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003) to name a few.} The acclaimed comic artist Art Spiegelman and his seminal work Maus revolutionized this genre of graphic novels and brought the medium into the mainstream.
While researching graphic novels on the Rwandan genocide, I was hard-pressed to find any work done by survivors of the genocide, aside from Rupert’s contribution. Rupert also stated that he believes he is one of the only Rwandan graphic artists to have created a graphic novel about the 1994 genocide. Conversely, there exists a wealth of graphic novels which grapple with the Holocaust, produced largely by children of survivors who are driven to uncover their own connections with this past in their graphic memoirs, most notably Spiegelman’s Maus and Miriam Katin’s We Are On Our Own.

This paper will consider Rupert’s position as a survivor and the potential influence that this had on his representation of the Rwandan genocide in his graphic novel. I will argue that Rupert’s role as a ‘spokesperson’ for the victims of the Rwandan genocide has influenced the content of his graphic novel, creating a ‘safer narrative’ that does not fully explore central themes of the genocide despite the book’s sub-title, “The Story of the Rwandan Genocide.” How do the silences that transpire in his graphic novel impact the story recounted? Comparatively, how do non-Rwandan artists Cecile Grenier and Jean-Philippe Stassen and their respective works on the Rwandan genocide, Rwanda 1994: Descent en l’enfer and Deogratias: A Tale of Rwanda, deal with the same ‘silences’ especially when considering their different vantage point on the genocide? What does Rupert’s decision to produce a graphic novel about the Rwanga family while avoiding his own story reveal about himself as a survivor? Before considering these and

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10 Graphic artists Cecile Grenier and J.P Stassen’s graphic novels portray fictional accounts of the Rwandan genocide.

11 See Miriam Katin, We Are On Our Own: A Memoir (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2006); Martin Lemelman and Gusta Lemelman, Mendel’s Daughter: A Memoir (New York: Free Press, 2006); Bernice Eisenstein, I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors (New York: Riverhead Books, 2006). These are but a few graphic memoirs that have followed in the footsteps of Art Spiegelman’s Maus, which is acknowledged as the first graphic novel to explore the Holocaust and its legacy.
other questions, it is important to situate Rupert Bazambanza, and his craft and subsequently provide an overview of the structure of the comic.

**Rupert Bazambanza: “Activist/Illustrator”**

Between June and August 2008, I conducted four interviews with Rupert, totaling over four hours of recorded time. However, he often shared his memories of Rwanda and discussed his work in our informal conversations together as friends. In our interviews, Rupert identified himself as an “activist/illustrator,” instantly shaping how viewers of the interview recordings might regard him. This self-identification is indicative of his desire to be viewed not only as a “survivor” of the Rwandan genocide - an undoubtedly constrictive label which seems to remain perpetually with individuals who survive genocide, unless they choose to identify themselves differently. After surviving the Rwandan genocide in 1994 with his mother and two sisters, Rupert arrived in Canada in 1997 and shortly thereafter embarked on what he believed to be his duty as a survivor of the genocide: to bear witness to the crimes he witnessed in Rwanda. After completing his training in graphic design at Montreal’s *Académie Internationale du Design*, Rupert began the difficult process of documenting his terrifying experiences of the genocide in images - as images for him came before words.

Utilizing his artistic abilities to represent his traumatic memories, Rupert created cartoons that depicted the slaughter in 1994, but ultimately decided to produce a graphic novel in honour of the Rwanga family - close family friends who were all murdered except for the mother, Rose Rwanga. His decision to recount a story familiar to him, but

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12 Bazambanza, *Sourire malgré tout, 1*. In the introduction of his graphic novel, Rupert describes his mission as “town crier,” stating that “my work is far from done. I vow to continue with my mission to fight racism and to perpetuate the memory of the Tutsi genocide so that it may never happen again.”
still not his own, is part of his mission to memorialize loved ones who were murdered in the genocide. For Rupert, it was more important for him to honour the memory of the victims in his work than to represent his own experiences, which he knows he can recount to willing listeners.\textsuperscript{13} As Henry Greenspan emphasizes, “‘giving testimony’ bestows meaning on the suffering and the loss, so that it was not in vain.”\textsuperscript{14} By producing a graphic novel, the memory of the Rwanga family was immortalized through images and words, an invaluable gift for Rose Rwanga, the only surviving family member. Rupert’s commitment to activism involves narrating his own experiences to various audiences and educating youth about the dangerous outcomes of racism and hate.

In an interview with the \textit{The Link}, Concordia University’s independent newspaper, Rupert expressed that if people understand the root causes of genocide, the deaths can have meaning: “If it just happens again and again, and we don’t learn, what’s it all for?”\textsuperscript{15} Oral historian Susan Rose asserts that this process of speaking out and transmitting traumatic memories in order to educate others about the event is “a political as well as therapeutic act.”\textsuperscript{16} The political agency that narrations refract, replicate, and authorize cannot be undermined.\textsuperscript{17} However, most survivors are not initially motivated by such factors and, like Rupert, many speak out to fulfill what they believe is simply their duty as witnesses.

\textsuperscript{13} Rupert Bazambanza, Interview #3, (July 6, 2008).
\textsuperscript{14} Greenspan, \textit{On Listening to Holocaust Survivors}, 171.
\textsuperscript{17} Allen Feldman, “Memory Theaters, Virtual Witnessing and the Trauma-Aesthetic,” \textit{Biography} 27, (2004): 165.
Telling stories through pictures and drawing caricatures has been his passion from a very young age. He read the Belgian comic book series *Tin Tin*, and found a hobby in secretly drawing derisive caricatures of former Hutu President Juvenal Habyarimana and other unpopular political figures among Tutsi and moderate Hutu. Unfortunately, he received little encouragement from his family and his friends to pursue his artistic abilities, for as he stated: “Rwanda’s a poor country, [and] drawing will not feed you.”

Nevertheless, he was determined to receive formal training and attended the École des Arts design school in Rwanda, almost completing his degree before the country was engulfed by the genocide. There was little hope of returning to school in Rwanda after the genocide and Rupert only returned to drawing when he arrived in Canada in 1997.

He admitted that it took him three years and a new environment for him to transform his buried memories into an aesthetic form. By witnessing through his art, he was able to create meaning out of his suffering and ultimately found that drawing even his most terrifying memories was a cathartic experience. Art therapy professor Josee Leclerc maintains that “art and the creative process can be healing, as guided imagery and the creative impulse draw on the healthy side of the person.”

Deciding to create a graphic novel also appealed to Rupert for he felt “it gave him many opportunities to transmit his memories of the tragedy.” American cartoonist and comic theorist Scott McCloud argues that “cartoon imagery possesses universality.” This unique representational strategy within graphic novels made Rupert feel as though he was approximating the

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19 Ibid.
21 Rupert Bazambanza, Interview #4, (August 1, 2008).
reader to the tragedy through the pages of the book. How then do graphic novels transmit genocide differently than other mediums? The following section will consider how the comic narrative enables a more transformative and self-reflexive reading through reader participation, a critical function when overcoming the ‘unknowability’ of genocide.

Power of the Comic Narrative

The graphic novel’s unique ability to capture and involve the reader through a creative interplay of images and words is especially critical when dealing with the subject of genocide. Images of genocide alone have the potential to repel viewers rather than engage them due to the content of such photos, whereas the combination of images and words create an approachable medium that can trigger emotion as well as interpretation. The illustrations and visual rhetoric are just as crucial to understanding the narrative as is the storyline. As noted by McCloud, it is what occurs in the empty spaces between the panels, a process that he refers to as “closure,” that requires the largely subconscious participation of the reader to fill in the details. Art Spiegelman asserts how the process of closure in a graphic novel forces the role of a reader rather than a looker, encouraging an active participation throughout. Creative aesthetic techniques employed by the artist specifically to promote reader participation can be achieved through various artistic techniques. Panels that portray views from above in which the reader is looking down create a sense of detachment in the reader as they become an observer rather than a

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23 Rupert Bazambanza, Interview #4, (August 1, 2008).
participant. Whereas panels featuring a view from below endorse a sense of smallness and stimulate fear in the reader, creating a sense of viewer participation in the scene.  

Rupert’s graphic novel makes frequent use of these creative techniques, forcing the reader to become a semi-participant throughout the story, and was utilized repeatedly during violent scenes. In one particularly explicit panel, the viewer is drawn into the scene through a worm’s eye view, revealing Degroot Rwanga and his friend Christophe Safari just moments after being brutally shot to death in a vehicle by Hutu génocidaires. Looking up at the bullet-ridden bodies from below transports the reader into the scene as a ‘witness’ (see figure 2). Rupert acknowledged that he sought to accurately transmit the tension and fear of particular episodes by manipulating some view panels. These panels could also be interpreted as an attempt at positioning the reader to ‘witness’ the brutality inflicted by the perpetrators in order to reinforce the trauma of genocide. Utilizing this technique reinforces the documentary nature of graphic novels, another one of its defining features.

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28 Rupert Bazambanza, Interview #4, (August 1, 2008).  
29 See Dori Laub as quoted in Michael Rothberg, ‘We Were Talking Jewish,’ Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* as “Holocaust” Production in *Considering Maus: Approaches to Art Spiegelman’s “Survivor’s Tale of the Holocaust.”* Deborah R. Geis, ed. (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 2003), 154. Art Spiegelman actively made use of documentary techniques in his graphic novel *Maus.* Dori Laub argues “*Maus* embodies the aesthetic of the testimonial chain- an aesthetic that is indistinguishable from the documentary.”
Josee Leclerc agrees that comic art can elevate the reader’s consciousness of horrific events beyond mental registration, for “in imagining the unimaginable, it demands from us [the viewer] a response.”

Rupert sought to produce a graphic novel that would memorialize the Rwanga family while also maintaining its documentary value. His work would ensure that future generations would “never forget” while denouncing claims made by genocide deniers. The images relayed are deliberately shocking and the message does not go unnoticed: the role and intervention of witnesses is crucial to ending genocidal conflicts, and the failure of the international community in Rwanda should never be repeated. The question remains whether a graphic novel about the Rwandan genocide can act as a memorial to the genocide, and whether it can provoke its readership to speak out against similar crimes against humanity. Rupert has stated that he feels his graphic novel and social activism have in fact motivated students to denounce genocide and human rights abuses, fulfilling what he believes is part of his duty as a survivor.

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31 Rupert Bazambanza, Interview #4, (August 1, 2008).
It is through what author Rocco Versaci refers to as ‘graphic language’ that the artist and their technique can best be understood.³² Graphic novels are known for their ability to offer a self-consciousness unavailable in other mediums and a presentation of themes in a self-reflexive manner. How does Rupert as an artist expect the story to be read and interpreted seeing as how his subjective position is evident from the start? *Sourire malgré tout* maintains an unmistakably accusatory tone throughout the story against the perpetrators and the bystanders, potentially influencing how the narrative is read and interpreted. Yet, can Rupert, as a survivor of the Rwandan genocide, be expected to offer an objective and nuanced representation of the events in a graphic novel created as a memorial to murdered friends?

**The Author’s Influence on the Narrative**

After reading *Sourire malgré tout*, it becomes apparent that the emphasis on the verbal bears as much significance, if not more, within the story as the visual. Often, graphic novels give significance to the visual aesthetic over the written word, communicating more readily through images, smaller captions and the process of closure to relate a story. Rupert incorporated a great deal of historical background in separate boxed captions and within the dialogue throughout his graphic novel, facilitating the uninformed reader’s understanding of the narrative. By incorporating this information, the author is also asserting its importance and validity by juxtaposing it with the story. Rupert situates the 1994 genocide among past Tutsi massacres, reinforcing through written captions the cyclical pattern of violence that existed against the former Tutsi

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³² Rocco Versaci, *This Book Contains Graphic Language*, introduction. Versaci explains how “graphic language operates within a unique poetics” where the importance lies on the verbal and the visual and how they interact together on the page.
minority, and occasionally illustrating the symptoms that led to the slaughter in 1994. In addition to the informative captions, the narrative contains several references to the genocide of 1959. It is reinforced throughout that the Tutsi were perpetually victimized by the Hutu and this point is made integral to the narrative. At the start of the story, Rose Rwanga and her husband are admiring baby Hyacinthe in the first three panels. Rose is depicted alone in the two subsequent panels as she somberly reflects to herself: “she [the baby] looks like my older sister who was killed in 1959, why, why did our people die so unjustly?”

Figure 3. Rupert Bazambanza, Sourire malgré tout: L’histoire du génocide au Rwanda. Published by Les Editions Images (2005).

The bluntness of statements like these throughout the narrative is striking to the reader but appear to serve the purpose of reinforcing that the Tutsi have been historically victimized by the Hutu, while highlighting Rose’s sense of isolation. However, Rupert is largely addressing events that he did not directly witness, but that his parents lived

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33 Bazambanza, Sourire malgré tout, 5.
through and were narrated to him growing up.\textsuperscript{34} In our interview, Rupert stated that he did not consult outside sources as he felt he could rely on his memory to tell the stories he grew up hearing.\textsuperscript{35}

This admission underlines the subjectivity of his memories, an aspect of oral history that often comes under attack. The practice of oral history is sometimes seen as “unscientific and unreliable” due to its subjectivity, dialogic narrativity, and personal memories. However, oral historian Alessandro Portelli argues that within different cultures, there are certain “aids to memory”: the repeated telling of stories and their discussion with members of the community creates a formalized narrative preserving the ‘facts’.\textsuperscript{36} Rupert’s decision to include the history of violence against the Tutsi in Rwanda can further be understood as part of his role as a spokesperson, who tells the ‘complete’ story, since ethnic tensions have a long history in Rwanda of erupting into genocide. He is undoubtedly continuing the tradition of stories told to him by his family and most likely also by community members, a practice that writer Alex Haley experienced and relates in his article in which he describes the transmission of memories that were preserved within his African-American family.\textsuperscript{37} It is through this inclusion of the history of violence against the Tutsi and the focus on the Rwandan genocide that Rupert sought to contextualize the 1994 genocide in relation to past Hutu aggression against the Tutsi. In doing so, the title of Rupert’s graphic novel seems to purport that it is the official story of the genocide: \textit{Smile through the Tears: The Story of the Rwandan}

\textsuperscript{34} Rupert Bazambanza, Interview #4, (August 1, 2008).
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{37} Alex Haley, “Black History, Oral History and Genealogy,” in \textit{The Oral History Reader}, 14. Haley recounts how he learned that the stories passed down to him were part of a long narrative history of the family passed down across generations.
*Genocide.* It is not uncommon for survivors to portray their narratives as the ‘official’ account of the destruction, as survivors were in fact eye-witnesses to the event in question. However, as historian Aleida Assmann rightly asserts, “their point [survivor narratives] is less to tell us what happened than what it felt like to be in the center of those events; they provide very personal views from within.”

In addition, survivor accounts are “stories that are made for what is ‘not a story.’ A completely impersonal destruction is framed by a perspective that is personal: one still grounded in the life and voice of the recounter.” Rupert’s “voice” permeated the story despite the fact that he narrated Rose Rwanga’s experience and affected him as much as if he were the main character in the graphic novel. This untraditional method of bearing witness by indirectly narrating his own memories through the Rwanga family in his graphic novel was possible since the Bazambanza family and the Rwanga family were close friends and neighbours, and struggled to survive the genocide together in Kigali. Choosing to write in a third person omniscient point of view in the narrative was due to Rupert’s adopted role as a spokesperson for the victims of the genocide. Rupert chose to depict the Rwanga family’s experience and honour their memory as it was more meaningful and important to him than directly narrating his own story.

Even so, the process of creating the graphic novel still presented Rupert with a personal negotiation of ‘what to tell,’ as he admitted in an interview. Mediating between what he felt comfortable including and what he believed appropriate to include inevitably left gaps in the narrative, an occurrence that Greenspan has witnessed through hundreds of interviews with Holocaust survivors. He confirms that “survivors anticipate

40 Rupert Bazambanza, Interview #4, (August 1, 2008).
what will be hearable by us as well as what is tellable by them, and both negotiations are reflected in what they … retell.”  What gaps evolved from this inevitable negotiation and more importantly, what were the silences imposed by the author?

A Difficult Negotiation

For many survivors, not telling is just as difficult as the act of recounting. This becomes the first negotiation that survivors encounter. If they choose to tell, they must decide to whom, and how to transmit their traumatic experiences through a medium that appeals to them. First-hand accounts presented through oral interviews or written narratives, are two of the most commonly used mediums by trauma survivors. Artist representations, unlike written narratives or oral interviews, may be considered as a less intimidating form of confronting traumatic memories. Representing memories through creative expression allowed Rupert a more active interpretation of his memories and was perceived as less challenging than using language. Trauma experts Selma Leydesdorff and Graham Dawson emphasize that the “impact of trauma … can influence survivors to express themselves in stories containing elements which are imaginary, fragmented or disjointed and loaded with symbolism.” This complexity inherent in all traumatic experiences requires a thorough analysis of chosen mediums and survivor accounts. Rupert’s decision to produce a second-hand account that also transmitted his first-hand experiences highlights his dilemma over self-representation in his work due to his

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41 Greenspan, *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors*, xx. Furthermore, he asserts that listeners’ expectations can affect recounting. Comparatively, Rupert’s negotiation was also due to the anticipated reaction from the reader and what he believed to be hearable’ for his listener.

42 Rwandan genocide survivor and international award-winning R&B singer Corneille Nyungura uses his musical talent as an outlet to narrate his experiences during the genocide. As the only survivor of his family, his songs also honour the memory of his family and friends who were victims of the genocide.

hesitancy to directly confront his personal experiences. However, starting a long-term project that would be a constant reminder of both his traumatic memories and those suffered by the Rwanga family through images and text was no less challenging for Rupert. Immortalizing the memory of the Rwanga family in his graphic novel inadvertently immortalized his own experiences. As such, this memory work required a constant negotiation of ‘what to tell’ and of which memories to confront. For historians Roger Simon and Claudia Eppert:

Testimonies of historical trauma attempt to translate the tangibility of occurrences across time and space. As translations, however, testimonies are indelibly marked by their own insufficiency. These marks - inscribed within the texts themselves - are the scars testimonies bear to their discursive inadequacy to render fully the realities of human cruelty and suffering.  

It is an inevitability then that all narrative “translations” of historical trauma will have “absences that, in their silence, solicit or “ask” questions.” And yet, how do survivors who bear witness interpret these “absences” that may pervade their narrative?

Mediating between what to include in a graphic novel that Rupert hoped would be read by different age groups led to a succession of near silences on major themes common in genocide studies. Representing violent rapes and forced impregnations, brutal killings, and other horrific realities of genocide, would likely eliminate a large readership that Rupert sought to reach. Yet, despite his admission that he purposely held out on representing these themes more extensively or all together in his graphic novel due to their nature, is it possible that Rupert was not ready to confront these explicit memories

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that he possessed? Judith Zur suggests that “oral memories have an advantage over written history because the narrator retains control over its dissemination [of the oral history] … including its particular version.” But it can also be argued that a narrator possesses more control over their written story as they have the benefit of time to meditate over the content of their transmission and how they would like to be viewed by the reader. A survivor’s struggle for words, therefore, is also visible in written memory work and is manifested by silences and gaps in their narrative.

Rape: A Graphic Matter

Representing rape in a narrative composed of both visual and written components is understandably a challenging matter. Yet, is such graphic content necessary within representations of genocide and is it vital to our understanding of the event?

How women are affected during violent conflicts and genocide is often an overlooked phenomenon but has become a growing concern among the United Nations and specifically within war-torn countries. Rape is used as a weapon to terrorize and degrade women and their communities and was a popular weapon used in the Rwandan genocide. As Human Rights Watch (HRW) asserts:

Although the exact number of women raped will never be known, testimonies [HRW and other aid organizations gathered] from survivors confirm that rape was extremely widespread and that thousands of women were individually raped, gang-raped with objects such as sharpened sticks or gun barrels, held in sexual slavery (either collectively or through forced “marriage”) or sexually mutilated.47

Rape, it can be argued, has become synonymous with war and genocide due to staggering figures within violent conflict and its effectiveness at destroying communities of the present and potentially of the future. The intent to eliminate Tutsi and moderate Hutu was perpetrated by extremist Hutu and was enacted through systematic slaughter. The plan to eliminate the Tutsi population was so well propagated through hate media and hatred incitement that planned destruction included destroying future generations of Tutsi by targeting women. Tutsi women had been specifically targeted due to their mysticized beauty and sexuality which Hutu propaganda alleged would infiltrate and control the Hutu community. Therefore, they were selected to be raped and were often forcefully impregnated by Hutu perpetrators as part of the plan to eliminate the Tutsi ‘race’.

As such, rape and sexual violence during violent conflicts and genocide should be represented and discussed alongside the killings as they are an integral part of mass violence. Its representation in Sourire malgré tout is noticeably minimal and slightly pornographic in nature and is only included in one panel that is not easily discernible among the crowded storyboard of panels and frames (see figure 4). Furthermore, a single panel does not adequately inform the reader of the widespread frequency of rape during the genocide. Rather, it obscures this central gendered component of the genocide among a visual sequence that depicts the brutality that was inflicted against the Tutsi at the Sainte- Famille church in Kigali. In the panel, a Hutu soldier is raping a topless Tutsi

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48 See Mardge Cohen, Anne-Christine d’Adesky and Kathryn Anastos, “Women in Rwanda: Another World is Possible,” JAMA 294, 5 (2005): 613. The article argues that Hutu extremists used the sexually transmitted disease of HIV as a weapon to exterminate the Tutsi, and estimates that 250,000 women were raped and tens of thousands infected with HIV. In 1998, an international tribunal convicted a Hutu rapist of a crime against humanity, an unprecedented ruling.

woman, who is attempting to force the soldier away. The information included in the panel informs the reader of the sexual violence that occurred to the women seeking shelter at the church, stating that “girls and women were first gang-raped by the soldiers.”

![Comic panel](image)

Figure 4. Rupert Bazamabanza, *Sourire malgré tout: L’histoire du génocide au Rwanda*. Published by Les Editions Images (2005).

It is undeniable that the brutality of the image is shocking, however one panel depicting the violence at a single location does not adequately transmit the gravity of sexual abuse experienced by a large majority of women across the country during the genocide.\(^5\)

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\(^5\) Despite the fact that Tutsi women were the prime targets of the *Interahamwe* (Hutu militia men), Hutu girls and women were not necessarily spared from sexual abuse as a result of their ethnicity and were often attacked. HRW states that: “some Hutu women were also targeted with rape because they were affiliated with the political opposition; were married to Tutsi men or because they protected Tutsi. A number of women, Tutsi and Hutu, were targeted regardless of ethnicity or political affiliation.”
addition, the harsh realities facing Rwandan women who survived the sexual abuse inflicted on them is long lasting. As HRW posits:

A large number of women became pregnant as a result of rape during the genocide … and their unwanted pregnancies and born children are commonly referred to as “children of hate”, “children of bad memories” and enfants non-désirés (unwanted children).51

The indiscriminate raping of Rwandan women has left deep scars in hundreds of thousands of women’s psyche and is still a largely overlooked issue within the country, due to the social stigma attached to the crime. Their personal suffering and social trauma are aggravated by minimal government support for women’s organizations in post-genocide Rwanda.52

As I have shown above, gender specific crimes in Rwanda were prolific during the genocide and were as central to the hundred days of violence as were the systematic killings. Therefore, what was Rupert’s motivation for minimizing its representation and not providing more detailed information in his graphic novel, whether through information boxes as he frequently uses elsewhere, or through additional panels? In our interviews, Rupert explained that he had wanted to depict the violence as he had witnessed, however he faced resistance from some members in the Rwandan community in Montreal who felt that his representation of the genocide was already too graphic.53 This is an interesting aspect to consider and begs the question, if the graphic nature of

51 Human Rights Watch, Shattered Lives, 3. As a result of the high number of unwanted pregnancies, health personnel reported to HRW that some women abandoned their children or even committed infanticide, while some have chosen to keep their children. Among women who chose to keep the child, it has not surprisingly caused deep divisions in many of these families.
52 Human Rights Watch, Shattered Lives, 71.
53 Rupert Bazambanza, Interview #4, (August 1, 2008).
genocide should be muted for the sake of its readers. Rupert feared that creating a highly graphic narrative would exclude the young audience he hoped to target with his work. I suspect that the subject of rape was not more overt in his work in part due to its sensitivity as a topic which could have directly affected his family and the Rwanga women. Rupert’s creation of a second-hand narrative is also his production of a ‘safer narrative’, which might potentially remove the focus from his personal experience while shining it on the Rwanga family. Throughout our interviews, Rupert never discussed whether members of his family or those of the Rwanga family were sexually abused; a sensitive topic that is not easily broached within oral history interviews with women and men. The personal and social stigma of rape is common in most societies throughout the world and is still highly stigmatized within Rwandan society. As such, surely he did not want to represent memories or experiences that could be seen to bring shame to his family, nor to Rose Rwanga whose family he sought to memorialize. Sourire malgré tout was meant to honour and pay tribute to the Rwanga family, and Rupert would clearly avoid addressing personal examples of sexual abuse if they in fact occurred as it could be seen to bring ‘dishonour’ to the family name.

54 See Eric Heuvel, Ruud van der Rol, and Lies Schippers, The Search (Amsterdam: Anne Frank House, 2007). A graphic novel created by The Anne Frank House in Amsterdam, The Search explores the main facts of the Holocaust yet without portraying the violence. It is told through the experiences of a fictional family during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands. However, during its creation, an international team composed of teachers and researchers tirelessly debated over whether to directly depict the horrors of the Holocaust in a graphic novel intended as a pedagogical resource, similar to the difficult negotiation that Rupert faced in his work.

55 See Marie Beatrice Umutesi, Surviving the Slaughter: The Ordeal of a Rwandan Refugee in Zaire (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 183. Umutesi details her survival and escape during the 1994 genocide as a moderate Hutu. She also puts forth a ‘safer narrative’ that reveals her hesitancy to delve into the most traumatic memories of possible sexual abuse. In one paragraph, she casually describes being taken into a hut with other women by a Hutu Interahamwe, as well as being searched down to her underwear systematically at checkpoints. But part of her interest in writing her first-hand account is comparable to Rupert’s as she did not make the abuses inflicted on Tutsi women central to her narrative, but rather sought to immortalize the memory of murdered family and friends, by repeatedly naming them in her account.
Rupert weaved into his narrative a depiction of Rwanda’s patriarchal society through the use of charged words such as ‘honour’ and ‘dishonour’ reinforcing gendered notions and expectations of ‘purity’ among both unmarried and married women in Rwandan society. For example, the daughter Hyacinthe, a beautiful young woman, had repeated advances made by Hutu and French soldiers and was offered protection by a priest in exchange for sex. In a series of panels, Father Munyeshyaka, a Hutu, disregards Rose and Hyacinthe’s pleas for protection as punishment for refusing his offer of ‘shelter’. The final panel of the conversation reaffirms the importance attributed to women’s ‘purity’ in Rupert’s work, as Hyacinthe states: “No Father - I won’t take back what I said. I won’t dishonour my parents. They brought me up to respect certain values. I’d rather die than shame myself before you!”56

56 Bazambanza, Sourire malgré tout, 61.

Figure 5. Rupert Bazambanza, Sourire malgré tout: L’histoire du génocide au Rwanda. Published by Les Editions Images (2005)
Rupert’s frequent inclusion of Hyacinthe’s commitment to remain ‘pure’ even if it meant a certain death is revealing of how he sought to portray and memorialize Hyacinthe as a woman who brought ‘honour to the family’ and is a reminder of the story he is attempting to tell.

When speaking about his traumatic memories, Rupert asserted in an interview: “ce qui a pu sortir est ce qui est raisonnable pour moi.”57 Within this conversation, he also added that what emerged was what he chose to deal with during the process of creating his graphic novel, an admission that reaffirms this difficult negotiation of what to tell. He explained that the process of making the graphic novel was a valuable opportunity for him to discover what issues and traumatic memories were still affecting him and those that he was not yet ready to confront and represent through images and words. As Cathy Caruth discusses, some survivors remain reticent to articulate certain memories because of “self-imposed censorships” as a way of coping with their traumatic experiences. Although Rupert still broached rape in his graphic novel, its minimal inclusion in the story could also be understood as a “self-imposed censorship” used to protect himself from having to rehash painful memories, as well as to protect Hyacinthe’s mother, Rose Rwanga from them.

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57 Rupert Bazambanza, Interview #4, (August 1, 2008). For the purposes of this paper, I have kept Rupert’s quotes in French as I believe they remain more powerful in their original language and seem to lose their meaning when translated in English: “What transpired in my graphic novel is what was reasonable for me.” See Riki van Boeschoten, “The Trauma of Rape: A Comparative View on the Bosnian Conflict and the Greek Civil War,” *History and Anthropology* 14, 1 (2003). The author argues that war rapes are intended to destroy the community’s cohesion. van Boeschoten interviewed Bosnian survivors of war rape and observed the reason why some women chose to bear witness to her as an interviewer- “what was the victim’s agenda in telling her their story”, and came to the realization that timing was a factor in their decision, as there was an omnipresent human rights discourse emerging empowering some of the women to seek justice.
Our discussion of gender inequality in Rwanda underlined the dominant ideology still prevalent in Rwanda today, which bears importance on a woman’s ‘purity’ and ‘virtue’ before marriage. Single women fear they might not marry if it is known that they are rape victims. As Rupert stated “[pour une femme] le fait de dire, oui, j’ai connu des relations sexuelles, peut diminuer ses chances de se marier.” Even Rupert’s use of language, calling it ‘sexual relations’, draws the focus away from the crime of rape to the woman’s role in the act as though it were consensual. As such, women do not easily come forth with rape accusations, as they could potentially be ostracized from their families and communities. The long-term repercussions facing women who were victimized during the genocide and self-imposed silences that many rape victims bear, provides further reason to ‘break the silence’ around this taboo and to effectively address it in a graphic novel that seeks to educate.

It is my contention that it is necessary to educate audiences about genocide and its gendered sexual violence, through a blend of texts and mediums including work by non-survivors of genocide. A diverse selection of interpretations and memory work is crucial to achieving a broader understanding of the event in question. Even though survivor memoirs and representations offer a candid look at one individual’s experience, ‘outsider’ perspectives can offer a nuanced analysis as a result of their distance and unattachment.

58 Rupert Bazambanza, Interview #3. (July 6, 2008). The English translation of Rupert’s quote: “The fact of saying yes, I’ve known sexual relations” can diminish a woman’s chances of marrying.
59 Human Rights Watch, Shattered Lives. 3. HRW states that the shame of the rape humiliates the family and all associated with the survivor and can thus be seen as an assault upon the community.
This distance can also allow for an interpretation of the ‘silences’ and gaps that are perhaps avoided by survivors who repress certain traumatic memories. Rupert’s narrative offered a single representation of the sexual violence that was prolific during the genocide. Representing rape proved to be a major negotiation that he confronted when creating the graphic novel. The following section will compare how non-Rwandan artists Jean-Philippe Stassen, Cécile Grenier and contributing artists have represented the Rwandan genocide, and how the ‘outsider’s’ lens represent the graphic reality of genocide.

An “ Outsider’s” Perspective

The medium of the graphic novel promotes creative ownership contributing to its ability to communicate more readily to the reader through image and text. Belgian-born artist Jean-Philippe Stassen refused to adhere to a common representation of the Rwandan genocide by depicting his main character, Deogratias, as a boy turned into a dog as he was driven to madness by witnessing the massacres of the Rwandan genocide. His fictional graphic novel, Deogratias: A Tale of Rwanda mediates between the on-set of the genocide and its aftermath through a series of borderless panels that indicate flashbacks and bordered panels indicating flashforwards. Stassen has been acknowledged as among the first Western authors to denounce the Rwandan genocide and the failure of the international community to respond. It is not surprising then that

Lemarchand’s criticism, Ostrovsky describes Rupert’s work as a “compelling account of the horrors suffered during the 1994 genocide,” adding that his book touches on “important historical issues.”

Stassen, a journalist who now lives in Rwanda with his family, won the prestigious French award Prix René Goscinny in 2000 for outstanding graphic novel script.

he produced a graphic novel on the genocide, depicting a Hutu teen who participates in the killings but is tortured by the memories and culpability he feels, which leads to his transformation into a rabid dog by the end of the story.

The story highlights several important themes of the genocide such as the controversial French collaboration in the killings of Tutsi and violent raping of women. Similar to its representation in *Sourire malgré tout*, only one panel is actually used to represent the prevalence of rape, while it is alluded to in different situations. In Stassen’s work, the panel graphically depicts a woman exposed after being savagely raped with a bottle and left for dead.63

![Image](image.png)

**Figure 6. Jean-Philippe Stassen, *Deogratias: A Tale of Rwanda.* Published by First Second (2006)**

Stassen spared little detail in the disturbing panel that highlights the sadistic methods used to sexually abuse women during the conflict. The frequency of rape is addressed in text rather than through images, in which a Hutu perpetrator praises Deogratias for having raped a girl through highly vulgar language.64

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64 Ibid., 74. This panel highlights how the raping of virgin girls and women was seen as the ultimate victory. The perpetrator commends Deogratias for having raped a virgin girl while Deogratias seems to ignore the praise and appears emotionless.
Stassen’s use of graphic language throughout the story underscores Rupert’s concern about excluding a young readership. It is not through continuous explicit images that Stassen represents the brutal acts of the genocide, but through a considerable emphasis on explicit language used by perpetrators that demonstrates the sadistic personalities of those who participated in the genocide. What does it reveal that the ‘outsider’ took on the perspective of the perpetrator? Perhaps Stassen sought to reflect and grapple with the complexity of how the genocide could have occurred, by considering the perspective of a perpetrator and the influence of hate propaganda. Engaging these themes did not serve as a cathartic exercise for Stassen, as drawing did with Rupert, but can be interpreted as striving to shock and confront the reader through uncensored text in order to transmit the gravity of what took place. In the English version of the book, translator Alexis Siegel includes a short but nuanced introduction which offers “unfamiliar readers a few useful historical pointers,” educating the reader before subjecting them to a challenging narrative from the perspective of the perpetrator.65

Jean-Philippe’s Stassen’s interpretation of the 1994 genocide was applauded by Rupert in which he called Stassen’s work a “heroic gesture.” An ‘outsider’, it can be argued has ‘less to lose’ in undertaking a creative project that pushes their emotional limits, as opposed to a survivor who must negotiate what they are willing to remember and voice without re-traumatizing themselves in the process. Rupert acknowledged that these authors are also taking personal risks as well as the process of creating a graphic novel can be all consuming and requires an investment on the part of the artist.66 However, can an outsider’s representation, often supplemented with numerous interviews

66 Rupert Bazambanza, Interview #4, (August 1, 2008).
and years of research, even closely approximate a survivor’s experience? This question implies that survivors can in fact accurately represent their experiences for others to comprehend, when often many admit that no level of representation can offer an adequate glimpse into what they survived.

In Stephen Feinstein’s article, “Artists and the Rwandan Genocide,” he raises important questions of concern for artists (‘outsiders’ or ‘insiders’) who choose to represent the genocide in their art. He questions “how to adequately convey the enormity and weight of injustice of mass killing?” and “how to elicit an emotional response from a viewer in a culture inured to widespread imagery of violence and cruelty?” Stassen produced a graphic novel that did not utilize visceral graphic images throughout but rather revealed how genocide affected a group of characters differently, while repeatedly juxtaposing these stories with the tranquil Rwandan landscape in the background. Does one artistic approach more adequately convey the magnitude of genocide to its audience? As Feinstein argues, different representations and attempts at doing so, challenge us to try and understand the event, an important outcome in itself.

In the second graphic novel, also produced by non-Rwandans, artists Cecile Grenier and Pat Masioni created a fictionalized account of the Rwandan genocide entitled, Rwanda 1994: Descente en enfer. At first glance, the cover page featuring a woman hiding in a swamp while a fire rages behind her, warns the reader of the dark and destructive tale that follows. Mathilde, the main character in the story, attempts to

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67 Stephen Feinstein, “Destruction has no covering: Artists and the Rwandan Genocide,” Journal of Genocide Research 7, 1 (2005): 36. Feinstein questions what has been the effect of artistic vision on our perception of genocide and atrocities. He argues that the effect of visceral art and images showing piles of bodies can only repel viewers while art that offers ‘absence’ also promotes ‘presence’- a representation that can lead to a useful discourse on genocide knowledge.

68 Feinstein, “Destruction has no covering: Artists and the Rwandan Genocide,” 44.

survive the slaughter mounting around her while sheltering her three young children. With a woman as the main character in the story, also seen in Rupert’s graphic novel, the reader gets a glimpse into the terrifying challenges that so many women faced during the genocide which were often compounded by trying to protect their children. Author Cecile Grenier reinforces the struggles that women faced throughout the genocide and in its aftermath, as they were a constant target for rape. In the introduction, Grenier describes having done months of interviews with survivors, former militia, and prisoners and describes how these interviews provided her with an understanding of the different facets of genocide she sought to incorporate into the narrative. This admission in the book’s introduction serves to provide Grenier with “authority” and suggests the authenticity of the account. The intensive research that is often completed by ‘outsider’ authors who decide to represent genocide can be quite extensive as various individuals who either perpetrated or survived the events are interviewed. Both Jean-Philippe Stassen and Cecile Grenier immersed themselves in these testimonies in order to write about an event neither had witnessed or could even attempt to imagine, allowing these testimonies to come together as one story.

In *Rwanda 1994: Descente en enfer*, artist Pat Masioni relied on darkened panels ranging in size to transmit fear and terror throughout the story. The centre page is a two page spread incorporating bubbles of memories rather than panels which represent Mathilde’s flashback to her rape by a French soldier and her subsequent pregnancy from the rape. A scene at the top depicts Mathilde stabbing the soldier during the rape, a
reminder that women were not always passive rape victims and some undoubtedly wounded or killed their perpetrators in their resistance.  

Figure 6. Cecile Grenier, Pat Masioni and Ralph, *Rwanda 1994: Descente en enfer*, Published by Albin-Michel (2005).

Mathilde is portrayed as a strong woman who succeeds in eluding and resisting the killers, but despite her best attempts cannot save her children from the perpetrators. Grenier and Masioni depict French soldiers in the story as merciless collaborators who participated in the missions to hunt and kill the Tutsi, a lesser-known fact about the Rwandan genocide that all three graphic novels discussed in this paper included in their representations.  

Grenier’s inclusion of a French soldier raping and impregnating Mathilde shine an accusatory light on France’s active participation in the genocide as part of the *Opération Turquoise* mission. Bringing such lesser-known facts to the forefront of

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71 See Mark Doyle, “Ties Frayed by Decades of Tension,” *BBC News Online*, November 24, 2006, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/6181988.stm. The Rwandan government has accused France of playing an active role in the genocide and a Rwandan justice ministry report claimed that France was aware of preparations for the genocide and helped train the ethnic Hutu militia perpetrators. France has previously denied any such responsibility in the genocide.
their work reinforces the importance of the issue to the reader, demanding its consideration throughout the text. One such fact that has had a surprising role in both *Sourire malgré tout* and *Rwanda 1994: Descente en enfer* is the occurrence of Hutu women who took part in the torture and killings in 1994. What was the significance of their involvement in the genocide and in the graphic novels listed above?

**Women as Perpetrators**

Within works examining the Rwandan genocide, little consideration has been given to the prevalence of Hutu women who participated in the killings and who were among those that master-minded the genocide. Lisa Sharlach’s article argues that a considerable number of Hutu women were involved in organizing and perpetrating the genocide alongside their male counterparts. In interviews with survivors, Sharlach gathered testimonies from survivors, including children, who witnessed the active participation of women in hunting and killing Tutsi victims. One widow claimed that “women were killing like men … what they were doing was horrible, they were hunting, telling where people were hiding, or going, taking clothes or jewelry from the bodies.”

In an interview, Rupert remembered how the notion of women as maternal and nurturing beings made it even more difficult to comprehend how local woman Angelina, portrayed in his work, organized and participated in the killings in his community. Rupert stated:

I don’t understand how she came to kill. She was a teacher and had every reason not to be a killer. She was a mother - all the aspects that contribute to having

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compassion and tolerance towards children. That is the reason why I could not exclude her [from my work] and why I portrayed her as accurately as possible.  

She is portrayed as a brutish figure, in full army combat gear armed with a machine gun. In one scene, Rupert focuses solely on her bloodied machete, bearing the blood of her former student who she just murdered. In the same panel, her daughter is depicted pleading for the child’s life, an objection that leads to her murder by her own father. The significance of his decision to include Angelina as one of the chief perpetrators in his community extends beyond his graphic novel.

By creating the graphic novel, Rupert was bearing witness to the crimes he saw and denouncing the perpetrators who committed them. He hoped that identifying Angelina in his book and depicting some of the crimes she committed, could impact her being brought to justice. His self-imposed role as a ‘prosecutor’ for the crimes he witnessed is further motivated by the fact that many of the killers have not been tried by the International Criminal Tribunal of Rwanda (ICTR) and by denouncing their participation in his work, he could contribute to bringing an end to their impunity. He believes it is part of his duty as a survivor to denounce what he witnessed and to condemn those involved through his book. ‘Prosecuting’ the perpetrators brings meaning to his survival as he announced in his book’s introduction: “I am denouncing for the victims who cannot and survivors who will not.” Many survivors living in Rwanda fear reprisals if they incriminate the perpetrators in the controversial and largely unpopular

73 Rupert Bazambanza, Interview #4, (August 1, 2008).
74 Bazambanza, Sourire malgré tout, 47. Inspector Angelina as she is known, is depicted as an intimidating, brutish figure throughout the narrative, fearfully obeyed by her male subordinates.
75 Rupert Bazambanza, Interview #3, (July 6, 2008). Rupert stated that he depicted Angelina and her crimes as accurately as possible in hopes that she would be captured and convicted by officials.
76 Bazambanza, Sourire malgré tout, introduction.
*Gacaca* trials, which encourages survivors to come forth against suspected killers, since many of the perpetrators are still living among the survivors in their communities.⁷⁷

Both Jean-Philippe Stassen and Cécile Grenier can essentially only denounce the crimes they ‘indirectly’ witnessed through survivor testimonies in their graphic novels but their works cannot be considered as a document of evidence in the same way as *Sourire malgré tout*. By incorporating the real identities of the perpetrators, Rupert’s book is also an ‘eyewitness’ report despite his almost total self-exclusion from the narrative. Can his graphic novel, as well as the fictionalized works by Stassen and Grenier, also be used as a tool to educate about genocide as Rupert has asserted?

A “Graphic” Education?

English literature professor Rocco Versaci defends the medium of comic books as a viable tool to engage students in ‘serious issues’ such as genocide since they facilitate the analysis of issues through creative narrative devices, blending the visual and the textual as already discussed above.⁷⁸ Rupert described how he sought to mediate between his graphic memories and a presentable narrative that could be used to educate students about the Rwandan genocide. He negotiated how to best portray traumatic issues through images and text by minimizing the explicit content of the subject in his graphic novel as a means to keep it available to a large readership. By editing his memories, Rupert crafted a tellable version of the story, satisfying his self-imposed duty to witness and ‘prosecute’. By undertaking the role of a spokesperson for the victims of the Rwandan genocide, his tellable narrative is unlikely to repel or exclude listeners or

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readers since the brutal realities of genocide are muted or scaled-down to ensure a larger audience.

His decision to scale down the graphic content in his work shields the reader from the realities of genocide, yet is a necessary provision for Rupert if he wants his work to be used as an educational tool among children and teens. Stephen Feinstein, who argues against a too visceral representation of genocide, as there is little explanation of ‘why’ it occurred, supported the artistic representation of artist Alfredo Jaar whose postmodernist approach: “challenged the viewer to imagine mass violence.” Jaar created an installation in Sweden where he put over 50 signs around town that said simply “Rwanda” in big bold letters. He affirmed that “absence could provoke a presence” and challenged his audience to imagine the horror without being ‘guided’ through it. 79 It is through this form of transformative abstract representation that allows for what Michael Rothberg calls ‘traumatic realism - an attempt to produce the traumatic event as an object of knowledge and to program and thus transform its readers so that they are forced to acknowledge their relationship to posttraumatic culture.” 80 Jaar’s artistic installations are a form of traumatic realism as they suggest to the viewer the “magnitude and traumatic reality of death in Rwanda” through a repetition of absent images that do not offer any redemptive characteristics but rather leave the viewer feeling distressed. 81

Both forms of representation - the graphic novel and Jaar’s installation of ‘absence’, create a partial ‘experience’ for the reader and the viewer requiring a

81 Feinstein, “Destruction has no covering.” 44. Representing the Rwandan genocide through ‘absence’ plays on the viewer’s senses while forcing them to become a detective to seek out an understanding of the event.
subsequent investment in the subject matter in order to approach a comprehensive understanding of the event. An interpretive analysis of nuanced texts (graphic novels included) and subjective narratives are fundamental to achieving a deeper knowledge of the magnitude of genocide and should be utilized in conjunction by educators. As Samuel Totten suggests, the value of survivor accounts humanizes the event, bringing meaning to collective numbers.82 It is also important to contextualize the event since embellished details or events can become fixed in the mind as hard facts. The graphic novels from Stassen and Grenier introduced readers to the Rwandan genocide through a broad overview of the facts suggesting its importance and necessity to contextualize their fictional representation. However, Rupert’s graphic novel situated readers within the context of the story requiring an active participation throughout to follow the course of the event. Totten claims that “oral history depicts what genocide means to the individual victim” since survivors recount what bears importance to them.83 Understanding why survivors recount or bear witness through texts and what they transmit can ultimately influence our interpretation of their narrative.

The graphic novels examined in this paper are part of the larger debate existing on the Rwandan genocide and contribute to shaping our understanding of the destruction. A narrative that actively engages its readers to critically consider the event and how it is being represented can be an effective method of educating and memorializing a genocide. This can be accomplished through a self-reflexive engagement with the work produced as a means of periodically reevaluating the information transmitted. Rupert’s decision to add a sub-title to his graphic novel, “The Story of the Rwandan Genocide,” purports that what

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83 Ibid., 163.
is contained within is the official story, a position not easily challenged when it is a survivor narrative. A self-conscious representation is an invaluable characteristic for all traumatic representations and would be especially beneficial in survivor testimonies as a way to reevaluate their subjectivity and their motivations for recounting.⁸⁴

Having listened to Rupert reflect on his graphic novel and his decision to memorialize the Rwanga family, it became apparent to me that his graphic novel was much more than just a tribute to a loved family. He re-discovered his artistic abilities when he began to work through his memories, a talent that always seemed to bring him great pleasure growing up as a child in Rwanda. He was even surprised to recall for the first time since the genocide how he had wanted to utilize his talent to leave messages behind in case his family was murdered.⁸⁵ He discussed how the process of recalling his experience at the start of the project was difficult for him, as he had time to reflect on all the traumatic experiences he had survived - memory-work that did not take place before arriving in Canada.⁸⁶ Actively remembering his experiences during the genocide through his drawings allowed him to realize which memories he was not comfortable rehashing, and ultimately proved to be a cathartic experience that he still receives from his work.⁸⁷ For Rupert, simply the process of realizing that he did not want to depict certain memories proved to be therapeutic as well. Mary Marshall Clark argues in her article on

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⁸⁴ See Art Spiegelman, *Maus I: My Father Bleeds History and Maus II... And Here My Troubles Began*, presents a self-conscious narrative in *Maus* as he attempts to reconcile his desire to create a graphic novel but yet is hesitant of the success to be made from a narrative based on his father’s experience during the Holocaust.

⁸⁵ Rupert Bazambanza, Interview #1, (June 3, 2008).

⁸⁶ Ibid. Rupert remembered how there was little emphasis and sparse resources available in Rwanda following the genocide for survivors to deal with their traumatic memories. The process of mourning and healing was derived through the exhumation of mass graves to rebury loved ones in traditional religious ceremonies- a ritual that still occurs today. See Claudine Vidal’s article “La commémoration du génocide au Rwanda: Violence symbolique, memorization forcée et histoire officielle,” *Cahiers d’Études Africaines*, XLIV 3, 175, (2004). Vidal argues that the process of exhuming and re-burying the dead is counter-intuitive to national healing efforts and reconciliation.

⁸⁷ Rupert Bazambanza, Interview #1, (June 3, 2008).
Narrative Medicine that the “process of healing comes only when it is shared.”\(^8\)

However, this assertion disregards the individual process necessary in written text and artistic representations before it is viewed or read.

As Rupert discovered, the process of recalling his traumatic experiences, actively engaging specific memories in image and text and reflecting on his decision to do so, constituted a form of healing for him. The following step of disseminating those memories and sharing them with an audience also facilitates the healing process. In addition, making art goes against what genocide strives for - finality, loss, disappearance, and destruction. The process of witnessing is a function of his role to denounce and condemn the perpetrators he witnessed killing, as well as the international community that ignored the slaughter that unfolded in his country. The final aspect of his role is to educate his audience about the genocide, especially students, in hopes of awakening their “moral sensibilities” so that they are able to address issues of racism and discrimination in their society. Authors Jean-Philippe Stassen and Cecile Grenier may not have delineated a specific role for themselves as Rupert declared, but their fictionalized graphic novels also condemn the perpetrators of the genocide (albeit through fictional characters) and seek to educate their readers through a narrative based on survivor testimonies and other research they undertook. Their distance from the genocide as ‘outsiders’ does not infringe upon the narrative but rather strengthens it by revealing a self-consciousness to ‘get the story right’. They strived for a nuanced yet representative

\(^8\) Mary Marshall Clark, “Holocaust Video Testimony, Oral History, and Narrative Medicine: The Struggle against Indifference,” *Literature and Medicine*, 24, 2 (Fall 2005): 2. She also suggests that: “through the process of attention, the patient experiences the acknowledgment that allows telling, [allowing] the creation of a narrative to begin.” See Greenspan, *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors*, xx. Greenspan suggests that “the essential truth is that survivors recount in order to be heard.” This “essential truth” is evident through Rupert’s decision to create a graphic novel, stating in his preface that he believes his duty is to witness as a “town crier” and to testify to whoever will listen.
depiction of the stories recounted to them from survivors and perpetrators, and an inclusion in their works of a detailed introduction with the ‘facts of the event.’

Daniel James points out in his seminal text *Dona Maria’s Story*, that we frequently know “the facts” better than our informants. Yet, how do we reconcile the value of subjective interpretations while attaining the facts? James suggests that we can apply different evaluative criteria concerning truth telling to different levels of narration and memory. Interpreting survivor narratives reveal how survivors understand genocide and make sense of their personal experience. How can the role of the reader or listener be influential to the process of telling? What is retold is often influenced by the anticipated reception it will receive, and survivor’s assumptions of our expectations. Rupert had to mediate between how much his readers could ‘handle’ while remaining true to his memories and his role as a witness.

In our interviews, Rupert never admitted if this was a difficult negotiation and said that Rose Rwanga trusted him completely to portray her family’s experiences and was honoured that he chose to do so. He hoped that his decision to recount would empower Rose to begin the process of dealing with her memories through a medium best suited for her. In the book’s foreword, Rupert “invites his fellow survivors to continue with the sacred task [of witnessing] …in order to know peace.” In several of our conversations, Rupert asserted that he believes it is necessary for survivors to recount, for doing so continues to help him deal with his haunting experiences. In our first interview

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90 Ibid., 135.
92 Rupert Bazambanza, Interview #3, (July 6, 2008). Rupert stated “when I made my book, I was not going to consult Rose all the time. Seeing as how it’s a story that I also experienced- I was there, so she knew that I was intimately familiar with the story, because it was also my own.”
93 Ibid.
together, I was nervous that my inexperience as a new interviewer might provoke a re-traumatizing experience for Rupert by recalling untapped memories.\textsuperscript{94} However, when we spoke off camera at the end of the interview, Rupert stated that I had in fact triggered a ‘stored away’ memory that, although painful, he was happy to recall. Fortunately he saw this as a positive experience and was undeterred by the possibility of being overwhelmed by his memories. He reminded me that he believed that speaking to others about his experiences was part of his continuous effort to deal with his traumatic past, despite the occasional difficulties of doing so. Oral historian Mark Klempner suggests that “perhaps by telling, the traumatic event becomes drained of some of its toxicity.”\textsuperscript{95} However, it not the event itself that becomes drained of its toxicity as Klempner suggests, but the process of retelling it, as over time, it becomes a “tellable narrative.”

\textbf{Conclusion}

Ultimately, the expectations on the survivor to recount their experiences and to do so accurately can make a challenging experience even more difficult and intimidating. Listener expectations emerge from our understanding that ‘they were there’ and our assumption that they ‘know’ the event like no other. Attaining a closer understanding of the event is not necessarily through the ‘facts’, but through how the survivor interprets the event and its impact on them. Understanding what motivated their recounting is telling of the narrative they offer. In addition, how they choose to represent their experiences is an important piece of the puzzle.

\textsuperscript{94} Gadi Benezer, “Trauma Signals in Life Stories,” 34. Benezer lists thirteen signals of trauma which are evident when an interviewee is recounting. The signals could amount from experiences with which they have already come to terms.
\textsuperscript{95} Mark Klempner, “Navigating Life Review Interviews with Survivors of Trauma,” in \textit{The Oral History Reader}, 200.
What has emerged in this paper was an attempt to assess how a survivor’s subjective position influences their narrative and in turn, our comprehension of the event. What silences transpire, if any, as a result of this influence? Comparatively, how does the influence of the ‘outsider’s’ perspective affect how the subject matter is presented? Rupert Bazambanza’s graphic novel Sourire malgré tout, Jean-Phillippe Stassen’s Deogratias: A Tale of Rwanda and Cecile Grenier’s Rwanda 1994: Descente en enfer are significant representations of the Rwandan genocide presenting three different vantage points on the violence. Rupert’s third-person omniscient point of view throughout the narrative was a result of his commitment to create a memorial for Rose Rwanga and her murdered family. Sourire malgré tout is Rupert’s visual and textual chronicle of the genocide and is a poignant testimony that reflects the challenge of self-representation that some survivors might confront when bearing witness. Through his vocal dissociation in the narrative, his work demonstrates how the effects of trauma persist long after the event. This decision allowed him to narrate ‘from a distance’, indirectly representing his memories in his book. Interestingly, in this case, the survivor-artist needed to put some distance between himself and the story told, whereas the two authors from an ‘outsider’ position attempted to bridge this distance by compiling survivor testimonies to gain an understanding from the ‘inside’. This process still required Rupert to rehash painful memories, however through a ‘safer narrative’. A negotiation of what to transmit was necessary, as the primary purpose of the graphic novel was to commemorate his friends by rehashing common experiences, but also to bear witness in order to denounce racism and prejudice.
Our interviews together provide revealing reflections and valuable insight into how the representation of a traumatic past forms personal identity. From our first interview together, I could not help but notice that Rupert seemed to take on a different ‘role’ in front of the camera - bearing a more formal style when answering my questions. In two interviews, he introduced himself as “Rupert Bazambanza, activist/illustrator” and referred to this title in another. He wanted to be identified by the viewer as an activist/illustrator - two roles that do not initially indicate that he is a survivor of the Rwandan genocide. His ‘reconstructed identity’ influenced his graphic novel and what he decided to transmit.\footnote{Judith Zur, “Remembering and Forgetting: Guatemalan war widows’ forbidden memories,” in \textit{Trauma: Life Stories of Survivors}, 55. Zur describes how some survivors incorporate new language to identify and define themselves.} In addition to his roles as an activist/illustrator, Rupert has become a ‘spokesperson’ for the victims of the Rwandan genocide, through his personal initiatives of narrating and speaking out against the genocide in honour of those who cannot. His preferred medium, the graphic novel, has received considerable attention as an explosive cultural phenomenon as well as a means to educate. It is a powerful and viable tool to educate various ages about genocide due to the ways in which it transcends ordinary art and text, by engaging the reader through its multilayered visual and textual elements. As Stephen Feinstein asserts, “because of the relentlessness of the historical narrative, one might speculate that art may be the most powerful device to create some understanding [of genocide], despite Theodor Adorno's famous admonition that there can be ‘no more poetry after Auschwitz.'\footnote{Stephen Feinstein, “Reviews,” Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies, University of Minnesota, http://www.chgs.umn.edu/museum/exhibitions/bittersweet/reviews.html} Its ability to ‘transport’ the reader closer to the event of genocide is an important contribution to making it ‘knowable’. Rupert’s graphic novel and the fictional representations by Stassen and Grenier offer diverging and
penetrating lenses into the events of the genocide. It is through these separate analyses and interpretations that a nuanced understanding of the Rwandan genocide can hope to be achieved.
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