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Identity and the Genocide That Did Not Happen: An Analysis of Two Zimbabwean Plays *1983: Years Before and After* and *Speak Out!*

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Abstract: Between 1983 and 1987, three years after Zimbabwe gained independence from Britain, there were disturbances in the Ndebele dominated Matabeleland and Midlands provinces, resulting in the massacre of an estimated 20,000 unarmed civilians by an elite armed unit sent by the newly elected democratic (Shona dominated) government. This has become known as the Gukurahundi. The atrocities ended with the signing of the Unity Accord in 1987; however, the Gukurahundi issue has remained sensitive, due to the official silence on this painful period, which has lasted many decades. Victims and families in this community have been given no closure. This article examines the portrayal of identity/genealogy issues by two stage plays: *1983: Years Before and After* and *Speak Out!* The view that we take is that theatre offers a map of individual and social experience that provides a tapestry of the people's suffering, pain, concerns, hopes, and aspirations. We observe that the plays under study grapple with issues of identity emanating from the undocumented deaths and disappearances of people during the Gukurahundi, whose effects manifest today in the lives of the survivors and children of victims, through failure to obtain birth certificates and identity documents, and through an identity crisis. We conclude that theatre has provided an avenue for the victims of the Gukurahundi to share their experiences and to protest against their continued marginalisation.

Keywords: Gukurahundi; theatre and identity; *1983: Years Before and After*; *Speak Out!*



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1. Introduction

Following Zimbabwe's independence from Britain in 1980, suspicion and mistrust arose between the Robert Gabriel Mugabe-led Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) political party, hereafter referred to as ZANU and the Joshua Mqabuko Nyongolo Nkomo-led Patriotic Front–Zimbabwe African People's Union (PF ZAPU) political party, hereafter referred to as ZAPU. While ZANU held the majority power in the north, north-eastern, east, and south-eastern parts of the country, ZAPU's main support base was in the western, southwestern, and central Matabeleland and Midlands provinces. The Matabeleland provinces have a largely Ndebele speaking population. Ndebele people are a cultural minority, with Shona being the majority. Within a few years of independence, Zimbabwe was faced with a dissident problem that affected the Matabeleland and Midlands provinces. In response, the then Prime Minister, Robert Mugabe unleashed a North Korean-trained Fifth Brigade to 'crush' the dissidents in Matabeleland and Midlands provinces, and according to the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace & Legal Resources Foundation (CCJP & LRF (1997)) the biggest casualties of this violent operation, which killed in excess of 20,000, were civilians.

The CCJP & LRF report of 1997 notes that 'it is clear that thousands of innocent civilians in Matabeleland were killed or beaten and had their houses burnt during these years, mostly at the hands of Government forces' (CCJP & LRF 1997, p. 15). The atrocities began in 1983 and ended in 1987 with the signing of the Unity Accord between ZANU, represented by Robert Mugabe, and ZAPU, represented by Joshua Nkomo. The atrocities

have become known as the Gukurahundi, a Shona term that means the rain that washes away the chaff or dirt from the last harvest, before the spring rains (CCJP & LRF 1997). This terminology equates, in this instance, the people of Matabeleland and Midlands to chaff. The likening of human beings belonging to an ethnic minority to 'waste' or 'detritus' constitutes, in our view, genocidal language, for it sought to justify the violence that they were subjected to as a 'cleansing'.

Ordinary civilians who were not dissidents were branded as such, making it appear as though all Ndebele people were either dissidents or their supporters. There was little evidence to support such a claim. This has resonances with the Rwandan genocide, where Waller (2002, p. 47) points out that "the Hutu extremists called the Tutsi *inyenzi*, meaning 'cockroaches' or 'insects'." Waller calls this the dehumanisation of victims, which the perpetrators do so as to absolve themselves of the moral responsibility of their actions and to justify the unleashing of violence upon their victims. Similarly, Skloot (1982, p. 6) observes that before and during the Holocaust, 'German citizens were subjected to viciously anti-Semitic propaganda in which Jews were labelled as subhuman criminals or likened to nonhuman disease-causing insects'. Genocide was, therefore, encouraged as a solution. The Gukurahundi unfolded in a similar manner. A striking similarity between the Rwandan genocide and the Gukurahundi is that both coalesced around tribal affiliation as opposed to religious difference, although for the Gukurahundi, the ZANU versus ZAPU politics played a huge role.

The Gukurahundi atrocities have been described as genocide by a UN affiliated group, Genocide Watch. In its 2021 report, Genocide Watch captured the Gukurahundi as follows:

Between 1983 and 1987, the Fifth Brigade of the Zimbabwe National Army killed more than 20,000 ethnic Ndebele civilians in Matabeleland and Midlands. Thousands more were detained, tortured, or raped. The atrocities, known as 'Gukurahundi', constituted genocide because the Shona-dominated Fifth Brigade intentionally destroyed a substantial part of the Ndebele ethnic group. (Genocide Watch 2021)

Scholars such as Mpfu (2019), among others, have weighed in, also describing the Gukurahundi as genocide. Maedza (2017) has referred to the Gukurahundi as an unconfirmed genocide. Arguably, the Gukurahundi was a two-pronged conflict, with the first being between the state security forces and the dissidents, whilst the second involved the persecution of ZAPU members and unarmed civilians of Matabeleland and Midlands provinces by the Fifth Brigade soldiers (See CCJP & LRF 1997). According to Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2004), during the Gukurahundi, the Ndebele people, who mostly supported ZAPU, found themselves being brutalised by the government under Shona dominated ZANU leadership. The government of Zimbabwe has, however, preferred to refer to the Gukurahundi as a civil war (CCJP & LRF 1997, p. 31). This description is rejected by those who experienced this violence, as the civilians were unarmed and there is no evidence that they mobilised themselves or offered any resistance to the brutalisation by the Fifth Brigade. Again, such a reference glosses over the two-sidedness of the conflict that was going on in Matabeleland and the Midlands provinces, as we have just argued. It is widely held that the government chose to build the narrative of a civil war, to justify its deployment of the Fifth Brigade in Matabeleland and Midlands provinces and quash possible tribally aligned political opposition.

Whilst the Gukurahundi ended with the signing of the Unity Accord in 1987, its effects are still affecting the victims and survivors and their children. One of the key challenges that arises from the Gukurahundi is a bureaucratic one, but with huge personal consequences. Many people who were killed or abducted during this period were undocumented, other documents were destroyed as part of the operation through fire. Surviving children have battled to get birth certificates and other identity documents enabling them to access social grants, education, and exercise basic rights to vote, amongst other things.

After the Gukurahundi, the government muted dialogue around this issue of bloodshed and criminalised it, such that those who openly talked about it risked arrest. It is only

recently, in the last two years, that the government has come out saying people can share their Gukurahundi experiences openly. Mistrust and fear of government, however, has meant these stories have been slow to emerge from citizens in their personal capacities. During the period when the Gukurahundi was considered taboo and a crime to mention, however, and indeed up to the present, art in general, and theatre in particular, have offered an alternative space to address the Gukurahundi issue (See [Mpofu 2019](#); [Mpofu and Moyo 2017](#); [Sibanda and Moyo 2021](#)) by the brave.

This article examines the portrayal of issues of identity and belonging by two Zimbabwean stage plays: *1983: Years Before and After* and *Speak Out!* We seek to understand how these theatrical works frame and articulate the identity issues that affect the children of the Gukurahundi victims. Furthermore, we will unpack how these works act as avenues for the marginalised to express their views and to articulate issues that affect them as a form of protest. In our analysis, we take Karin Barber's (1997) view, that African popular culture serves as a map of experience for its creators. Barber (1997, p. 5), commenting on songs produced in Mozambican plantations, argues that they were "generated by people's suffering, giving collective voice to memories of pain, to make them serve as a 'map of experience'". We therefore argue that the plays under study were inspired by the painful experiences of the Gukurahundi and that they serve as a collective voice of a community that is refusing to be silenced, but rather to continue to speak truth to power.

2. Popular Performance and Change in Africa

The two plays under consideration exist beneath the umbrella of African popular theatre ([Kerr 1995](#)), because they are rooted in ordinary people's experiences and they seek to give agency to their creators. This is at the centre of popular theatre. Popular performance forms, such as theatre and songs, play a critical role in African contexts, to both reflect the state of their creators and to mobilise the oppressed and galvanise them into action for the betterment of their circumstances ([Young-Jahangeer 2015](#)).

The aspects of popularity and politics unite the plays, but the process and form differ between them. *1983: Years Before and After* was written by Ndebele playwright [Moyo \(2011\)](#) and falls comfortably within the genre of protest theatre, a form which was popularised by the likes of Athol Fugard and Mbongeni Ngema in 1980s South Africa. Well-made plays, written for seated and paying audiences present a dramatized narrative in one or two acts, which reveals the impacts of a political injustice on individual lives. The genre often draws on popular forms of song and dance to emphasise the specificity of the struggle, but the characters' experiences can be understood universally. *Speak out!*, on the other hand, is an example of an applied theatre form ([Prentki 2015](#)), called popular participatory theatre (PPT) ([Young-Jahangeer 2020](#); [Chinyowa 2009](#)).

Applied theatre is a broad term encompassing multiple forms of theatre that see the possibilities theatre can offer in fulfilling an objective beyond entertainment. This objective is most usually developmental or educational and is concerned with social change ([Taylor 2006](#)). PPT is particular because the participation of the community concerned is key to the process at every level. The issue emanates from a community, who are guided through the playmaking process by a facilitator. The play itself, is presented to an audience made up of other members of that same community. The play is not presented in a resolved form and the 'audience' are invited to discuss and engage with the content at the end of the play. The form draws from Paulo Freire's (1971) problem-posing pedagogy and African popular cultural forms ([Barber 1997](#)). In this sense, the play presents a dramatized problem in order to catalyse a discussion around it. The play *Speak out!* was facilitated by Cletus Moyo in 2019 in Bulawayo, with a group of second-generation sufferers of the Gukurahundi. The audience was comprised of family members and the wider Ndebele community.

[Skloot \(1982, p. 3\)](#), commenting on the Holocaust, argues that 'history is retold and re-experienced through song and story, poem and play'. We, therefore, view the plays under study, irrespective of form, as ways of telling or sharing the Gukurahundi experiences by the community that either directly or indirectly experienced it. As observed

by Zondi (2008), in African popular culture, artistic expressions such as songs that come from people's experiences are used as ways of commenting on these experiences and negotiating them. Furthermore, art and culture offer a particular and creative way of breaking an unhealthy 'culture of silence' (Freire 1971). Commenting on the Holocaust, Bigsby (2006) discourages the oppressed from choosing a position of suffering in silence. Rather, he encourages speaking out on the painful experiences, as a way to begin a process of healing. Within African examples, this theatrical articulation is usually collective and focused on social change. Most notable is Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii's (1982) *Ngaahika Ndeenda (I will marry when I want)* performed in 1977 and published in 1982, whose critical portrayal of postcolonial Kenya created a movement for change in the form of the Kamiriithu Community Education and Cultural Centre (wa Thiong'o 1986, p. 34). Miranda Young-Jahangeer (2014) reflects on how popular participatory theatre in a South African Female prison assisted the women to share and process traumatic experiences collectively and within a surveilled and oppressive space. The form enabled a non-confrontational way of speaking back to power that is aligned with African cultural practices (Magwaza 2001). The way theatre is created can also play a critical role in creating a platform for addressing sensitive issues, as seen in Gina Shmukler's (2014) reflections on her theatre work, which addresses the issue of xenophobia in South Africa. The script for Shmukler's play was created from interviews with the victims of xenophobia. This demonstrates theatre's potential to be made from experiences of the victims and thereby intersect real-life and creative expression, in a way that reveals possibilities for theatre beyond entertainment (Prentki 2015).

The two plays we are analysing were created by members of the community that were affected by the Gukurahundi, and we argue that, to a large extent, they capture the experiences of the Gukurahundi victims. They also, as has been argued, offer a space for individual and collective healing to begin, by using the form to catalyse conversations. However, perhaps more importantly, by inserting the discourse around the atrocities into the public sphere, there can be a push towards some practical change that can benefit the victims in their day to day lives.

Art in general, and theatre in particular, has been used in Matabeleland, Zimbabwe to speak to the Gukurahundi and issues emanating from it. Besides the two plays under review, other examples include *Talitha Koum!—Someone Lied*, written and directed by Desire Moyo (2018) and produced by Victory Siyanqoba; and *The Good President*, which was written by Cont Mhlanga (2007), who also directed it. This is a political satire that was banned by the government of Zimbabwe. The subject has also been depicted through film, with a documentary by Zenzele Ndebele (2018) titled *Gukurahundi Genocide: 36 Years Later*. This was cautiously screened at Rainbow Hotel in Bulawayo on the 29th of September 2018, during the Intwasa Arts Festival koBulawayo. On the visual arts scene, Owen Maseko's (2010) exhibition titled *Sibathontisele (Let's Drip On Them)* opened at the National Art Gallery in Bulawayo for only a few hours, before state authorities came down heavily on it and shut the exhibition down and arrested Owen Maseko for allegedly undermining the government (Mpofu 2019). The plays that we review in this article are, therefore part, of these concerted efforts by artists/creatives to address the Gukurahundi, by reflecting and commenting on it, raising questions, sharing experiences of the victims, protesting the silencing of victims, and challenging the government to address the Gukurahundi issue.

Whilst a lot of research has been done on the Zimbabwe liberation struggle, the same cannot be said for the Gukurahundi which took place in the post-colonial era. This article, in part, seeks to fill the literature gap that exists in this area. We also seek to document the experiences of the Gukurahundi victims. In this way, we hope to contribute towards the creation of a community archive that can provide a reference point for Gukurahundi experiences. The article also seeks to contribute towards an 'alternative' memorialisation of the Gukurahundi. This, we hope, will help the victims find closure and make the nation acknowledge the atrocities, as a cautionary tale for Zimbabwe—and the world—around

what countrymen can do to one another in the pursuit of one man's ambition for absolute power. Robert Mugabe ruled for 37 years.

3. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach. In particular, we use a case study approach, with multiple cases. According to [Creswell \(2013, p. 97\)](#), 'case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection, involving multiple sources'. For data, we used observations drawn from recollections of the performances of the plays, videos of the performances, responses during post-performance discussions, and the written scripts of the plays. The two plays that we focus on in this research, *1983: Years Before and After* and *Speak Out!* were purposively sampled. Purposive sampling involves a deliberate choice of a participant due to the qualities it possesses. It allows for the selection of information-rich cases that have the potential to serve the needs of the particular research ([Etikan et al. 2016](#)). The two plays were chosen because they deal with the bureaucratic consequences of a 'genocide that did not happen'.

4. The Plays under Review

At this point of [her] effort [woman] stands face to face with the irrational. [She] feels within [her] the longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world. ([Camus 1991, p. 28](#))

In this section, we present the summary of the plays under discussion and the contexts in which they were produced. We also introduce the themes of the plays and position them within the scope of the study.

1983: Years Before and After, was written by Bhekumusa Moyo and directed by Adrian Musa. Raisedon Baya and Adrian Musa coproduced the play for the Intwasa Arts Festival koBulawayo. The play was, therefore, performed during the festival on the 29th of September 2018 at the Bulawayo Theatre, Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. Bulawayo is the second largest city in Zimbabwe and is located in the Matabeleland region. It featured, as its lead actor, Proficiency Kadder, who played the main character 'Girl'. The play unfolds the story of a nameless girl, an orphan, who is on a quest to discover her true identity. She tries to uncover information about her parents, in an attempt to piece together the puzzle of who she is and where she came from. Girl, who in the play is now a young woman, takes us through her experiences of being identity-less. Her greatest struggle is that, for a long time, she has been unable to get a birth certificate at the Registry Office. In an effort that can only be characterised as absurd ([Camus 1991](#)), every time she visits the Registry Office to apply for a birth certificate, the officials there insist that she should provide the cause of death for her parents, which unfortunately she does not have. Girl bemoans:

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 troubled old man, am troubled of who really I am. I want to know the hospital where father and mother died. I need proof that they died. I only seek to know that. ([Moyo 2018, pp. 7, 8](#))

Pressed by a need to get a birth certificate and other identity documents, Girl visits her grandfather to inquire about the circumstances surrounding the death of her parents. This puts her grandfather in a difficult position, yet the old man summons some courage and tells her that her 'father' disappeared during the Gukurahundi. The grandfather's narration ushers the audience into a flashback that revisits the events of the Gukurahundi days during the 1980s. In the flash back, Fifth Brigade soldiers mercilessly kill civilians, torture some, and brutally beat up others. It is a gruesome episode. The flashback also captures women being raped. The killing, torture, and raping are represented on stage

mainly through mime. The nameless young woman follows the narration from the old man with keen interest. Unbeknown to her, the narration leads to a bitter ending—much more bitter than she had expected. Her grandfather tells her that the man that she has regarded as her father up to this point is actually not her father—the man who was married to her mother is not her father. The grandfather reveals that the man that was married to Girl's mother was abducted and presumably killed by Fifth Brigade soldiers. After which, Girl's mother was raped by a soldier and she was conceived. Girl's father was therefore a Fifth Brigade soldier, a perpetrator of violence against her mother and her imagined community (Anderson 1991). Following the rape, Girl's mother was overwhelmed by trauma and depression and committed suicide. The play ends with the Girl grappling with the information she has received and trying to figure out how she can manoeuvre past the pain.

Speak Out! (Moyo 2019) is a play that was collectively devised by a group of young people from Bulawayo and facilitated by author 1. The play was performed in Bulawayo in September 2019. A central theme of the play was the identity crisis faced by children of the Gukurahundi victims and emanating from the failure to become documented citizens. One of the participants in the devising process had first-hand experiences of such a challenge. The devising team, therefore, weaved his experiences into the play, together with accounts that the participants had heard from their families, relatives, friends, and the community at large.

The play centres on the story of two young people who are planning to marry, but whose lives are haunted by their history, to the extent that their planned wedding and future together is under threat. The young man's father was killed by Fifth Brigade soldiers during the Gukurahundi bloodshed and the Registry officials (again) refused to process a birth certificate for him because, as far as they are concerned, the Gukurahundi is not an accepted cause of death. Owing to this, the young man failed to get a birth certificate bearing the names of his father. To manoeuvre past this hurdle, he resorted to using his mother's surname. However, as he approaches marriage, the young man's main worry is that even his children will use the 'wrong' surname and may never know their true lineage and, thus, their identity will also be affected. In Ndebele culture, and many African cultures, a child inherits his or her father's surname, and ancestral lineage. His or her identity is tied to that of the father's side culturally and spiritually.

On the other hand, the woman, the young man's fiancée, is struggling to come to terms with the death of her aunt, who died as a result of being bayoneted by Fifth Brigade soldiers during the Gukurahundi. What comes to the fore is that the aftermath of the Gukurahundi is affecting the couple as individuals, but also their future generations. The problem of attaining identity documents for the victims of the Gukurahundi and their children is a deep-seated one and has persisted since the Gukurahundi days. According to CCJP & LRF (1997, p. 6):

Possibly hundreds of murder victims have never been officially declared dead. The lack of death certificates has resulted in a multitude of practical problems for their children, who battle to receive birth certificates, and for their spouses, who, for example, cannot legally inherit savings accounts.

The play employed the popular forms of music and dance, since the storyline borders around groomsmen and the bridesmaids, who are busy preparing the wedding dances for the anticipated wedding. As we have already pointed out, this play was collectively devised, the participants were responsible for selecting the dances and songs and working out the choreography. The play *Speak Out!* made use of songs as commentary. One of such songs is *Senzeni na?* (What have we done?) by Albert Nyathi, which has been used widely in Southern Africa as a form of protest against oppressive regimes. To capture their experiences and to protest against being silenced, some participants also composed their own poems, which formed parts of the play. In one of these poems, one of the participants boldly declares 'Now that they say we may speak and we are speaking, *hatshi ukwoinjwa!* *Hatshi ukwethuselwa!* (no to being silenced! No to being intimidated!)'. This way

of using art resonates with Magwaza (2001) and Karin Barber's (1997) writings on African popular culture. Magwaza contends that cultural forms and artefacts, such as beadwork, for example, are used to communicate in African culture and are largely deployed as forms of protest. Zondi (2008) echoes the same sentiments, as she views songs that are birthed by people's experiences as forms of negotiating and commenting on these experiences. Notably, both *Speak Out!* and *1983: Years Before and After* meet the mould of theatrical works that are described above, as they are arguably ways of dealing with the Gukurahundi issue and also as commentaries on it.

Genealogy is a central theme in both plays. Genealogy is the study of family trees, seeking to understand a person's descent (Rose and Ingalls 1997). The main characters for both plays are engaged in the search for their lineage, so as to better understand who they are and where they come from. However, what emerges is that the Gukurahundi ruptures/disrupts and curtails these genealogical identities, which are pivotal in both cultural and present-day state/government identity creation and assignment. From a cultural and social perspective, not knowing one's genealogy may make one feel fragmented. As Rose and Ingalls (1997, p. 8) put it, knowing one's genealogy gives 'a sense of completeness'. In African culture in general, and in the Ndebele culture in particular, knowing one's lineage is very important. In the Ndebele culture, one has not fully introduced himself or herself to another when he or she has not introduced his or her lineage. For example, when someone says 'I am Mandla', the likely question he will be asked is 'UMandla wakobani?' or 'UMandla kabani?', which translates to 'Mandla of where?' and 'Mandla of who?', respectively. Mandla would respond, for example, by saying 'UMandla wakoMkhithika' or 'UMandla kaMkhithika', which translate to 'Mandla of the Mkhithika clan' and 'Mandla son of Mkhithika', respectively. Mzilikazi, the late king of the Ndebele nation, was known as 'UMzilikazi kaMatshobana kaMangethe', which translates to 'Mzilikazi son of Matshobana son of Mangethe'.

It is also important to point out that the Ndebele culture uses totems. People of the same lineage share the same totem. These are, therefore, identifiers. Marrying someone with your totem is considered taboo. A person who does not know his father is, therefore, in danger of marrying his relative. Some among the Ndebele still have cultural taboos that prohibit the eating of certain animals, birds, or foods that are associated with their totems. For Girl in the play *1983: Years Before and After* and for Youngman in the play *Speak Out!* to find themselves not knowing their biological fathers is, therefore, a tragic situation. It inflicts on them genealogical bewilderment and great mental torment.

Failure to get identity documents, particularly the birth certificate that is addressed in the plays, has far reaching impacts. The birth certificate is the primary document that one needs to obtain an identity card. Without a birth certificate and a national identity document or card, one is rendered stateless and cannot fully enjoy his or her citizen rights. Registration is fundamental to the recognition of citizenship and also to entitlement (Szreter and Breckenridge 2012). We argue that since the Gukurahundi prevents the characters in the plays from obtaining birth certificates or birth certificates with correct information, this starts a chain of associated problems. The birth certificate, which should be obtained at birth, is the most essential primary marker of identity. Failure by the character Girl to get a birth certificate and the experiencing of a similar predicament by the victims of the Gukurahundi and their children, means that they cannot obtain passports, identity documents, or a driver's license. They cannot open a bank account, access education, or sit for public national examinations. They cannot get loans and mortgages from banks or financial institutions and, thus, are denied shelter and livelihoods. Without birth certificates the victims of the Gukurahundi cannot legitimately own mobile phones, as sim cards need to be registered. They are also denied access to employment and they may be hindered from accessing healthcare and taking out health insurance, as identification may be required for these. It may even be difficult for them to register marriages, and to own property and businesses. Not to have identity documents is to be disempowered, disenfranchised, and dehumanised. It is to be denied one's existence. This is the traumatic life that the

character Girl leads. We argue that there are victims of the Gukurahundi who experience such circumstances.

5. Discussion

The two plays portray the Gukurahundi and aftermath as ongoing and as a huge threat to future generations. The two plays present issues that overlap into different generations. In *1983: Years Before and After*, the main character, Girl, belongs to the second-generation victims of the Gukurahundi. This is the generation of those who were young during the Gukurahundi, those who were born during that time, and those who were born just afterward. In the other play, *Speak Out!* the Gukurahundi effects are shown to be affecting both the second-generation victims and those that are yet to be born; the third-generation. The young man and young woman who are preparing to marry are worried about their own identity and that of their children.

The effects of the Gukurahundi, as shown in the plays, are not only on issues of identity, there is also the issue of trauma. The characters in the play are traumatised by the painful experiences of their parents, as well as their own experiences, which they have been largely left alone to manage. They have been abandoned by the state, and fear of recrimination and personal pain has silenced the remaining family around them. Arguably, the victims of the Gukurahundi and their descendants are experiencing another genocide. The opening scene of *1983: Years Before and After* paints a picture that captures the trauma that is prevalent in the communities that were affected by the Gukurahundi. As the play opens, the old man and the girl are seated. Their postures are those of people who are weighed down by their troubles. Their clothes are old and tattered. Girl's opening lines confirm that indeed she is depressed by her failure to get identity documents and not knowing the circumstances surrounding the death of her parents. Girl tearfully says to the old man (Man):

I have come all this way. I am but only seeking the truth, even if it is only in my dreams. I shed tears that run in streams. Look, look here old man, I have grown eyes so small. That's not me. It is the incessant crying. It has become my daily like staple food. I agonise to realise sleep. I come in peace. I am a lost child baba. (Moyo 2018, p. 4)

The first author of this article attended the performance at the Intwasa Arts Festival koBulawayo in 2018, and he recalls the powerful effect on the audience:

The audience members really seemed to identify with the pain and suffering of the character Girl. Here and there, there were interjections from members of the audience saying 'eish', 'nc nc nc ncc', 'ahh', and there were also sighs of agony. Many people were crying. It was cathartic. (Personal communication, November 2021)

The interjections from the audience members suggest that the pain induced by the Gukurahundi is still there. Whilst some, especially government authorities, have sought to create an impression that the Gukurahundi is a closed chapter, and people should not open old wounds, other members of the community have raised voices, saying these wounds have *not* healed and need to be addressed. In fact, the trauma seems to be compounding. As Hirsch (2008, p. 107) explains, in relation to the Holocaust, 'these events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present'. Hirsch, in her theorisation of postmemory (2008), argues that a traumatic event that takes place in a certain generation can result in its trauma being transferred to the following generation. Postmemory, therefore, 'describes the relationship of the second generation to the powerful, often traumatic experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply so as to seem to constitute memories in their own right' (Hirsch 2008, p. 103). However, interestingly in the case of 'Girl', although she clearly feels and experiences the trauma, she has no inherited memories to connect it to. No stories have been told to her, only lies. Almost forty years of denialism by the Zimbabwean government has cast a shroud of silence that has

left many second-generation sufferers, such as the character Girl, to wander aimlessly in search of themselves.

Tshinga Dube, a former Member of Parliament for Makhokhoba in Bulawayo, once weighed in on the need to resolve the Gukurahundi issue saying:

When we have a conflict where a lot of lives are lost, it means we must take it seriously. To those who were not affected by Gukurahundi it means nothing to them apart from being a moment of madness but to those who were affected it remains in their heart . . . the pain remains for a very long time and those things go from father to son because people still talk about them . . . the kids that listen to you talk about Gukurahundi keep it in their hearts. When they grow, they grow with it in their hearts. They have a grievance but we do not want that grievance to go on. We want these things to be put to an end. (Dube 2018, former Makhokhoba member of Parliament, quoted by Zimeye)

Speak Out! also lays bare the trauma that children of the victims of the Gukurahundi have experienced. Both the young man and young woman, the main characters are traumatised by the violent past. The Gukurahundi experiences of their parents are haunting them. This devised narrative raises something critical: young people who did not directly experience the Gukurahundi are now experiencing intergenerational and transgenerational trauma. This transference of trauma is largely as a result of the painful stories that the young people hear from their parents, relatives, and community members. It can also occur in those who identify strongly with the victims (Rothberg 2019). The successive generations inherit difficult memories of things they did not directly experience (Di Castro 2008; Neri 1982). The plays under study reflect the pain of grappling with these difficult memories from the past. We, therefore, argue that the plays are part of the efforts of negotiating the painful past, in order to attempt to live a productive future. Writing on the impacts of the Holocaust, Conolly (2011, p. 609), drawing from Hirsch (2008), posits that 'one of the devastating effects of such trauma is the way in which it impacts not only the survivors but also the future generations'.

Such trauma is represented in the play through flashbacks and through the stories narrated by the characters, the Gukurahundi experiences are brought into the present, so as to challenge the government to address them. The government has a direct role to play in resolving the issue of identity documents for the victims of the Gukurahundi.

In early 2018, one of the authors of this article, author 1, attended a hearing at Lupane, Zimbabwe organised by the Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission. He recounts:

As I sat there, I heard first hand many people narrating the challenges that they have faced in trying to get identity documents for those whose parents died or disappeared (presumably abducted) during the Gukurahundi. They pointed out that those who work at the Registry Offices do not accept 'Gukurahundi' as a cause of death for the parents and therefore children of the Gukurahundi victims have a difficulty getting identity documents. Some of these are now adults who have their own children. This means the children too will have difficulty in getting identity documents. The issue of children using their mothers' surnames also came up during the hearings. (Journal entry, November 2021)

This speaks to the immediacy and relevance of the issues raised by the two plays. They are alive in the communities that were affected by the Gukurahundi. The plays are, therefore, reflecting the people's experiences, in line with Karin Barber's (1997) observation that popular art reflects the experiences of the people who have created it. Through art, the affected communities also seek to transform their conditions (Boal 1979). In the context of lack of action on the part of the government, art raises a voice against this injustice and seeks to put pressure on the government to act and address, at the very least, the bureaucratic effects of the Gukurahundi, so that the community can begin to heal itself.

Plunka (2009, p. 16) argues that theatre is an ideal medium for addressing traumatic issues such as the Holocaust, pointing out that 'Drama seems to be an ideal medium to

represent these eternal conflicts and dilemmas . . . the audience can serve as a community participating in a palpable rite of mourning for the Holocaust'. His comments can be applied to the Gukurahundi, for the victims have not been free to publicly express their pain and grieve, so as to find closure. The two plays capture this. Echoing sentiments that are similar to those of Plunka, [Graham \(2015, p. 119\)](#) observes that:

If one of the functions of testimonial literature is to produce for the listener the traumatic disruption of consciousness, then the immediacy, interactiveness, and malleability of theatre make it a medium singularly well suited for representations of mass trauma. ([Graham 2015, p. 119](#))

With the silencing of the Gukurahundi issues by the government following this episode, information on the Gukurahundi is scarce in the public zone. *1983: Years Before and After* and *Speak Out!* are part of efforts to archive the Gukurahundi experiences and to memorialise this period, since these plays are based on real accounts. Therefore, the plays are ways of transferring knowledge and experiences of the Gukurahundi from one generation to another. Performance arguably has this potential. [Roach \(1996\)](#) sees performance as interlinked with memory and history, because it facilitates the transfer and continuance of knowledge; in line with Diana [Taylor's \(2003, p. 35\)](#) observation, that 'the telling is as important as the writing, the doing as central as the recording, the memory passed down through bodies and mnemonic practices'. [Taylor \(2003\)](#) also posits that performance transmits memories and social identity, through being involved in acts of transfer. Similarly, [Scheider \(2001\)](#) points out that performance can function as a way of keeping memory alive. Performance, therefore, preserves memory so that it does not disappear. This assists in the 'body-to-body transmission of enactment—evidence, across generations, of impact' ([Scheider 2001, p. 103](#)). We, therefore, argue that the plays under review act as alternative ways of memorialising the Gukurahundi, considering that the avenues to do so are limited, as already argued in this article.

What is also important about the two plays is that the written scripts contribute to the efforts of creating a Gukurahundi archive or repository that the affected community can use as a reference. The memories passed down from generation to generation work together with the written documents, in this case scripts of the plays, in a complementary way, to capture and record the Gukurahundi experiences. As [Taylor \(2003, p. 35\)](#) puts it, "memory paths and documented records might retain what the other 'forgot'. These systems sustain and mutually produce each other, neither is outside or antithetical to the logic of the other". These plays are not official documents, nor do they purport to be; however, we have shown that while they are creative in their expression, they articulate truthful and factual accounts that can connect to a community's collective experience and memory. We submit, therefore, that plays such as these can and should function as legitimate records of what has happened and what continues to happen.

The plays portray an attempt by the children of the victims of the Gukurahundi to resist being silenced and the erasure of their subjectivity. Both plays are dominated by the narratives of the children of the victims of the Gukurahundi. They occupy the centre stage and share experiences from their perspectives. The events of the Gukurahundi are presented, as mentioned, through flashbacks from the perspective of the victims. In the backdrop of government repression and public censure of the Gukurahundi narratives, the main characters in the plays resist being silenced. In line with [Graham's \(2015, p. 114\)](#) observation concerning apartheid resisting plays featuring John Kani and Winston Ntshona, the main characters of *1983: Years Before and After* and those of *Speak Out!*, are able to 'reinvent themselves as oppositional subjects through imagination and performance'. This, as [Graham \(2015\)](#) further observes, restores the victims to the centre of their own tales. While the plays portray tragic circumstances for the protagonists, we believe that the plays are ultimately empowering for the community. Both plays tell the stories from the perspectives of the victims: Girl in one play, and the young man and young woman in another. In this way they create a space for and give voice to the children of the victims of the Gukurahundi to tell their truth on their own terms. Furthermore, the plays come

across as resistance and protest against being denied access to identity documents. The children of the Gukurahundi victims are raising their voices against this injustice and this is an interesting 'way in' to open up broader discussions on the atrocities. The use of theatre to resist and to protest is a common phenomenon. Morris (2017, p. 173), commenting on the apartheid plays in South Africa, observes that 'common to the South African plays of the apartheid era was the need to interrogate, understand, resist and protest the racism, inequalities and many injustices of the South African state'. We observe similar trends in the plays under study. In *Speak Out!*, one of the characters declares, through poetry, '... we are speaking, *hatshi ukuvinjwa, hatshi ukwethuselwa* (No to gagging of our voices, no to intimidation!)'. The reason for resisting and protesting is so that the issues affecting the victims and their children are heard and addressed. Another reason is so that there is no repeat of a similar thing in the future. According to CCJP & LRF (1997, p. 3):

One of the most painful aspects of the 1980s conflict for its victims is their perception that their plight is unacknowledged. Officially, the State continues to deny any serious culpability for events during those years, and refuses to allow open dialogue on the issue. In fact, there is a significant chunk of Zimbabwean history which is largely unknown, except to those who experienced it at first hand. All Zimbabweans, both present and future, should be allowed access to this history. Only by fully exploring how the 1980s crisis developed, can future Zimbabweans hope to avoid a repetition of such violence.

The two plays reflect the struggles of the children of the Gukurahundi victims as they seek to tell their experiences, particularly the difficulties they face when they want to access identity documents; but also how the silence around the issue has meant many children, now adults, do not know their lineage. In an African context this has serious cultural and spiritual implications. Through theatre, they resist being silenced and being marginalised; they take centre stage in their own narratives. Acknowledging that *Speak Out!* closely reflects what is happening in the communities that were affected by the Gukurahundi, an audience member remarked during postperformance discussions, 'so many lives were disturbed and so many lives are disturbed up to now as shown in the drama. There are still many people whose identity is mixed up' (Audience member 1, 2019)¹. Another audience member echoed similar sentiments saying 'I realise that these things [portrayed in the play] are things that are there in real life' (Audience member 2, 2019)². We, therefore, observe that the issues portrayed in these two plays are things that have affected, and continue to affect, members of the community that experienced the Gukurahundi.

6. Conclusions

The analysis of the two plays, *1983: Years Before and After* and *Speak Out!*, has revealed that these plays reflect the challenges that the community that was affected by the Gukurahundi, predominantly second-generation sufferers, grapple with up to this day. These issues sit at opposite ends of the human story, the one concerns the spiritual and cultural, the other concerns administration. Yet, these issues are deeply interconnected and impactful on the individual. The administrative problem is the failing to obtain identity documents by children of the victims of the Gukurahundi. The failure to get basic documents, such as birth certificates and national identity cards, creates a chain of problems, to the extent of undermining the citizenship of the affected and the enjoyment of citizenship rights. In addition to portraying these challenges, the plays also reflect the efforts that are employed by the victims to address their plight. The plays themselves serve as avenues and ways of addressing the aftermaths of the Gukurahundi. Through performance, the victims of the Gukurahundi resist and protest against being silenced and marginalised. Since the plays position the survivors at the centre, their experiences are narrated from their point of view. This gives agency instead of a state of helplessness. The plays also contribute towards the creation of an archive and a repository of the Gukurahundi, for use by the community as a point of reference. These efforts also aid in the memorialisation of the Gukurahundi, so that the knowledge of this painful history can be passed from generation to generation,

which can help in understanding what happened; leading to the creation of strategies to address its effects and to ensure that a similar thing does not happen again in the future.

Those who lived through the Gukurahundi and their children see the effects of this violence as continuing even in present day. Without identity documents and excluded from the full enjoyment of their rights as citizens of Zimbabwe, many are of the view that, whilst the physical violence ended with the signing of the Unity Accord in 1987, little has been done to end the marginalisation of the Ndebele speaking people of Matabeleland and Midlands provinces. The two plays analysed in this article are part of the efforts to negotiate a painful past, in order to have a productive culture. Whilst this is the case, however, the major driving force for the two plays is a quest for identity and for a solution to a protracted, inherited problem. The plays are a quest to heal old wounds that have festered for too long, a quest to heal trauma, a quest for closure, and a quest to reconcile with a dark, painful, and traumatic past. To eliminate or minimise the possibility of another Gukurahundi, open and honest discussions on the issue are necessary.

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Notes

- ¹ These are comments that were made by an audience member during postperformance discussions that followed the performance of the play *Speak Out!* in September 2019, Bulawayo, Zimbabwe.
- ² This is a comment that was made by an audience member during postperformance discussions that followed the performance of the play *Speak Out!* in September 2019, Bulawayo, Zimbabwe.

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