

# **Resistance, struggle and protest against genocide and incarceration: The case of *Talitha Koum – Someone lied!* and *1983 – Years Before and After***

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## **Abstract**

This article positions theatre as a site for victims and activists to action their resistance against Gukurahundi related incarceration and human rights abuse perpetrated in the 1980s. Through case studying *Talitha Koum* and *1983*, we examine resistance strategies deployed through theatre performance to expose Gukurahundi violence, invigorate debate and hold public officials accountable. We submit that theatre performance offers a ‘liberation’ of cultural memory from state regimes of censorship and suppression. We observe that performances served as a form of agentic resistance against the original acts of violence perpetrated during the genocide, and the subsequent ‘psychological incarceration’ experienced by victims.

**Keywords:** Gukurahundi; alternative space; *Talitha*; 1983; activism

## **Setting the framework**

Never again will the lions tell the stories of the kudus.<sup>1</sup> (Moyo 2018)

Gukurahundi marks a painful period in Zimbabwe’s history, especially to the Ndebele people of Matabeleland and Midlands provinces. It refers to the 1983–1987 period in Zimbabwean history characterised by an unconfirmed genocide where thousands of the minority Ndebele speaking people of south-western Zimbabwe were beaten, shot, raped, burnt alive or thrown into mine shafts or unconfirmed graves. Others were held in holding camps where they lost their cultural matrices as they were deprived of family, friends, fortunes, and occupations (Sibanda 2020). Key to the Gukurahundi strategy was the administration of brute physical and psychological violence by the Fifth Brigade<sup>2</sup> on mostly Ndebele people of Matabeleland provinces and western parts of the Midlands province. The violence was the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front’s (ZANU-PF) strategy of creating and consolidating its power and hegemony within the Zimbabwean polity. While ZANU-PF considered Gukurahundi a necessary security intervention, the Matabeleland populace considered it ethnic cleansing. As a result, Gukurahundi has become a contested historical event. There have emerged competing narratives that sought (and still seek) to explain what transpired as well as exonerate or implicate certain individuals as sponsors or victims of Gukurahundi. On the one hand, local Gukurahundi narratives have been gagged by the government of the day while on the other, it has been specifically framed for an international audience as a historical

neo-colonial project sponsored by the British and apartheid South Africa to destabilise the newly independent nation. The brutal response to the ‘insurgents’ and the community harbouring them was, in the government perspective, a clear message to the British and Afrikaners.

Consequently, the government has continued to deny culpability, silenced dialogue and enforced a mainstream media blackout on issues related to Gukurahundi, while historians and cultural practitioners have since the early 1980s protested, using a variety of media and art forms to express their displeasure on the atrocities committed by the state during and after Gukurahundi. With this account, we attempt to examine how Gukurahundi historical events have been represented on the stage in two productions, *Talitha Koum – Someone Lied!* (hereafter referred to as *Talitha Koum*) and *1983 – Years Before and After* (hereafter referred to as *1983*). Our analysis also explores how these productions express and communicate a community position regarding Gukurahundi. In other words, we examine strategies of resistance deployed through theatre performance to remember and represent (or present) Gukurahundi, to invigorate debate and hold public officials accountable.

The difficulty in providing a specific monolithic characterisation of Gukurahundi largely epitomises the historical trajectory of Zimbabwe as a nation. It is also the source of the Government(s) of Zimbabwe banning, censoring and surveilling all activities related to the remembrance of the Gukurahundi era and victims. This has been done by the former government led by former President Robert Mugabe as well as the current government under President Emmerson Mnangagwa. Both governments have also been dominated by Shona tribesman implicated in the instigation, planning and implementation of the ‘gukurahundi strategy’ (CCJP 2007). Thus, the government has closed down all forums for public acknowledgement of psychological trauma for both the victims and perpetrators, which has enforced a psychological carceral state on Matabeleland and some parts of Midlands communities. This imprisonment has been aptly described by one victim of Gukurahundi who asserted that ‘upika ugqoke ezakho’ (you serve your sentence while in your clothes and house) (Moyo 2018). We submit that this is a form of ‘psychological incarceration’ – a manifestation of years of circumscribed pain due to mass torture, detention, killings, rape and forced disappearances during Gukurahundi, and the inability to speak of these experiences openly.

This security-backed censoring of Gukurahundi remembrance activities, coupled with a deteriorating political and economic landscape since the turn of the millennium has further worsened the carceral conditions. While South Africans were afforded an opportunity of truth-telling and reconciliation performance through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission inquiries into apartheid-era killings and abuse of power, Zimbabweans have further been driven into psychological incarceration by regularly disputed elections which are characterised by violence, fast-track land reform and civil service protests. The cultural public sphere through music and theatre performances, though not entirely free from surveillance and censorship by state security personnel, has remained the only outlet through which victims have ‘escaped’ or resisted these carceral regimes of violence and control.

We seek to explore the ability of the theatre performers, playwrights and directors, and the respective productions’ ability to present, frame and represent this painful historical period and the competing memories from a historical and futurist perspective as observed by Freddie Rokem (2000, 3), who notes that:

What may be seen as specific to the theatre in dealing directly with the historical past is its ability to create an awareness of the complex interaction between the destructiveness and the failures of history, on the one hand, and the efforts to create a viable and meaningful work of art, trying to confront these painful failures, on the other.

It is this dual responsibility attached to the historical re-enactment of Gukurahundi in *Talitha Koum* and *1983* that we seek to engage with in this paper. This engagement is also informed by our experiences as young people from Matabeleland who have been directly and/indirectly affected by the Gukurahundi period. Personally, my mother and I<sup>3</sup> were arrested, when I was only 2 weeks old, and kept at Matopo holding camp for two weeks in January 1985.<sup>4</sup> As we set in the auditorium and watched these historical enactments and watched our co-audience members respond emotionally to the various images and stories presented on stage, we felt a sense of release, safety and belonging. As such, our analysis implicates our own suppressed experiences that have for a long time sought a release point.

Writing from the perspective of theatre and performance, Katherine Johnson borrows Richard Schechner's concept of performance as 'twice behaved behaviour' (1985, 38). She submits that 're-enactment as a form of twice behaved behaviour, can provide a way for the re-enactor to "re-become what they once were" or to "re-become what they never were but wish to have been or wish to become"' (2015, 38). From this perspective, we read nuanced strategies of resistance and remembrance explored in these case studies; expressing the community's (and our own) fears, anxieties, struggles, hopes and dreams. In Rokem's words, we examine how *Talitha Koum* and *1983* (re)present the 'burden of the past and the possibility of a new beginning' (2000, 2).

Theoretically, we deploy Diana Taylor's 'performance as an episteme' (2003, xvi) approach. This framework enables us to view *Talitha Koum* and *1983* as both subjects of analysis and lenses through which to analyse and appreciate Gukurahundi. This approach is deployed in line with Rokem's (2000, 8) observation that theatrical performances of and about history can provide a direct critique of not only certain figures and their actions but also complex ideological issues, contested identities, subjectivities and power. This reflection, resistance and critique is located within the theatre performance's aesthetic representation models, which are also influenced by diverse discursive practices. In examining these aesthetic models and discursive practices, we seek to understand and lay bare the political potential of theatre performance in challenging, exposing, resisting, re-awakening and actualising painful pasts in Zimbabwe. Through deploying this theoretical approach, we do not only respond to Dening's (2002) call for us to reflect on the processes by which we make sense of the past, but also Taylor's (2003) call to recognise and problematise the way performance depicts and actualises the real.

This paper is divided into three sections. Inclusive of this introduction, the first section provides a contextual historical background and descriptive information on Gukurahundi, *Talitha-Koum* and *1983*. The second section engages with the case study performances and how they liberate the memory of Gukurahundi and resist normative hegemonic histories. In the last section, we engage with the aesthetic strategies employed in *Talitha Koum* and *1983* to carefully balance the (re)presentation of Gukurahundi in contemporary Zimbabwe.

### **On staging gukurahundi: *Talitha Koum* and 1983**

In responding to the focus of this special issue, this article is framed by the observation that Zimbabweans, especially from Matabeleland, are in a different kind of prison created by gagging and chaining the memory of a painful Gukurahundi past, through arrests, surveillance, torture, censorship, and disruption of memorial activities. The carcerality that we engage with in this paper therefore details and describes a kind of psychological incarceration anchored on a contested postcolonial memory of a powerful articulation of being chained to a painful past – presented from the vantage point of second-generation survivors’ testimony and re-enactment. Most, if not all of the participants, writers, actors, directors and producers of these two works endured their infancy or childhood during the Gukurahundi era. Some emerging with contested identities as their fathers remain unknown – an issue which *1983* engages with.

The play *Talitha Koum – Someone Lied!* was written and directed by Desire Moyo and produced by the Victory Siyanqoba Trust. The play was performed at Bulawayo Theatre in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe on 30 December 2018 during the Intwasa Arts Festival KoBulawayo Extra to a full house. The lead character Talitha was played by Sasha Sandys, the costume was designed by Victory Siyanqoba Trust Production Company Team (Desire Moyo aka Moyoxide, Bhekumuzi Khumalo, Ishmael Zulu and Antony Zulu) and lighting was designed by Saimon Mambazo Phiri. The play opens with echoes of ‘Koum! Koum! Koum!’ (Arise! Arise! Arise!) bellowing out on the speakers. As the curtain is lifted, a rural setting characterised by huge logs of wood, fresh tree branches on the ground (actually hiding the main character Talitha who at this stage is dead), rocks and trees in the backdrop is revealed. On the left of centre stage, a male character stands in a frozen position lifting an axe, his right foot stepping on a wooden log on the floor. Adjacent to him, stands a female character, also in a statue position, holding in the air a wooden pestle suspended over a wooden mortar. At centre stage, sits a middle-aged woman (on the floor – with legs stretched out) holding a topless toddler on her lap. Two other men stand adjacent to each other downstage left and right. This image is disrupted by 5th Brigade soldiers who drop onto the stage from the roof using ropes in a military-style abseil.

The plot revolves around Talitha, a young woman who was killed by the 5th Brigade soldiers during Gukurahundi but is called back to tell her story, opening a window for the audience to journey with her as she exposes the violence, lies, and an alternative Gukurahundi narrative from the perspective of the victim. While chasing after Talitha, the 5th Brigade soldiers maim, kill, rape, and dump her family and all the young active women and men in mass graves. In a stylised manner, all the infants born during this period are branded by the 5th Brigade soldiers as ‘offspring of the dissidents’ with the violence that is meted out on them leaving some permanently disabled. As the play draws to an end, all the people that were killed by the 5th Brigade soldiers rise from their graves and confront the then Prime Minister, now former President Robert Mugabe, who maintains the ‘official rhetoric’ that it was a moment of madness. The Prime Minister later implicates himself when he threatens to kill them again: ‘vakada kunetsa tovarova’ (if they want to be problematic, we will beat them up).

Aesthetically, *Talitha Koum* adopts an African communal musical approach reminiscent of the South African anti-apartheid plays by the likes of Mbongeni Ngema, and Percy Mtwa among others. This performance approach, which makes use of documentary evidence (Paget 2009; Harte 2017) had previously taken root in the Zimbabwean arts sector through the works of Cont Mhlanga’s Amakhosi Theatre Productions, the Bambelela Arts Ensemble, and

various high school productions. Samuel Ravengai observes that most of the cultural work emerging from Bulawayo adopts South African performance aesthetics because of the similarities in culture:

Traditionally, the centres of cultural authority for Bulawayo and the rest of Matabeleland lie outside the borders of Zimbabwe. For rural folk, their centre of cultural authority is KwaZulu-Natal, the place they were driven from by Tshaka during the Mfecane, but also, more realistically, by increased Afrikaner incursions into the Free State, where they had temporarily settled in the 1840s. For urbanites, their centre of cultural authority is Gauteng, where much of South Africa's most vibrant black theatre comes from. (2015, 284)

Highlighting this influence Talitha says, when she speaks for the first time:

I met Sarafina in the world of Mbongeni Ngema – a fighter, a youth leader, a girl. Her story was about apartheid – racial syndrome, but my story is about dead bodies, dead truths and realities. No one alive must die *ingakhulunywanga ley'indaba* (before this issue is discussed openly). (Moyo 2018)

This invokes Morris (2007, 173) observation that 'common to the plays of the apartheid era was the need to interrogate, understand, resist and protest the racism, inequities and many injustices of the South African state.' Probably drawing inspiration from Mbongeni Ngema's *Sarafina, Talitha Koum* makes use of music at strategic points in the play to comment on the plot, to raise questions and to create context. The production also represents Gukurahundi related acts of violence through flashbacks between the current situation and during Gukurahundi. For instance, in one scene Talitha's grandfather helps her understand why she is an orphan through a flashback that takes the audience back to a killing that happened during Gukurahundi. This would have been of interest to most of the audience members who were drawn from civil society organisations that have been campaigning for the restitution of Gukurahundi victims. Using a flashback technique, *Talitha Koum* and *1983* take the audience through the killing fields, bringing onto the stage violence in the form of raping, maiming, killing and psychological torture of young women, mothers and men. For instance, in one scene soldiers drop down from the fly gallery in a military-style abseil to surround everyone and, in slow motion, start shooting at every moving body in their sights. This is amplified by the sound of an AK47 which is timed to the body movements of the Fifth Brigade soldiers shooting their victims.

*1983 – Years Before and After* was written by Bhekumusa Moyo, directed by Adrian Musa and co-produced by Raisedon Baya and Adrian Musa. It was performed at Bulawayo Theatre in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe on the 29<sup>th</sup> of September 2018 during the Intwasa Arts Festival KoBulawayo. The lead character, Girl, was played by Proficiency Kadder. The play is a story of a nameless Girl on a journey in search of her real identity. The young woman, who is an orphan, has had difficulties obtaining a birth certificate from the Registry Offices. Each time she goes to apply for a birth certificate, Registry officials ask her to provide the cause of death of her parents which, unfortunately, she does not have. Determined to get her birth certificate and other identity registration documents, she visits her grandfather to ask him about the circumstances surrounding the death of her parents. With some difficulty, her grandfather narrates how 'her father' disappeared during Gukurahundi. As the grandfather narrates this story, the audience is taken on a journey, through flashback, back to the Gukurahundi era in the 1980s. The 5th Brigade soldiers are seen killing, torturing and beating

people. Women are mercilessly raped. The greatest shock for the nameless young woman comes towards the end of the play when her grandfather reveals that the man who was married to her mother, the one she had regarded to be her father at all, was not her father. It transpires that after this man was abducted and presumably killed, a 5th Brigade soldier raped her mother and Girl was conceived. This man who fathered her was one of the 5th Brigade soldiers who executed the Gukurahundi atrocities. After her birth, we are told that Girl's mother suffered depression and psychological trauma and committed suicide.

Within the Zimbabwe performance industry, theatre productions that openly engage Gukurahundi are rare, largely because cultural production in Zimbabwe is highly fragmented, falling into the ethnic and ideological trappings affecting regional and national politics. For instance, most of the theatre productions coming out of Harare engage with the condition of the urban citizens in light of a debilitating socio-economic and political landscape, while those emerging out of Bulawayo largely engage with the challenges of the rural populace and the postcolonial political and cultural tensions. Consequently, Harare based theatre groups such as Savanna Arts, Global Arts, Edzaiisu and Rooftop Promotions engage with the contemporary and current political situation while Bulawayo based groups such as Victory Siyanqoba, Homegrown Arts, Siyaya and Bamblela Arts struggle with the impact of historical events, activities and periods on the current position of Zimbabweans. From an ethnic perspective, Bulawayo theatre groups see themselves as the rightful spokespersons of the victims of Gukurahundi and other historical incidents specifically because they are either second-generation victims or have family who are victims. Yet, Harare theatre-based practitioners, by virtue of the majority being Shona, are implicated by the victims of Gukurahundi and in some instances by Bulawayo based Ndebele theatre practitioners in the ZANU-PF Gukurahundi grand plan. In essence, it raises issues to do with authenticity and the positionality of enunciation.

### **Gukurahundi performances and the cultural public sphere**

Resistance during Gukurahundi was virtually impossible especially in holding camps such as Bhalagwe and Matopo. In these holding camps, which have 'unconfirmed<sup>5</sup>' mass graves, people dragged from the surrounding communities were beaten, shot, raped, burnt alive or thrown into mine shafts; and lost their cultural matrices as they were 'deprived of family, friends, fortunes, and occupations' (Plunka 2012, 89). Upon the deployment of the 5th Brigade in Matabeleland and some parts of Midlands, the government closed off media access to the affected areas, banning journalists from leaving Bulawayo, without permission (Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace-CCJP 2007; Santos 2011). Thirty-eight years later, these case studies give a 'voice to those who have lost theirs' such as the Gukurahundi survivors and their children in a manner that unsettles the past and 'provides opportunities for confidence, self-worth and accomplishment' (Taylor 2011, 198).

The cultural public sphere is characterised by Jin McGuigan as 'inclusive of various channels and circuits of mass popular, entertainment, the routinely mediated aesthetic and emotional reflections on how we live and imagine the good life' (2005, 435). *Talitha Koum* and *1983*, as mediated aesthetic and emotional reflections on Gukurahundi, 'provide vehicles for thought and feeling, for imagination and disputatious argument, which are not necessary of inherent merit but may be of some consequence' (McGuigan 2005, 435). Within the broader Zimbabwean public perspective, the performance of plays that explore Gukurahundi related data and experiences lacks merit because they have been characterised by the government as unnecessary efforts to open old wounds (We need not open old wounds 2021). Yet, to the

marginalised people of Matabeleland and some parts of Midlands, these performances such as *Talitha Koum* and *1983* articulate politics and societal issues as they manifest daily. We therefore examine these productions as instances of communication and community engagement with a specific interest in how they foster, dispute or create public opinion and identities related to Gukurahundi. From a public cultural perspective, we further explore how these theatre productions operate as affective communications that ‘help people to think reflexively about their lifeworld situations and how to negotiate their way in and through systems that may seem beyond anyone’s control on the terrain of everyday life’ (McGuigan 2005, 435).

The two performances present us with a window for understanding the community’s resistance strategies and mechanisms latent in their actions of submission. These resistance mechanisms are linked to issues of self-expression, identity and freedom (Shailor 2011). Through these two case studies, young people from Matabeleland and Midlands, discover and amplify their voices, liberating themselves to ask questions that might be difficult to pose in their public lives. The first such instance is the action of telling these Gukurahundi stories and declaring that the victims must tell their experienced narrative. Returning to the opening quotation from Moyo, this declaration proposes and supposes that there is an alternative Gukurahundi story that the victims (kudus) must tell to dispel the perpetrator’s (lion’s) dominant narrative and the fear attached to it.

Secondly, through usurping their personal history as victims and children of victims of Gukurahundi, the actors perform both as themselves and as actual personages, they represent (Martin 2006, 10). In *Talitha Koum*, Talitha is called back from death to tell her story and that of her community, where she claims to have met some members of the South African 1986 Soweto uprising who were killed by the apartheid police. In the words of Carol Martin, in both these instances the ‘dead, absent, unavailable and disappeared make an appearance by means of surrogation’ (2006, 10). As surrogates, the actors on stage perform a dual role; as themselves and actual personages they represent. This embodied representation of the Gukurahundi violence and psychological incarceration positions these productions at the forefront of community representation. In *1983*, the use of a nameless character served to universalise the reach and effect of Gukurahundi by making it anyone and everyone’s story. In so doing, the Gukurahundi struggle is transposed from an ethnic locale to a national, regional and international platform where it can be equated to the Rwandan genocide, the Jewish holocaust or the South African apartheid.

In this context, the actors in their dual capacity as characters on stage and hyper-historians (Benjamin 1999), function as witnesses of the event, which validates the authenticity of the incidents depicted on the stage as historical occurrence. The bodies of the performers, as containers of collective and personal memories, become sites of representation of the Gukurahundi violence. In *Talitha-Koum*, the bodies of people killed that rise from death to demand answers enable the performers (in their dual positions) to ‘re-become what they once were’ or ‘re-become what they never were but wish to have been or wish to become’ (Schechner 1985, 38). This enables characters such as Talitha, her father, the Man and the nameless young woman to look the perpetrator in the eye, former President Robert Mugabe’s character and the 5th Brigade soldiers, and ask them ‘why *ukhathaza abantu?*’ (Why are you troubling people?). They are also able to liberate the memory of Gukurahundi from state suppression by posing this question to a character who emulates Robert Mugabe in mannerisms, speech and dress. At this moment, it feels like the characters and the audience

have the power to confront and question Robert Mugabe about Gukurahundi as well as liberate themselves from this psychological prison.

A third instance in which community resistance is enacted and traced in the productions is in the use of real evidence in the form of documentary material such as speeches, characters and songs that were sung in the massacre fields. These provide a mechanism for resistance that not only implicates the perpetrators through their speeches but also implicitly challenges them to explain their position at the time the speech was delivered and whether this still reflects their current position. For instance, in *Talitha Koum*, the 5th Brigade soldiers sing the song 'Mai VaDhikondo' which we characterise as a Gukurahundi anthem because it became a defining musical score at holding camps and communities affected by Gukurahundi. Further, the character of former President Mugabe retains the default narrative of 'a moment of madness' (Gaidzanwa 2015, 162) whenever engaged on Gukurahundi. While Mugabe's rhetoric to banish those, who memorialise Gukurahundi to a psychiatric ward served to protect his romanticised liberation and *Chimurenga* credentials, in *Talitha Koum*, Mugabe's character gets physically and verbally attacked by Talitha every time he reverts to his default position. Talitha's action is symbolic of the community's refusal to accept Mugabe's explanation regarding the cause and expected outcome of Gukurahundi. This ability to draw from an archive that is concrete, historically situated and relatively permanent generates an 'aesthetics of discomfort through a systematically dismantling of boundaries between nightmare and reality, poetry and fact, the quotidian and the extreme' (Edmondson 2009, 66). To borrow from Brenda Werth, these two productions 'construct the subjectivity of the repressor figure through onstage explorations of discourses of confession and mechanisms of denial, escapism, betrayal and vengeance' (2010, 70). Mugabe's default rhetoric encapsulates all these characteristics.

The mechanisms of resistance that we have exposed here create a cultural public sphere that enables Gukurahundi victims to break out of decades of psychological imprisonment and present an alternative Gukurahundi history from the vantage point of experience and reflection. This performance against the grain provides an opportunity to the victims of Gukurahundi, who have for a long time been ostracised, to bring their experiences to the public space. In presenting the stories of the perpetrator, the victims and their children, these case studies create and offer us (new) ways of thinking about the disturbing contexts and complicated subject of Gukurahundi, while at the same time also revealing the virtues and flaws of its source. Throughout the performances, spectators stand with Talitha, the nameless character and other victims of Gukurahundi through interjections, protestations, denouncement and empathy. In the scene where the little baby is 'pounded' in a mortar with a pestle, women scream and stand up as the lights flash on and off. These psychological states are key in the creation and development of alternative public opinions and histories critical for social action and liberation of the Gukurahundi memory.

Whereas governments have disrupted memorial events of the Gukurahundi victims, such as the building of the 'Memorial Tomb' at Bhalagwe, as well as arresting artists that revisit the period through visual representations, these two case studies have circumvented this censorship because they were programmed within a government 'supported' festival. The Intwasa Arts Festival koBulawayo was initially managed and later overseen by the National Arts Council of Zimbabwe (NACZ) on behalf of the Ministry of Youth, Sports, Arts and Culture. While the festival has been handed over to the Bulawayo community of the Matabeleland provinces, NACZ retains political interest and always claims rights to the successes (only) of the festival. It is important to note that this production was only



performed within the festival space. The festival is a strategic platform for state security to gauge and appreciate the socio-political temperatures of the Matabeleland provinces, more so when the Human Rights Commission of Zimbabwe (HRCZ) was scheduled to undertake public consultations of the challenges faced by Gukurahundi victims and survivors and the second generation early 2019.<sup>6</sup> While the state could have used these performances for its gain and security purposes, the fact that they happened and were performed to full houses is testament enough that they opened a new discursive platform of engagement regarding Gukurahundi. In essence, these performances broke the psychological carceral instruments/devices of surveillance, fear and control, and revitalised the burning desire and need for answers through rhetoric questions posed both, to the audience and government by most characters in both plays. Gukurahundi is thus 'depicted not as an event of the remote past but as a continuous exploration of human terror through the devices of interrogation and testimony' (Dean, Meerzon, and Prince 2015, 11).

### **Liberating the Gukurahundi memory through performance**

The two productions present us with characters who open a window for us to peep into their gagged memories and memoirs of the Gukurahundi. These stories of a painful, fettered past pose critical questions relating to the community's ability to freely remember Gukurahundi. This kind of freedom, both at a personal and aesthetic level, present a triumph over the repression of painful historical pasts by postcolonial governments, especially in Africa. However, within the Zimbabwean geo-polity as we have submitted in this paper, events and stories celebrating or remembering Gukurahundi are 'imprisoned'. Subsequent generations involved in the production of these performances adopt an aesthetic approach to liberate the memory and history of the victims from this psychological 'prison' when they present this painful historical past on stage from the perspective of young women. Rokem observes that the absence of 'traditional forms of commemoration' (2000, 55) assigns the important function to theatre performances (such as *Talitha Koum* and *1983*) of creating their own sense of ritual and commemoration. Thus, theatre might provide an optic for representing resistance to the Gukurahundi psychological violence; resistance that shakes off the fetters of this mental incarceration and opens the memory box for the whole world to see.

The dominating theme in both plays is a demand for answers to the Gukurahundi violence and killings that left many of today's young people orphaned. The massacred young people rise from the world of the dead, in stained tattered clothes and still quivering in fear, to confront the characters of 5th Brigade soldiers and former President Robert Mugabe. This aesthetic representation by the young women in *Talitha-Koum* invokes a subaltern resistance that identifies marginality as more than a source of deprivation. Although deprived of their youthfulness and a fulfilled life, the act of bringing these young people back to life reminds the audience of the victims' collective strength, narrative and memory. Within the audience, state security agents were deployed to monitor the live event.<sup>7</sup> This representation of the grave and the dead as sites of resistance against psychological imprisonment creates a counter language anchored on the collective and experiential resistance of the past. This language manifests as the rising from death and collective resistance to silencing by the state. On the margins of fear and painful history, transformative resistance is born.

Both plays deploy the concept of 'metaphysical ventriloquism' (Rokem 2000, 54) that enables the collision of the world of the dead and living. In *Talitha Koum* and *1983*, the dead come back to voice their resistance to the continued 'imprisonment' of both their memories and the living. In other words, these two productions are about an agentic voice or a witness

from the country of the living dead.<sup>8</sup> From a traditional African spiritual perspective, Talitha and the Man summon spiritual disciplining powers by challenging the perpetrators and resisting domination from their graves. The dead speaks and looks over the living, operating as a protector and guardian angels of the 'living living'. It is believed therefore that the living dead, in their intercession on behalf of the 'living living', fight the spiritual battles and administer revenge on behalf of the living dead. In invoking this spiritual dimension in their fight to liberate the Gukurahundi memories, these performances transgress and challenge the biblical 'holier-than-thou' attitude of living Gukurahundi perpetrators.

Yet, there is an interventionist call to the Judeo-Christian spiritualism as well. For instance, *Talitha Koum* is a biblical invocation of a woman from the dead (Mark 5 vs 41). In this case, Talitha, to dispel the lies spread by political leadership concerning Gukurahundi. The recalling of Talitha from death to tell her story from a first-person narrative and the repetitive use, in declarative stance, of 'Someone Lied' and 'Koum!' questions the authenticity of the Gukurahundi normative narrative provided by the government. This strength of challenging this narrative, defined by Felman and Laub (1992, 94) as 'a claim to establish a certain history', grants agency to these performances and enables them to establish a counter-historical narrative from the perspective of the 'kudu': the victim. *1983* raises a question of a concealed painful history, watershed by the year 1983. The biblical narrative links darkness to evil, characterised by all the things that the Ten Commandments stand against. These Gukurahundi painful years have been enclosed in a memoir box of the elite and the powerful, banishing the affected communities to decades of psychological imprisonment.

Both performances deploy rhetorical questioning as an aesthetic strategy of gaining consent from the community and challenging the community to action and expose the perpetrators. *Talitha Koum* begins with Talitha's father repeatedly asking the audience if they are willing to watch and listen to their Gukurahundi stories; '*Lingitshela ukuthi liqinisile ukuthi* you want to listen to our stories?' (Are you really sure that you want to watch and listen to our stories?). *1983* begins with the nameless girl asking an old man questions about her identity, paternal history and demanding the explanation to their death in a 'democratic' Zimbabwe. The whole story then unfolds in an attempt to answer the young woman's questions.

The 'fiction' created in these performances is that the spectators have 'given' consent to (watch and) listen to this story being told. From an African storytelling narrative, this rhetorical device creates a rapport, where an audience is transformed from a spectator into a witness. This kind of transformation enables the performers to implicate spectators into the performance, condensing the time-lag of the *now* of the performance and the *then* of the historical events (Rokem 2000), and giving the past its own present and new ways of understanding that past (Dean, Meerzon, and Prince 2015). This creative collision of the time lag 'offers us a way to think about disturbing contexts and complicated subject matters' (Martin 2006, 9), such as Gukurahundi, as if they were happening now. The staging of provocative performances such as *Talitha Koum* and *1983* enables performers to open and reveal themselves to each other and the audience with whom they share work. This creative use of rhetorical questions created the desired threshold through which both the performers and spectators revealed themselves to each other at the beginning and end of the performances.

To draw again on Edmondson (2009, 66), *Talitha Koum* and *1983* presented a 'unique poetics of violence [that] illuminates the intricate political web in which narratives of the genocide are entangled and categories of survivor, bystander, and murderer intertwine.' In *Talitha*

*Koum*, young children were pounded to death and women were raped in full view of their boyfriends or husbands. As this pounding to death of children is dramatised on stage, the audience is heard shrieking in pain and protesting. Talitha, Senzeni's father and the other young girls are rounded up by the 5th Brigade soldiers, killed with a hail of bullets and burnt with gasoline. In 1983, the character of Man narrates:

They said she must put the boy in the grinding pot. She ground him when they all watched ... Your mother pounded your brother to soup which she was made to taste. The whole village was forced into a song. They were forced to dance. They were singing the song as your mother pounded. They sang in the language from the other side (Moyo 2018, 19).

Further in 1983, there is a scene where the 5th Brigade soldiers find a young man conversing with his lover and force him to masturbate. While engaged in the act, one of the 5th Brigade soldiers quickly moves in and cuts his penis with a knife and forces him to watch as he rapes the girlfriend. The brutality shown in these two productions generate an aesthetics of discomfort that systematically dismantles boundaries between nightmare and reality, but authentically represents narratives of victimhood that prevents the erasure of history.

This violence which resulted in the deaths and disappearances of elders is the cause of the struggles faced by the second generation of Gukurahundi survivors. Talitha's father fails to secure a death certificate for Talitha because the government officials at the Registry Offices refused to record Gukurahundi as the cause of death. He is ordered to find another cause of death, which he vehemently protests and refuses to do. In 1983 there is a similar problem. The character of the nameless Girl narrates:

I went to the office of identification where they write your name and give you a number for you to be known with. They said I must know my father, bring his death certificate if it is true that he died. Other than that, I am a troubled old man. I am troubled about who I am really! I want to know the hospital where my father and mother died. I need proof that they died. I only seek to know that. (Moyo 2018, 7–8)

The refusal by Talitha's father to accept a death certificate with 'dead truths', as he says, and the bringing back of dead characters to life so that they can tell their own story grants agency to the Gukurahundi alternative narrative. While perpetrators have publicly and privately acted and claimed their innocence, and feigned ignorance of these Gukurahundi crimes, these productions reveal explicitly 'the atrocity triangle – the relationship between victims, perpetrators and observers' (Werth 2010, 14).

In *Talitha Koum*, Victory Siyanqoba makes use of a soundscape, created through voice and song and delivered at critical points that are characterised by violence. The song '*Why ukhathaza abantu?*' (Why are you troubling our people?) operates as an artistic rhetorical questioning of Gukurahundi perpetrators as well as providing relief for the spectators who are now 'witnesses' of this violence. This re-transformation is critical because it enables spectators to critically engage with what they have watched so they can make sense of the past and create their own connotations of the performance. This rhetorical structure used in both case studies brings out the idea that we are witnessing a testimony that uses historical data to debate its implications on generations yet to come.

The plays adopt a futurist trajectory at the end. In *Talitha Koum*, as all characters stand in a file on stage while one character declares: ‘The process of healing starts with the courage to talk about it. If we are really committed to healing, then we must embrace the courage to talk about it. Truth must be told. We must let truth express its wings and fly, let it multiply [...]’ (Moyo 2018). The ‘resurrected victims’ then run off stage, supposedly to tell their story to the world. *1983*, ends with a call for the second generation to forgive and forget. The Man pleads with the nameless Girl to forgive and love her enemies. He prays for her and releases her to live her life in freedom. As she walks offstage, all the other characters sing *Nkosi Sikelel’iAfrica* (God bless Africa) calling on Africa to come together and be liberated from psychological ‘prisons’ that are similar to that experienced by the nameless Girl.

## **Conclusion**

The survivors of Gukurahundi continue to die due to deeply instilled psychological traumas and physical ailments stemming from the violence and abuse at the hands of the 5th Brigade. The second generations, therefore, have a responsibility to keep alive the painful memories of Gukurahundi. The younger generation such as those involved in the Victory Siyanqoba Trust need to invest in generating awareness, connections and aesthetic responses to the memory of their elders’ trauma and victimisation. As we have exemplified in this paper, while *Talitha* is re-called from the world of the dead to tell the story of her family at the hands of Gukurahundi, most of the issues posed to the current government relate to issues affecting the second generation. Most, if not all of the actors in the two-case study plays we have examined were either born during or after Gukurahundi.

These cultural performances cannot and should not be viewed in isolation. These plays come as part of efforts by cultural practitioners to amplify the silenced voices of Gukurahundi victims. On 29 September 2018, Zenzele Ndebele screened a documentary titled *Gukurahundi Genocide: 36 Years Later* at the Rainbow Hotel in Bulawayo. In March 2010, Owen Maseko’s exhibition entitled *Sibathontisele (Let’s Drip on Them)* opened for less than two hours at the National Art Gallery in Bulawayo. As the title of Maseko’s exhibition suggests, one of the methods of killing employed by the perpetrators of Gukurahundi was through the dripping of burning plastic on the victims and leaving them to die due to the pain. Ndebele was summoned for questioning by State security, and while Maseko was arrested his exhibition shut down through a High Court order for undermining the authority of the president. Future research can extend on this study by engaging these cultural productions as critical utterances that defy politico-security restrictions, speak truth to power, and voice resistance. This will help to further liberate incarcerated memories and histories and offer communities a mechanism for freedom and release from forms of state-imposed psychological prison.

## **Disclosure statement**

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

## **Notes**

1 This is an African saying that intimates that the stories of the subaltern need to be told by those with experience and not those with political and economic power.

2 The Fifth Brigade refers to a ‘special’ brigade that was created by Robert Mugabe and trained by the North Korean Army specifically to attend to ‘insurgencies’ in Matabeleland and Midlands provinces. The Fifth Brigade only was operational during the Gukurahundi period (1982–1987) and was later disbanded, granted blanket immunity and integrated into other brigades located across the country.

3 The ‘I’ refers to Nkululeko Sibanda. Moyo has his own very personal encounters and experiences with Gukurahundi which relate to Talitha.

4 Growing up within such a historical context, we were given monikers that captured these painful moments. I was called ‘Ntolongweni’ (Jailbird) while my cousin sister was named ‘Ntombiyejele’ (Girl from Jail). There were many other families that were kept at these holding camps, some even getting separated for life.

5 We call these ‘unconfirmed’ because the state has blatantly refused to admit that there are mass graves in these areas just like the Gukurahundi genocide (see Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace - CCJP 2007; Maedza 2017).

6 This followed other outreach programmes by the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission (NPRC) hearings in 2018 which gave an opportunity for victims in Matabeleland to come forward. The Monhlante led Commission of Inquiry in 2018 also opened space for Gukurahundi victims to share their frustrations and experiences with the world. Yet this Commission of Inquiry was set to deal with the post-election violence that happened on the 1st of August 2020.

7 Most Gukurahundi related events have in the past been disturbed or stopped by state security agents who would have been ‘masquerading’ as audience members. We easily identified some of these agents in the auditorium.

8 This adopts an indigenous African spirituality that characterises the dead as the ‘living dead’ who provide spiritual protection and guidance to the physically alive.

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