

Renegotiating Narrative Coherence: Édouard Louis' Autobiographical Novel *History of Violence* as “Multidirectional Testimony” of Sexual Trauma

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Abstract: The autobiographical 2016 novel *History of Violence* by the French author Édouard Louis is commonly read as a personal trauma narrative, as it recounts an experience of sexual violence the author has had and seeks to reestablish his self, which was left shattered by this very experience. Yet, in one of its main scenes, the novel stages how one of the conventions for personal trauma narratives, i.e. narrative coherence, precisely prohibits the reestablishment of narrator Édouard's self. This article investigates how *History of Violence*, especially through its digressive set-up, renegotiates the coherence norm for personal trauma narratives. It considers how this set-up exposes the racial and sexual lines along which conventional, coherent trauma narratives are elaborated, and coins and explores a new concept for the type of trauma narrative that it considers *History of Violence* to be instead: a multidirectional testimony of personal trauma.

Keywords: Multidirectional testimony, trauma narrative, sexual violence, narrative coherence

Introduction

“[The doctor] didn't ask many questions, for which I was grateful. She said that what I'd gone through was like a kind of death.” (Louis 117) After having become a victim of murderous sexual assault, Édouard, the narrator of Édouard Louis' 2016 autobiographical novel *Histoire de la violence*, translated to the English as *History of Violence*, talks to a doctor in the hospital who, speaking softly “as if it might shatter me if she raised her voice”, tells him what impact an experience like his often has on victims: in a way, such victims, even if they survive, are left feeling they were killed. Édouard indeed feels death-like, a feeling that is typical for victims of murderous sexual assault who suffer from a shattered sense of self (Brison xi). As *History of Violence* recounts the night of the assault and its aftermath, the novel is commonly read as a literary testimony to this traumatic experience, and, because of the assault's self-depriving impact, as a personal trauma narrative with a very specific goal: to re-establish the self of the assaultee (Mueller 166; Dancus 13).

Yet, *History of Violence* does not live up to some of the writing conventions for successful personal trauma narratives. For one, the novel is set up as a frame story in which Édouard's sister is the one recounting the happenings during the night of the assault, which contradicts the need for assaultees to regain the subject position in their trauma story (Brison 68) – an issue I will address elsewhere. Another profound way in which the novel challenges personal trauma narrative conventions is through its many digressions. By recounting the story of their assault in a non-chronological order with many digressions assaultees are thought to run a risk. This risk is, in fact, a theme in *History of Violence*: in the scene that recounts how Édouard testifies to his assault at the police station, the officers refuse to listen to his story if he does not stop telling it his “*completely anarchic way*” and starts to “[t]ell it in the order that it happened” (Louis 33, emphasis in original). Indeed, if victims of sexual assault want their trauma story to be believed and taken seriously, they should tell it in a specific way, and this specific way involves coherence (Roeder 21; Borg 453; *Tainted Witness* 54).

What I want to do in this article is explore the scene just mentioned, as well as two of the digressions that characterize the novel’s set-up, to reconstruct how *History of Violence* renegotiates the coherence convention for personal trauma narratives. What we will see is how this scene stages the specific reasons why the coherence convention does not allow but rather prohibits the assaultee in question to reestablish his self: the narrative marked by the authorities as coherent and thus convincing turns out to be laced with both sexist and racist tropes and therefore represses in instead of expresses aspects of Édouard’s self. What I will do first, is give some more theoretical cachet to the claim that sexual trauma ‘kills’ assaultees in the sense that it bereaves them of their sense of self and that personal trauma narratives are key in reestablishing this self. Then, I will zoom in on the testimonial scene at the police station and reconstruct how it stages the intertwining of coherence as a convention (or even: norm) for trauma narratives and sexist and racist tropes. Eventually, I will have a look at two digressions, exploring how they renegotiate the discriminatory coherence convention for trauma narratives, after which I will suggest that *History of Violence* takes the shape of what I, referring to the concept as introduced by Holocaust historian Michael Rothberg, will dub a *multidirectional testimony*.

1. Piecing together a shattered self

The consequences of sexual assault for a victim’s self or identity were theorized thoroughly in *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* by philosophy professor Susan Brison. The direct motivation for the book was the fact that Brison herself had become a victim of sexual violence and attempted murder, a gruesome episode that functions as guidance throughout her text. One of the book’s main concerns is the experience Brison had during the assault’s aftermath: the experience of the attacker not only having attempted but succeeded to kill her: “For months after my assault, I had to stop myself before saying (what seemed accurate at the time): ‘I was murdered in France last summer.’” (Brison xi)

As Brison theorizes, a victim of murderous sexual assault is left dead even if they survive: such an assault causes a victim to no longer feel like they live and naturally belong in their surrounding world. Referring to *Trauma and Recovery* by the psychiatrist Judith Lewis Herman, Brison explains that victims lose their belief that it is possible to be themselves around others in their social surroundings. This, according to Brison, indicates that it is nothing less than the victim’s self that is shattered by sexual violence. Yet, the very assumption that someone’s self can be undone by a violent encounter with another human being implies that their self can be reestablished in relation to others as well: “In this book, [...] I develop and defend a view of the self as fundamentally relational – capable of being undone by violence, but also of being remade in connection with others.” (Brison xi)

The narrator in *History of Violence*, Édouard, indeed attests to a lost belief in the possibility of being able to be oneself in his social surroundings: “[E]ver since I faced my own death that night with Reda, I’ve been afraid of not believing, of not believing in anything anymore, and of replacing the absurdities of my own life with other absurdities.” (Louis 24) What occurred exactly during that night with Reda, we learn in the course of the novel. As already mentioned, the novel is set up as a frame story: Édouard overhears his sister recounting his traumatic episode to her husband and supplements it with his own internal commentary. It is through this semi-dialogical set-up that we gradually find out about the events. After a dinner party on Christmas Eve, Édouard walks home and runs into a man whom he initially ignores. After having talked for a while, Édouard invites the man home, where they make love. During the night, the two have a collision and by daybreak, after Reda has fled the house, Édouard finds himself having become the victim of theft, extreme sexual violence, and attempted murder.

The remaining part of *History of Violence* recounts Édouard going to the hospital and, after his friends had convinced him to do so, to the police station to report the assault. We learn that in the months after the assault, Édouard lived on without feeling either alive or feeling to be an actual person, a self. Following Brison, however, we can assume that selves, shattered by sexual violence, can in fact be remade. Theorizing the remaking of shattered selves, Brison refers to psychoanalyst Dori Laub, who claims that in the process of remaking a self, “telling is crucial” (Brison 59). According to Laub, trauma is precisely that type of experience that has not occurred before and that therefore cannot be processed. To enable oneself to process a traumatic event, one has to order it, mold it into a narrative: “Piecing together a shattered self requires a process of remembering and ‘working through’ in which speech and affect converge in a trauma narrative.” (Brison x)

What, according to Brison, happens when one molds one’s traumatic experience into a trauma narrative, are two crucial things. Since an experience with sexual assault shatters your sense of self, i.e. your feeling of naturally taking up a specific position in life among others, you are in need of regaining that position if you want to reestablish your self. The regaining of this position, according to Brison, happens when you recount your trauma story: you reclaim the subject position in your own life story that was taken from you when you were forced to be a mere object to your perpetrator (68). The second crucial effect of recounting one’s personal trauma narrative is making other people witnesses to the story. Making others witnesses to your story, in case these others act as good enough listeners, in fact reestablishes your relationships with them: you regain your sense of naturally taking up a specific place in your social surroundings (Brison 68).

Yet, for these two crucial things to happen, a trauma narrative typically has to take on a certain shape. That is to say: there are certain conventions that the narrative should live up to for the intended effects to occur. As already touched upon in the above, one of these conventions is narrative coherence. Narrative coherence as a convention for trauma stories is recommended in both therapeutic and legal contexts. In therapeutic contexts, regaining the subject position in one’s own life story is thought to be dependent on one’s ability to recount this story coherently, as many personal trauma narratives about sexual assault emphasize the value of control and stability, proliferated by the coherence of a narrative (Borg 455). In the legal context, it is the other of the two crucial effects of narrativizing a traumatic experience that is mainly at play: making others witnesses to your trauma story. Especially in the legal context, as already mentioned, it is important for these witnesses to rely on the truthfulness of your story. And indeed, witnesses are more likely to do so in case your trauma story is narrated coherently (again, cf. Roeder 21; Borg 453; *Tainted Witness* 54).

2. A testimonial scene: discriminatory aspects of coherence

Yet, one may ask oneself which particular narratives count as coherent, as well as which subjects are able to (relatively) smoothly operate norms such as coherence. The even more pressing question is: which subjects may *not* be able to operate them, resulting in their trauma narratives not being believed or valued. According to Lauren Berlant, not all conventions function as norms, but under specific circumstances, conventions can in fact be made the norm, implying in our case that coherent trauma narratives become favored over stories that are considered less or non-coherent (Berlant and Prosser 181). Indeed, as Borg maintains, “narrative coherence has been used ideologically to legitimise certain narratives while excluding from the canon other narratives, by women or slaves, for example, that do not fit hegemonic narrative structures” (458).

Borg goes on to emphasize that the ideal of a reestablished coherent self, coming about in and through a coherent personal trauma narrative, may in fact be “a cultural construc-

tion and an effect of gendered and racialized discourses and practices” (Hyvärinen et al. 7, as quoted in Borg 458). What I want to explore in this paragraph is how *History of Violence* exposes some of the specific ways in which the coherence convention for trauma narratives is indeed an effect of such gendered and racialized discourses and practices. To do so, I want to turn to the already mentioned scene in the novel that stages Édouard testifying to his assault at the police station, where the officers impose coherence as a norm for trauma narratives on him explicitly. By exploring this scene, I want to detangle the way it stages how the coherence convention privileges certain subjects over others along both gendered and racialized lines.

Let us begin with the aftermath of the scene at the police station that we want to zoom in on. In a later chapter, Édouard reflects upon the scene’s impact:

I no longer recognized what I was saying. I no longer recognized my own memories, when I spoke them out loud; the questions I was being asked by the police made me describe my night with Reda differently than I’d have chosen, and in the form that they imposed on my account, I no longer recognized the outlines of my own experience, I was lost, I knew that once I went forward with the story, according to their cues and directions, I couldn’t take it back, and I’d have lost what I wanted to say; [...] (Louis 57).

In this passage, the narrator of *History of Violence*, Édouard, gives expression to the implications of the events at the police station. Indeed, he feels the officers imposed a specific form on his testimony, a form he feels did not do justice to his experience at all. This form, as we already learned, was in fact a coherent one – and what the officers understood by ‘coherent’ exactly is cleared up in the scene that describes Édouard being interviewed about his assault at the police office.

While Édouard recounts the events of the traumatizing night to two officers at the police station, one of the officers interrupts him: “Stop right there!” (Louis 49) She tells him she is frustrated about the messy way the testimony is evolving and requests him to recount the events of the night chronologically and without digressing. Yet, what happened just before the interruption gives us insight into the specifics of the form that the police impose on Édouard’s story. The moment before the interruption, Édouard was replying to a leading question that the other officer had asked him after he recounted the part of his story where he invited Reda home: “Wait – you brought a stranger up to your apartment, in the middle of the night?” (Louis 48) Édouard not being conscious right away of being victim-blamed by his interviewer answers: “But everyone does that...”, to which the officer replies sarcastically: “Everybody?”

Édouard then explains to the reader: “It wasn’t a question. Obviously, he wasn’t asking me whether or not everybody did that, he was saying nobody did that. Or at least, not everybody. So finally I answered: ‘What I mean is, people like me...’” (Louis 48) What the officer insinuates in this passage, is that he understands Édouard to be at least partially to blame for his assault, and for a very specific reason: for being part of the gay scene in which, according to the world view of the officer, dangerous behavior, such as inviting strangers home in the middle of the night, is normalized. By asking his leading questions, the officer requests Édouard to mold the story of his assault in a form that he, the officer, takes to be coherent; a story in which Édouard takes part of the blame for his assault because of his sexual identity. In this way, the testimonial scene stages how coherence as a norm, imposed on Édouard by the officials, has distinctly sexist implications. Indeed, a police officer suggesting that the behavior related to your sexual identity is to blame for the violence being done to you has a similar effect as victim-blaming women for sexual violence inflicted on them, as Brison explains it: “The fear of rape has long functioned to keep women in their place.” (Brison 18)

The leading questions of the officer are not the only markers of the ways in which the discourse imposed on Édouard is gendered and racialized. Another sign is introduced early in the novel. There, Édouard thinks of the police report that was drawn up after the interview and how it described his perpetrator: as an ‘Arab male’ (Louis 13). This description, we learn later in the book, does not at all echo the actual description that Édouard gave of Reda during the interview. Édouard then explains to the reader that while he was giving the description, one of the officers interrupted him, in a way similar to when he was posing the leading questions, and imposed on him a specific way of telling his story: “At the police station I’d given a brief description of Reda, when they asked, and immediately the officer on duty cut me off: ‘Oh, you mean he was an Arab.’ He was triumphant, *delighted* would be an exaggeration, but he did smile, he crowed; it was as if I’d given him the confession he’d wanted to hear since I walked in the door, as if I’d given him proof that he was right all along; he kept repeating it, ‘the Arab male, the Arab male’, every other sentence involved ‘Arab male’” (Louis 13–14).

Reda, we learn, is not an Arabic but a Kabyle man. In the discourse of the police officers, however, this difference has no place. Their idea of a coherent narrative about becoming a victim of sexual violence indeed involves racist tropes like generalizing all men with a certain physical appearance, which fills Édouard with anger: “The copy of the report that I keep at home, drafted in police language, refers to an *Arab male*. Each time I see that phrase it infuriates me, because I can still hear the racism of the police who interviewed me [...].” (Louis 17) As staged in the scene at the police station, what the officials understand to be a coherent version of Édouard’s trauma story, i.e. the version that ends up in the official report, is a version that lays part of the blame of the assault on Édouard’s sexual identity and that stigmatizes the perpetrator in an obviously racist way.

3. Digressions and the way they renegotiate the coherence convention

While coherence as a convention for personal trauma narratives is thought to enable victims of sexual violence to reestablish their selves, *History of Violence* stages reasons why the convention, bound up as it is with the sexist and racist discourse operated by the officers, precisely *obstructs* Édouard’s self-reestablishment. Yet, the novel may thematize how the convention is forced upon Édouard during his interview at the police station, but in itself, it does not necessarily live up to this same convention. Indeed, the novel does not recount the events chronologically or concisely; one of the main literary devices used in the novel is, as I have already mentioned, the digression.

The use of digressions is not even the first and foremost sign that the novel is set up to resist conventions or norms for writing personal trauma narratives. In fact, two remarkable peritextual elements indicate such a set-up from the start: the book’s title, as well as the epigraph placed at the end of the text. The book’s title does not, as one may expect a title of such a book to do, refer to the specific violent episode it recounts, but to the history of violence in general. Therefore, the title suggests that the described violence, although experienced personally, is not recounted as fully personal, but is rather “embedded in a sociological understanding of structural violence” (Mueller 155). This underwrites the thesis, posed by life writing scholar Leigh Gilmore, that “[r]auma is never exclusively personal; it always exists within complicated histories that combine harm and pleasure, along with less inflected dimensions of everyday life. Remembering trauma entails contextualizing it within history” (*The Limits of Autobiography* 31). The title *History of Violence*, in other words, announces a personal trauma narrative that may not take the conventional personal form for such narratives, but a form that may account for the broader sociological aspects of the trauma in question as well.

Apart from the title, there is another peritextual element that may steer readers’ expectations away from conventional personal trauma narratives: the epigraph. This epigraph is taken from the autobiographical novel *Kaddish for an Unborn Child* by the Hungarian writer and Holocaust survivor Imre Kertész, a novel that testifies to certain aspects of Kertész’s Holocaust trauma. The passage reflects on the relation between writing, truth, happiness, and pain, and while in the academic reception of *History of Violence*, no attention has yet been paid to its epigraph – perhaps because Louis has uncharacteristically placed it at the end of the book where it is easily overlooked – the choice for the Kertész fragment is arguably hazardous: as the Holocaust is commonly perceived as “‘unique’ among human-perpetrated horrors”, comparisons with other instances of violence are considered improper (Rothberg 6). Yet, a comparison between the Holocaust and sexual violence is exactly what Louis is suggesting to make by having selected the Kertész fragment as an epigraph to his novel.

To recapitulate what we have just explored: although *History of Violence* is clearly a personal trauma narrative, there are some indications that the book also challenges the conventions for this type of narrative. The title, for one, suggests that the book does not only recount a personal experience of violence but addresses the structural aspects of this type of violence too. Additionally, the epigraph daringly suggests that the violence done to Édouard can somehow be compared to the violence inflicted upon the Hungarian Holocaust survivor Imre Kertész. Both these peritextual elements suggest that one way in which *History of Violence* challenges the conventions for personal trauma narratives is by accounting not only for the victim’s personal experiences, but also, presumably in the great number of digressions in the novel, for the social aspects of the violence or its relations with other types of violence. This, I want to suggest, forms an intriguing indication for what to look for when we will explore the already named digressions as modes of renegotiating the coherence norm for trauma narratives.

4. *History of Violence* as multidirectional testimony

The digression I want to have a closer at in this section is the one at the beginning of *History of Violence*’s fifth chapter. There, narrator Édouard recounts how Reda told him about the journey that his father made as a refugee from Kabylia to France: “He crossed the desert, he slept on the sand and in the dirt, hidden in the bushes.” (Louis 41) The main part of the digression is about Reda’s father’s arrival and time in a French immigrant hostel. Édouard recounts how Reda told him that his father always described the “manager as a violent and tyrannical man” (Louis 41). He recounts how Reda told him about the frequent fires that “would be part of his life in the hostel, that sometimes they’d be fatal”, about the fact that “he could be deported for any reason”, about the filth and the insects; in short about the wretched circumstances and frequent violence Reda’s father experienced during his first years in France (Louis 44; 45).

Indeed, this episode functions as a digression from a supposedly coherent narrative about Édouard’s sexual assault, as its focus is not this assault, but instead the violence that a member of the perpetrator’s family had to endure as an immigrant from a country formerly colonized by France. This violence, we learn, still has visible effects on the life of Reda, for example in the economic sense, as Reda cannot find employment other than minor plumbing construction chores here and there (Louis 58). Thus, *History of Violence* resists the coherence convention for trauma narratives and instead digresses to recount not only the story of the violence that Édouard has experienced but also the story about the violence that the perpetrator and even the perpetrator’s father has experienced in his life. It is by resisting coherence that the novel can resist the racist tropes that the police considered to be contributing to the coherence of Édouard trauma narrative; by digressing,

the novel instead draws a line between the violence experienced by the victim and the violence experienced by the perpetrator, thereby underwriting Gilmore's already cited thesis that "[t]rauma is never exclusively personal" (*The Limits of Autobiography* 31).

What I want to suggest, is that *History of Violence*, with its digressive set-up and the space that, through this set-up, is cleared for not only the events of the traumatizing night but related instances of violence too, should be seen not as a conventional personal trauma narrative, but more specifically as a *multidirectional testimony* of personal trauma. Indeed, I would want to coin this concept of multidirectional testimony in the extension of the concept of multidirectional memory introduced by Michael Rothberg in his 2009 study under that same title. In this study, Rothberg questions the "uniqueness paradigm" that dominates the cultural memory of the Holocaust, a paradigm that renders comparisons between the events of the Holocaust and other "histories of victimization" unethical or simply unacceptable (Rothberg 6). In the course of his study, Rothberg discusses several Holocaust commemorating artworks that date from before the installation of the uniqueness paradigm and finds that in them, the events of the Holocaust were related or even compared to instances of colonial violence, which made these artworks distinctly multidirectional modes of commemorating the historical event.

History of Violence indeed seems to inscribe itself in this tradition of distinctly multidirectional ways of commemorating violence – with its choice of the Kertész epigraph, as well as with its digressive set-up that allows Louis as a writer to relate the violence inflicted upon him to the coloniality-related violence inflicted upon his perpetrator. One of the potential effects of recounting a violent experience in a multidirectional way is that lines of solidarity, however fragile, can be drawn between people that in the 'coherent' version of the story would have been each other's opposites: the victim and the perpetrator. Let's have one more look at the digression about Reda's father. While Édouard digresses about what happened to Reda's father upon his arrival in France, he digresses again within this digression, by relating Reda's father's experiences to his own. In fact, he explains that when Reda told him about the rude and violent manager welcoming his father to the immigrant hostel, he envisioned the manager by involuntarily remembering the appearance of a witch-like and detested woman from the village he grew up (Louis 41). He then recounts a part of the tragic history of this woman, thereby drawing a line of solidarity between not only the manager and this woman, suggesting that the manager may have had a tragic history of himself that made him the violent man that he was, but also between Reda's loved ones and his own.

A similar line of solidarity is drawn in a different digression in *History of Violence*. In this digression, Édouard's sister pauses her report of Édouard's assault to her husband to tell him a story from their shared youth, which Édouard overhears as he is still secretly positioned behind the door. The story is about the time that Édouard's sister caught Édouard and his friend going out stealing. She tells the anecdote after she has told her husband how Édouard, during the traumatizing night, caught Reda stealing his iPad. When Édouard told her about this particular event, she recalls, he explained to her that he thought it somehow made sense for Reda to steal, thereby expressing solidarity with his perpetrator at this point. His sister, a person of principle, did not agree with him at all. The anecdote that follows explains their difference in opinion about the topic of stealing: as Édouard's sister recounts, by going stealing with his friends, Édouard risked being punished for it by his father, while at the same time, his father would somehow be proud of him as well. His sister explains: "Now that he's stolen, now that he's disobeyed his father, Édouard has finally become a man" (Louis 64).

Whereas the anecdote about the young Édouard going out stealing has little to do with the sexual violence he experienced, and thus clearly forms a digression from the presumed

coherent narrative about his trauma, something crucial happens in it. Not only does it draw a line of solidarity between the supposed victim and the supposed perpetrator in the trauma narrative, it in fact elaborates the specifics of this line of solidarity: as gay men from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, both Édouard and Reda were brought up with pressing masculinity norms installed by their fathers – and stealing, however paradoxically, would be one of the ways to live up to these norms. Thus, the digression does not only allow for nuancing the assumed unbridgeable gap between victim and perpetrator, it also allows to elaborate the intersectional situatedness of the victim and the perpetrator that grounds the line of solidarity between them. Indeed, this digression could be read as an instance of the multidirectionality of *History of Violence*'s set-up, as it makes space for, in the words of Rothberg, “visions that construct solidarity out of the specificities, overlaps, and echoes of different historical experiences” (Rothberg 16).

I would want to make one last step in this exploration. Besides the possibility of drawing lines of solidarity between parties that, in conventional trauma narratives, would be presented as opposites or antagonists, and the possibility of elaborating the intersectional backgrounds of these lines of solidarity, there is a third, related effect of the multidirectional set-up of *History of Violence* visible in the digressions just analyzed: a reestablishment of Édouard's identity. As Rothberg emphasizes, the uniqueness paradigm that dominates the cultural memory of the Holocaust is “flawed” because it views “the public sphere as a pre-given, limited space in which already-established groups engage in a life-and-death struggle” (Rothberg 5; 3). Multidirectional types of commemorating or narrating, on the other hand, acknowledge that identities are not already established or pre-given, but in fact *produced* in the act of commemorating or narrating, and thus these multidirectional types of narrating encourage “us to think of the public sphere as a malleable discursive space in which groups do not simply articulate established positions but actually *come into being through their dialogical interactions with others*; both the subjects and spaces of the public are open to continual reconstruction” (Rothberg 5, my emphasis).

Indeed, I want to suggest, it is in the digressions, as instances of multidirectional trauma narration, that the identity of Édouard, shattered by trauma, comes into being again through its relations with others. As we may remember, in the ‘coherent’ version of Édouard's trauma narrative crystallized in the official report, Reda was stigmatized as a stereotypical ‘Arab male’ perpetrator and Édouard as a stereotypical irresponsible gay male victim who has, at least partly, himself to blame for his assault. But in several digressions in *History of Violence*, the identity of both men is established otherwise. The digression about the experiences of Reda's father as a new immigrant in France resists the racist stereotyping in the police's version of Édouard's trauma narrative and establishes Édouard's identity in a relationship of solidarity with the cultural background of his perpetrator. In addition, the digression about the young Édouard going out stealing resists the sexist stereotyping in the police's official report, a stereotyping that suggests gay men are irresponsible because of their sexuality. It thereby establishes Édouard's identity in a relationship of solidarity with the economic and sexual background of his perpetrator, a background that Édouard in fact shares, by explaining how behavior that would commonly be perceived as ‘irresponsible’, such as inviting strangers home or stealing, may come about in relation to masculinity norms imposed on people with this background.

Conclusion

In the course of this article, we have seen how *History of Violence* as a trauma narrative renegotiates the coherence convention for such texts and can be read as what I suggested to dub a multidirectional testimony of sexual trauma. The first step we took was to expose how *History of Violence* indeed shows signs of the victim's loss of self, as theory points out

to be characteristic of victims of murderous sexual assault. Personal trauma narratives, we saw, are thought to take up a key role in the reestablishment of this sense of self, and in both therapeutic and legal contexts, coherence is viewed as an essential convention to live up to in conveying such a personal trauma narrative. In the scene at the police station, *History of Violence* indeed stages the importance attached to coherence as a convention for trauma narratives: the officers interviewing Édouard explicitly impose coherence as a norm on his trauma story. Yet, as this same scene makes clear, the version of the story that the officers understand to be coherent involves explicit racist and sexist tropes, othering the perpetrator, as well as victim-blaming Édouard.

Yet, as we have seen, two paratextual aspects of *History of Violence* indicate that the set-up of the novel may in fact differ from conventional personal trauma narratives. In the first place, the title suggests that the violence that is the book's topic is not viewed as incidental or personal but as part of a socially and historically specific network of acts of violence. In the second place, there is the epigraph at the end of the novel, taken from a book by Holocaust survivor Imre Kertész, which challenges the uniqueness paradigm dominating the commemoration of the Holocaust by drawing a line of comparison between the violence experienced by Kertész and the violence experienced by Louis. Indeed, *History of Violence* can be read as not a conventional personal trauma narrative, but as a distinctly multidirectional testimony: *History of Violence*, as we have seen, contains digressions that resist the coherence norm imposed on Édouard at the police station by clearing space for drawing lines of solidarity between victim and perpetrator. In a digression about Reda's father's history, we saw a line of solidarity being drawn between the violence Reda's father has experienced as a refugee, as well as with Reda as a second-generation refugee, and the violence Édouard experienced being raped by Reda; the digression, we have argued, thereby nuances the racist, stereotype version of the trauma narrative in the official report. Additionally, in a digression about the young Édouard going out stealing, a line of solidarity is drawn between the economic and sexual backgrounds of victim and perpetrator, thereby nuancing the sexist-stereotypical version of the story in the police's report.

What I finally wanted to argue, is that it is by renegotiating the coherence norm in the described ways that *History of Violence* reestablishes Édouard's self, shattered as it was by sexual assault and repressed instead of expressed in the 'coherent' version of the story imposed on Édouard by the police. The novel in fact reestablishes Édouard's self in a multidirectional way, acknowledging the instances of violence that Édouard has endured earlier in life, but most importantly, the violence that other people involved in the story have experienced. Instead of letting Édouard's sexual identity be repressed as in the official report, the author of *History of Violence* digresses and thereby reestablishes Édouard's identity in a relation of solidarity with his perpetrator's sexual identity: he acknowledges that they both, because of sharing economic and sexual backgrounds, or in other words a certain intersectional situatedness, are regularly confronted with masculinity norms. The self that is reestablished in *History of Violence*, thus, is not precisely a coherent self, but a fragmented, relational and multidirectional one. Therefore, the novel indeed illustrates what Susan Brison concludes, namely that the "recovery [of the self after sexual assault] [does not seem] to consist of picking up the pieces of a shattered self (or fractured narrative). It's facing the fact that there never was a coherent self (or story) there to begin with" (Brison 116).*

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