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Melodrama Tropes as Language Registers of Trauma in the Gacaca Trilogy

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This paper examines how melodrama tropes function as language registers of trauma in one of the Gacaca Trilogy: *Living Together Again in Rwanda* (Aghion, 2003). Therefore, the paper sought to interrogate how the documentary employed melodrama tropes as a narrative framework technique to depict narrative registers of trauma. Initially, the paper explored the melodrama trope of recognition, rooted in a symbolic Manichean worldview, to narrate the major conflicts of the selected trilogy. Therefore, it scrutinised how the trilogy's narrative structure is constructed around moral oppositions of 'good and evil' to represent trauma, and secondly, it examined melodrama's last-minute rescue trope that narrated sudden interventions that saved a character from despair. The paper employed a multi-modal transcription method for decoding primary data, and the findings were interpreted using narratological and literary trauma theories. The paper revealed that Manichean and last-minute melodramatic tropes function as key narrative devices that encode traumatic experiences, shaping the documentary's registers of trauma. In addition, the paper concluded that these melodrama tropes mediate the representation of war trauma, contributing to broader discourses on memory, violence, and the narrative structure of the Gacaca trilogy.

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INTRODUCTION

The Gacaca Trilogy: *Living Together Again in Rwanda* (Aghion, 2003), *In Rwanda We Say: The Family that Does Not Speak Dies* (Aghion, 2005), and *The Notebooks of Memory* (Aghion, 2009) feature the aftermath of 1994 Rwandan genocide, which resulted in the systematic massacre of an estimated 800,000 Tutsi and moderate Hutu (Des Forges, 1999; United Nations, 1999). According to Clark (2010), the government introduced Rwanda's innovative Gacaca courts, community-based tribunals that were designed to foster reconciliation through public testimonies and confession. In the process, the testimonies inspired the *Gacaca Trilogy* documentary films, which serve as crucial cinematic interventions in trauma representation and collective memory. While extensive scholarship exists on the genocide's historical and political dimensions (such as Fujii, 2009; Mamdani, 2001), the trilogy's narrative strategies, judicial testimony, re-enactments, and trauma registers remain critically underexplored. This gap obscures the documentaries' significant contributions to the narration of traumatic experience and the melodrama tropes' depiction of trauma in genocide narratives.

The paper addresses this gap by analysing how melodrama tropes function as language registers of trauma in one of the trilogy: *Living Together Again in Rwanda* (Aghion, 2003). Focusing on the documentary's use of survivor testimonies, archival footage, and community re-enactments, the paper argues that the trilogy constructs narrative language codes of trauma that play a critical role in post-genocide storytelling. Consequently, the paper not only expands the role of melodrama in documentary film but also offers new insights into the study of the depiction of trauma in cinema.

METHODOLOGY

This paper employed qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) to examine the *Living Together Again in Rwanda* (Aghion, 2003) documentary film, selected through purposive sampling based on three key criteria. First, it's direct engagement with post-genocide transitional justice mechanisms that portray the aftermath of a war catastrophe. Secondly, its use of survivor-centred narratives, and thirdly, underrepresentation in existing scholarly discourse (Palys, 2014). From the documentary, four scenes were systematically examined, with particular focus on survivor testimonies, Gacaca court proceedings, and community re-enactments of traumatic events.

The scene selection for analysis followed two major steps. First, identifying sequences with high narrative centrality through repeated viewings, and secondly, verifying their theoretical significance through alignment with established trauma scholarship (LaCapra, 2001; Caruth, 1996).

The paper employed a dual analytical approach, integrating both narrative and thematic analysis. The narrative analysis examined storytelling structures and agency within testimonies, while the thematic analysis explored recurring trauma motifs, including tropes of trauma, silence, fragmentation, and discourses surrounding justice, forgiveness, and accountability.

Finally, ethical considerations guided the selection of scenes and therefore prioritised scenes that avoided graphic depictions of violence. This approach balanced scholarly rigour with sensitivity to the traumatic nature of the content.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Melodrama's Trope of Recognition as a Trauma Register

According to Marcantonio (2015), the melodrama recognition trope is based on a symbolic Manichean worldview that posits a dualistic understanding of traumatic suffering between embodiments of oppressive systems and victims portrayed as figures of innocence. This framework informs the narrative structure of the trilogy as witnesses, victims, and perpetrators use different narrative expressions to describe their experiences.

For instance, the trilogy narrative structure is built around this dichotomy. In *Living Together Again* in

Rwanda (Aghion, 2003), for example, the narrative structure is a separation between 'good and evil' that serves as a foundational element shaping character development, plot progression, and trauma exploration. This paper argues that characters are often constructed to embody these opposing forces. They portray trauma experiences that confront moral ambiguities, transforming personal suffering into conflicts with redemptive potential (Tal, 1996). For instance, Vital Sindikubwabo was depicted both as a victim and a perpetrator as he struggled with anger toward his tormentors while dealing with the consequences of his actions.

Figure 1: One of the Accused, Mr. Vital Sindikubwabo, is Introduced to the General Public by the Government Prosecutor.



Source: *Living Together Again* in Rwanda, 2003

Consequently, this paper asserts that as he comes to terms with his traumatic situation, he undergoes a self-discovery journey that reveals forces that engulf him. His recognition acts as a catalyst that allows him to confront his past and thus make sense

of his present traumatic suffering. In the beginning, this analysis notes that while using testimonial language and repetitive phrasing, Sindikubwabo recounted how he committed crimes against his close friends under duress. He asserted that his

actions were influenced by someone else, and that is why he felt compelled to seek forgiveness. The unnamed speaker observed:

He was forced. Speak up! Tchombe was brought by force to Vital's house. But they went after him and brought him back to Vital. Then the bosses demanded that Vital kill him for having let him go. He killed Tchombe. He's had the courage to confess and seek forgiveness.

This paper notes that his bosses had then ordered Vital to kill Tchombe as punishment for having let him escape. However, he acknowledged that Vital had ultimately killed Tchombe, but emphasised that he had shown courage by confessing and seeking forgiveness. He stressed that he was coerced into his actions, a fact that everyone knows. He then recounted a personal tragedy, revealing how he lost two of his children, who were brought to the location where they were massacred and buried alongside others. The cemetery surrounding them provided a visual representation of the countless lives that had been lost.

This paper noted that his experiences embody a Manichean perspective as he finds himself in extreme polar positions. His actions, while horrific, are framed within a context of survival and coercion, representing two forces in his life. His plea for forgiveness illustrated a scenario of the two opposing forces that propel him. As he sought forgiveness, this paper argues that he had to deal with guilt and the burden of his actions. Despite that, his admission of committing crimes under duress illustrates the situations he finds himself in, whereas his loss of his children portrays him as a victim as well. Thus, this paper considers the tragedy of losing his two children as an ironic twist in the trilogy. This analysis concludes that their deaths described the epitome of the senseless violence that the most vulnerable encountered. His acknowledgement that he was forced to commit these crimes reflects a struggle to reconcile with the community while reflecting on the scars left by trauma. Through him, this paper interrogates how

the trilogy employs descriptive and testimonial language that haunts characters.

Secondly, through expressions of desperation, he further narrated another horrific incident. He sadly noted that they had brought a man to his house, where he was hiding. They had picked him up from over a kilometre away, and the accusers claimed that he had helped the man flee. They demanded that he kill the man and also give them money. This situation led him to end up in his current predicament, where he mentioned that a person named Leven had given them 2000 francs for the inconvenience he had caused. Subsequently, they instructed him to kill the man immediately, and he complied. He laments:

They brought him to my house, where I was holed up. They had picked him up over a kilometre away. They said I had helped him flee. They demanded I kill him and give them money, too. That's how I ended up here—I gave them 2000 francs for the inconvenience I'd caused them. Then they told me: 'Kill him now.' So, I killed him.

His narration demonstrates a fragmented narrative structure that embodies trauma. This paper considers the lack of transitional elements in his descriptions of scenes, mirroring the disjointed nature of his traumatic memory (Caruth, 1996). Of particular note is the passive construction (the victim had been brought) and third-person framing (they had ordered), which serve to distance him from direct responsibility, suggesting psychic numbing (Lifton, 1986).

This paper points out that his recognition is geared towards an acknowledgement of his actions. As a perpetrator, he recounts the moment when he was compelled to kill a man. By narrating these events, this paper notes, he began to recognise the weight of his past actions. Furthermore, this analysis suggests that his admission of witnessing the act of transporting bodies to a mass grave and the systematic disposal of victims depicts trauma,

whereby many were killed. Further, this analysis notes his recognition as he embarks on a difficult journey toward self-awareness and understanding his past.

In addition, the song that closes *Living Together Again in Rwanda* (Aghion, 2003) employs a

conversational tone and ambivalent language to describe a need for co-existence after the battle between opposing forces ceases. The content of the song reveals a shared experience despite a painful past. The speaker's reflections on coexistence and the innocence of children depict a shared humanity.

Figure 2: School Children Performing a Song that Portrays a Future of Hope and Harmonious Existence



Source: *Living Together Again in Rwanda*, 2003

Briefly, the persona questioned whether they were already living together again, reflecting on the current state of their coexistence. He pointed out that those who had killed their people were now working in their fields. He noted the paradox of feeding and educating the children of those who had perpetuated violence against their community, pondering if there could be a better form of Gacaca, a traditional Rwandan court system aimed at reconciliation. Moreover, he expressed a moral dilemma, asking how one could harm a child who had not committed wrongdoing. He aptly states:

Aren't we already living together again?

Today, those who killed our people are working in our fields.

You feed and educate the children of those who killed your people.

Can there be a better Gacaca? Gacaca. Can there be a better Gacaca...

How can you harm a child who cannot do harm?

Listen to me, God of Rwanda...

Protect me from the urge for vengeance...

Uphold justice and keep our land free...

This analysis infers collective trauma experienced by Rwandans following the 1994 genocide in the song, as the persona depicts issues of memory, justice, and reconciliation. Caruth (1996) suggests that trauma is not fully experienced at the time of

the event but resurfaces belatedly through repetition and narrative. This paper notes that the lines questioning whether people are already living together again tend to represent a forced coexistence between survivors and perpetrators.

The reference to Gacaca, Rwanda's traditional community-based justice system, underscores the complexities of post-genocide reconciliation, as noted by Clark (2010). This paper argues that feeding and educating the children of those who killed, while asking if there can be a better form of Gacaca, illustrates the psychological burden survivors carry, as they were compelled to interact with the descendants of their oppressors.

Further, this analysis contends that the plea questioning how one could harm an innocent child introduces a traumatic dilemma, challenging notions of intergenerational guilt while emphasising the child's innocence. Moreover, this research argues that the invocation of the God of Rwanda suggests a search for divine justice where human systems may fail, echoing an argument that trauma narratives often seek resolution beyond human comprehension (LaCapra, 2001). In addition, this paper notes that the final appeal for protection from vengeance and a call for justice and freedom reveal the internal conflict between retribution and healing (Alexander, 2004).

Similarly, this paper argues that the juxtaposition of victims and perpetrators working side by side in the fields illustrates the painful reality of shared spaces after trauma. This paper concludes that the coexistence evoked feelings of resentment, anger, and confusion among survivors, complicating the trauma recovery process.

Despite that, the persona reflects on feeding and educating the children of killers. Thus, through the persona, the trilogy depicted guilt and innocence, particularly when innocent children are involved. This analysis emphasises that trauma experienced by them signals the next generation, as they grapple with the legacy of violence and seek a path towards

healing and forgiveness. Therefore, this paper notes that characters embody a struggle between forgiveness and the desire for justice. Their voice resonates with loss and a hope for reconciliation. Consequently, a presentation of children and the land serves as a powerful symbol of innocence and continuity. In the process, the act of feeding and educating the children of perpetrators juxtaposes the innocence of the population against the backdrop of historical violence. This emphasises hope for a future that transcends the traumas of the past, suggesting that healing can begin with the next generation.

Also, this paper suggests that the composition of the song, filled with its rhetorical questions and spiritual pleas, creates an atmosphere that reflects the emotional turmoil of the speaker. This composition presents a speaker's plea for justice and protection from vengeance, as it can signify recognition of a new era. This recognition of the need for justice, alongside the desire to protect innocent lives, reflects the inner conflict faced by individuals navigating the aftermath of violence.

In conclusion, the exploration of contradictory experiences where witnesses, victims, and perpetrators coexist, this analysis argues that the trilogy depicts a variety of traumatic experiences as each character employs specific narrative expressions to present his or her experiences. Thus, the recognition trope is rich in a variety of expressions such as descriptive and vivid imagery, testimonial language, rhetorical questions and repetitive phrasing that function as registers of trauma. Therefore, this paper argues that narrative expressions present a dualistic perspective of existence in the trilogy, whereby the forces of good and evil are perpetually at play. This binary framework not only significantly influences the narrative structure but also enriches the depiction of traumatic experiences in the trilogy.

The Last-Minute Rescue Trope as a Trauma Register

According to Marcantonio (2015), the last-minute rescue trope is a narrative device that embodies several key elements. Primarily, it includes latent recognition where characters become aware of significant truths or realisations that may have been hidden until such a time when they are revealed to the public. This trope also encompasses the revelation of truths that depict cause-and-effect episodes of the narrative. Furthermore, reversal of fortune represents characters' experiences of a sudden and unexpected shift in their circumstances, mostly transitioning from despair to hope and vice versa. In addition, it includes the wished-for cure that depicts characters longing for a solution to their predicaments or ailments, which sometimes are anchored at the climax. Finally, the enactment of justice segment depicts instances where wrongs are righted and moral balance is restored, often in the nick of time.

This paper looked at how this trope introduced the temporality aspect of the trilogy. It depicts hope by providing a dramatic resolution to seemingly unbearable conflicts and thus acts as a narrative device that embodies change in the face of adversity. In other words, it introduces sudden interventions that represent a physical or psychological rescue that signifies a recovery from trauma.

It has three major characteristics in the trilogy. First, it depicts past events long after they have occurred through back-to-story wound techniques and expressions that describe a delayed reaction to the trauma itself. Secondly, it involves a moment of

latent recognition where characters suddenly become aware of truths that have been obscured, thus allowing characters to process their experiences and begin a journey towards recovery. Besides, it embodies the reversal of fortune where characters experience a dramatic shift in their circumstances, indicating a possibility of justice, especially reflections for a resolution that restores balance in characters' lives.

For example, in *Living Together Again in Rwanda* (Aghion, 2003), through the use of reflective language and transformative expressions, an unnamed character describes a situation where they faced overwhelming violence but had to hold on to a resolution. He stated that it was the responsibility of the authorities to pursue those involved in the massacre. He expressed frustration, questioning what he could do if they were unwilling to speak:

Much could have been said there, but it was impossible to speak because it wasn't a real trial. ... We couldn't express our personal opinions. It's up to the authorities to pursue these people. What can I do if they won't speak? The State bears the responsibility for what happened. The State is the root cause of these deaths. And the State is responsible, maybe in time, the current State may be able to reconcile us and bring us together anew. Today, already, people have begun to help each other. Maybe one day, security and unity will prevail.

This analysis argues that his description depicts a disturbed mind after collective violence, denoting silenced trauma, institutional betrayal, and a hope for reconciliation.

Figure 3: Unnamed Characters Lamenting the Lack of Opportunities to Express Their Divergent Perspectives during the Trials



Source: *Living Together Again in Rwanda*, 2003

He expresses frustration that they could not speak because it was not a real trial, demonstrating how they were silenced and consequently suggesting the erasure of their voices from history (LaCapra, 2001).

Moreover, this analysis argues that his attribution of responsibility to the State, stating that the State is the root cause of these deaths, represents structured violence and secondary victimisation. Alexander (2004) argued that re-victimisation occurs when systems meant to deliver justice reproduce conditions of powerlessness and silencing. Therefore, this analysis underscores how structural violence operated through the calculated absence of justice mechanisms, leaving survivors in the dilemma of unresolved grievances.

In his narration, this paper noted that there's a conflict between the responsibilities of the State and the individual's desire for action. His plea for the authorities to take action against perpetrators and the acknowledgement of the State's responsibility depict 'a wish-for cure', one of the characteristics of a last-minute rescue figure. He hoped that the current State might reconcile the community,

suggesting a possibility of rescue in dire circumstances. This analysis suggests that this hope is a crucial element in the trilogy as they find themselves on the brink of despair before a potential resolution emerges. Thus, this paper argues that his observation that people have begun to help each other signifies a grassroots movement toward recovery and solidarity. This collective action embodies characteristics of 'a revelation of truth', where individuals come together to support one another in the face of adversity.

Further, this paper argues that the assertion that the State bears the responsibility for the events highlights the trauma experienced by characters. This recognition of blame is crucial as it acknowledges the impact of larger structures on personal and collective experiences. Thus, his insistence on the State as the root cause of death depicts anger and grief as they sought to understand the sources of their suffering.

Moreover, his frustration tends to revolve around the inability of the state to act or speak. This feeling of helplessness is a response to their traumatic experiences, as they opt for silence over speaking

the truth. Despite that, this paper notes that he also gestures toward potential recovery through collective reconciliation. He expresses cautious optimism that perhaps in time the current State may be able to reconcile people, reflecting a tension between trauma's lingering effects and the necessity of societal reintegration. The observation that people have begun to help each other suggests communal resilience. Herman (1992) argued that healing from collective trauma required both acknowledgement and re-establishment of social bonds. This paper argues that his yearning for a resolution is an example of the last-minute rescue trope, where characters often strive for resolution and harmony after experiencing turmoil. This paper concludes that hope for reconciliation serves as a trilogy anchor, indicating that despite the challenges they faced, there remains a possibility for a brighter future.

Another example in *Living Together Again in Rwanda* (Aghion, 2003), through persuasive and

accusatory language, depicts a character on the brink of being overwhelmed by accusations, yet hoping for vindication. In the beginning, an unnamed character had been asked if there had been a falling out with his neighbours. He argues:

Did you have a falling out? With them? And if you were proven guilty?

But if your guilt were proven - although you've tired me out - what if you're mistaken? I've done nothing.

Don't dodge the issue. If you were proven guilty? If people testified? What would happen?

I would defend myself in court. I would fight it. Go get me a blank sheet of paper from the table.

In this dialogue, this analysis infers trauma through its fragmented conversational patterns and exploration of issues such as denial and self-preservation.

Figure 4: Unnamed Perpetrator Who Insists That He is Innocent and Willing to Defend Himself against All Odds



Source: *Living Together Again in Rwanda*, 2003

This paper notes that repetitive questioning about potential guilt represents the processing of traumatic events that have been observed in trauma survivors (LaCapra, 2001). This paper argues that his defensive stance, especially his sudden request for writing materials, can be interpreted as a mechanism that distances him from painful realities (Herman, 1992).

Further, this paper noted that the interrogation demonstrated emotions related to being accused and the fear of being proven guilty. This scenario illustrates the impact of living under the threat of judgment, where he had to deal with the potential consequences of being deemed guilty. However, the mention of more witnesses against him builds feelings of isolation and vulnerability. This paper notes that he seemed to feel that there was a possibility of being judged not only by the authorities but also by his friends, thus creating a sense of alienation.

Despite that, he seemed to be determined to defend himself in court. Therefore, his request for a paper symbolises the need to articulate his side of the story. Through him, this paper argues that the trilogy depicts the characters' journey motif of self-assertion and resilience in the face of potential ruin. He seemed to be aware that, in "a nick of time", he had either justified his innocence or faced consequences. As a result, he had to fight the accusations and defend himself, indicating that despite the overwhelming accusations and potential witnesses, there was a glimmer of hope for a last-minute rescue.

CONCLUSION

This paper analysed *Living Together Again in Rwanda* (Aghion, 2003), one of the Gacaca Trilogy's employment of melodrama's trope of recognition and last-minute rescue as trauma registers. The paper found that the tropes of melodrama provided a framework for representing trauma. At the beginning, the paper revealed that the trilogy's narrative structure was constructed around

the trope of recognition that consists of a symbolic Manichean worldview, characterised by two opposing forces, of victims on one hand, and perpetrators on the other. This foundational structure served to frame and narrate the major conflicts driving the plot in the trilogy. This paper revealed that the trope played a critical role in dramatically unveiling registers of language that expressed hidden truths, especially what victims underwent, and what perpetrators did. As a result, this paper noted that the trope played a critical role in the articulation of trauma in a polarised moral landscape. For example, through the performed song, this paper demonstrates how the song's melodramatic composition of the recognition trope embodies the fragmented and cyclical nature of traumatic memory. The pervasive use of rhetorical questions and unresolved spiritual pleas reflects the speaker's psychological distress, illustrating Caruth's (1996) concept of trauma as an event that resists coherent narration. The song's lines oscillate between demands for justice and fears of vengeance, depicting the paradox of bearing witness. This tension underscores the collective dimension of trauma, as Alexander's (2012) framework suggests, systemic violence transforms individual suffering into a shared historical wound. Thus, the song's temporality gestures towards future reconciliation.

Furthermore, the paper concludes that the reference to the Supreme authority functions as a form of traumatic sublimation, channelling unspeakable violence into ritualised language, in the context of art as fractured testimony (Felman and Laub, 1992). As a result, the paper argues that the song acts as a language register of trauma that not only mirrors the disruptions of memory but also echoes ethical dilemmas of post-violence survival. Consequently, the paper suggests that by condemning the State while cautiously invoking hope, the speaker is in a dilemma, between indictments and yearning for trauma recovery, denoting trauma's enduring grip on both individual and collective consciousness. Ultimately, the paper concludes that the song serves

as a register of unresolved trauma, where the interplay of silence, repetition, and fractured testimony reveals the challenges of articulating and overcoming traumatic experiences.

Secondly, this paper found that the last-minute rescue trope registered language expressions for symbolic hope, representing possibilities for recovery despite overwhelming trauma. This paper revealed that the trope consists of registers depicting sudden interventions that avert a catastrophe or save characters from despair. For instance, through the analysis of the unnamed character's accusatory dialogue, the paper reveals a psyche fractured by guilt, denial, and the struggle for self-vindication. The paper concludes that the repetitive, circular questioning mirrors the intrusive, unresolved nature of traumatic memory (LaCapra, 2001), while the fragmented conversational patterns reflect a destabilised narrative voice, unable to coherently assimilate the accusations. On the same note, the character's defensive insistence on innocence and sudden demand for writing materials function as dissociative coping mechanisms that threaten to overwhelm him (Herman, 1992). The interrogation's escalating tension, which includes hypothetical witnesses and communal judgment, amplifies his isolation and vulnerability. This illustrates how trauma extends beyond individual suffering to encompass collective condemnation. Further, the paper concludes that the dialogue's unresolved tension, between defiance and desperation, depicts the state of a traumatised subject, suspended between the need to testify and the impossibility of full articulation (Caruth, 1996). Ultimately, this paper concludes that the exchange not only depicts a man on the brink of psychological collapse but also exposes his survival tactics depicted through nonlinear storytelling, repetition and evasion. In summary, the paper has demonstrated that melodrama tropes of recognition and last-minute rescue played a critical role not only in depicting trauma but also in providing language codes through which trauma is narrated and registered in the *Gacaca Trilogy*.

Recommendations

The findings of this paper underscore the urgent need for trauma-informed approaches to justice and reconciliation, particularly in post-conflict societies like Rwanda. Building on this study's literary trauma-theoretical framework, future research should investigate how narrative-based interventions such as structured storytelling platforms or community truth-telling processes can facilitate trauma processing and collective healing in post-conflict societies. Such research could critically examine the tensions between legal truth-finding procedures and the nonlinear nature of traumatic testimony, with implications for reforming justice systems to better accommodate survivors' psychological needs.

In addition, the paper suggests that policymakers should develop trauma-informed protocols for judicial and reconciliation processes, training officials to recognise linguistic markers of trauma (tropes, fragmentation, dissociation) while creating safer spaces for testimony. At the same time, complementary cultural interventions that include memorialisation projects and collaborative art initiatives could serve as vital supplements to formal justice mechanisms by providing alternative avenues for working through unresolved collective trauma. These approaches would operationalise literary trauma theory's insights about representation and recovery, translating textual analysis into concrete psychosocial support frameworks.

Consequently, this paper argues that future studies should expand this research through comparative analyses of other African post-genocide films to test the communal testimony framework across different cultural contexts. At the same time, future studies can assess the *Gacaca Trilogy's* long-term impact on intergenerational trauma and reconciliation in Rwanda. Further, interdisciplinary collaborations such as partnering with oral historians to compare filmic testimonies with official archives or working with psychologists to

measure therapeutic outcomes of participatory viewings might further bridge scholarly, artistic, and practical approaches to genocide memory.

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