

## Unruly Sites of Repair: Rwanda, 1994-2019

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I am an architectural historian and cultural geographer who explores the spatialization of peacebuilding in relation to unresolved histories of harm and the legacies of uneven redress. I work primarily in Rwanda, where I have been reflecting on the unruly nature of repair after the 1994 genocide. “Repair” implies efforts to mend or compensate for harms that result from crimes and a range of wrongs not necessarily recognized by law, including psycho-social injuries, non-prosecutable forms of state terror, and structural oppression. Repair is both an individual matter, and a fundamentally social dilemma concerned with issues of redress for whole groups of people. Forms of repair range from material payment and redistributive policies, to truth-telling and forms of recognition, mutual aid, and the restoration of relationships. Repair is no easy task: it is unruly. Nonetheless, individuals and communities seek repair to fulfill the possibility to endure; to feed a body in need of some measure of acknowledgment of wrongs, restitution, and perhaps healing. Endeavoring to repair recognizes both the impossibility and necessity of that task.

A memorial can be a potent act of communal repair. Memorials also resist notions of repair as inevitable, immediately accessible, or achieved through techno-scientific acts of reconstruction. Rwanda’s genocide memorials are distinct sites: they conserve places of killing and victims’ remains in attempts to materialize collective memory of Tutsi survival and erasure. Among them, the Murambi Genocide Memorial is prominent for its display of mummified genocide victims at the massacre site. Attempting to understand the ethical and political motivations behind the conservation of genocide victims and sites compels engagement with the views and experiences of individuals who did that memory work. Doing so has led me to an intimate historiography of repair.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> My approach to writing intimate histories is informed by the sensibility and work of Yvette Abrahams, Ariella Azoulay, Tina Campt, Saidiya Hartman, and Toni Morrison.

On April 21, 1994, state-sponsored militants attacked the Murambi Technical School and killed an estimated 35,000 people who sought refuge at the complex.<sup>2</sup> The next day, local authorities disposed of the evidence, throwing bodies into newly dug mass graves. The following year, an iterative process of exhumation, conservation, memorialization, and reburial was initiated by a local community group and later, the Genocide Memorial Commission. The Commission was convened and funded by the post-genocide governing regime. At Murambi, its charge was to conserve victims' remains and the weapons and place of massacre, and to make that genocide evidence available to view, creating a memorial site that was at once commemorative and a justice-seeking corrective. Work was led on-site by a Rwandan archaeologist, Dr. Celestin Misago Kanimba, and a Chilean UN human rights worker, Mario Ibarra. The Commission's work was complicated by the divergent aims of the new regime, whose interest in genocide memorials was as much about justice as securing national sovereignty and quieting dissent.<sup>3</sup>

Two photographs taken by Ibarra near Murambi engage what it was like to conserve evidence of the genocide in 1996. In one, a woman's arms gently encircle a child who watches an infant playing with the grass at their feet. Blankets to keep the pair warm are close in case comfort is needed. The woman is resting and looking off to the distance, where another woman sits partially out of frame. She holds a baby to her chest, nestled in a blanket on her lap. In a second photograph, the camera centers in on a multitude of hands suspended over a sheet of plastic that tenuously holds soapy water. They rub human skulls to wash the dirt and remaining bits of hair, blood, and flesh from genocide victims found in a mass grave. Several groups are at work conserving hundreds of bones and skulls, some for display at the Murambi Memorial and others for burial in consecrated graves. Photographs of the "backstage" work of conservation and mothering challenge a reading of those memorials solely as commemorative monuments, inviting questions as to the politics and emotional labor of repair.

The majority of conservation workers at Murambi were young women whose children accompanied them as they did their work. Most survived the genocide and their family members. Vestine featured in numerous photographs of Murambi conservation work in 1996. When I spoke with her in 2018, she described what it was like to conserve bodies and bones. The conservation of killing sites was gruesome, difficult, and emotional. She said that she and other genocide survivors were still sad and grieving. The stiff, withered bodies were inordinately

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<sup>2</sup> The estimated number of individuals killed at the Murambi massacre on April 21, 1994 varies according to the account. In 1996, the Genocide Memorial Commission estimated that 35,000 to 40,000 people were killed at the site, based on the 20,154 dead bodies found in area mass graves and witness testimonies (Preliminary Report, 1996: 55). By contrast, subsequent African Rights and government reports identify 50,000 dead at the site. African Rights, *Murambi: "Go. If you die, perhaps I will live"* (Kigali: African Rights, April 2007): 10, 134.

<sup>3</sup> Research on the government control of genocide memorials is exhaustive, represented partially in the following: Jennie E. Burnet, *Genocide Lives in Us: Women, Memory, and Silence in Rwanda* (Madison: U. of Wisconsin Press, 2012); H  l  ne Dumas and R  mi Korman, "Espaces de la m  moire du g  nocide des Tutsis au Rwanda: M  moriaux et Lieux de M  moire" *Afrique Contemporaine* 2, 238 (2011): pp. 11-27; Nigel Eltringham, "Bodies of Evidence: Remembering the Rwandan Genocide at Murambi," in *Remembering Genocide*, Nigel Eltringham and Pam Maclean, eds. (London: Routledge, 2014): pp. 200-218; Timothy Longman, *Memory and Justice in Post-Genocide Rwanda* (New York: Cambridge U. Press, 2017); Olivier Nyirubugara, *Complexities and Dangers of Remembering and Forgetting in Rwanda* (Leiden: Sidestone Press, 2013); Claudine Vidal, "La Comm  moration du G  nocide au Rwanda: Violence Symbolique, M  morisation Forc  e et Histoire Officielle," *Cahiers d'  tudes Africaines* 3, 175 (2004): 575-592.

heavy and smelled of decay. Yet, Vestine cleaned the bodies of the dead to bring her kin some measure of dignity. She continues to care for them today, returning to the school buildings every day for the last three decades to clean the grounds and the bodies in one of the classrooms. This despite being laid off for a time by the memorial managers, and the recurring migraines and high blood pressure that doctors explain as trauma related. She did the work despite all this because the job provided her and her two surviving children with some income, and, as she said, “they were our people.”

These efforts of repair are oriented to what I call an ethic of non-erasure, which holds that the very representation of genocidal crimes helps to counter the intended obliteration of a people. Acts of recognition train the averted gaze back to that which it seeks to evade, and tells otherwise ignored or hidden truths. This is a form of memory justice, one that bears witness to erasure. In Rwanda, the views of those involved in early genocide memory conservation demonstrate that it was not exclusively government directed. The conservation of bodies, bones, and massacre sites developed from local initiatives motivated at least in part, as Vestine helps to highlight, by care for those killed. As unruly sites of repair, genocide memorials refuse closure as state symbols of power. They also hold contested memories, providing windows onto marginalized remembrance.

What might architectural historiography learn from unruly sites of repair—as a matter of epistemology, method, and subject of focus—to reckon with its own historical omissions and the dispossession, marginalization, and oppression enacted through built environments? Considering her approach to repair as a method for writing history, one might describe Vestine’s caregiving as one that intervenes directly in the violence of historiographical omission by seeking to recognize lives lost; by recalibrating the ways in which genocide histories are narrated. Architectural historians attentive to those dynamics participate in parallel acts of repair, activating both a politics of recognition and forms of scholarly care. The latter emerges from a radical seeing and listening that refuses to turn away, that is attentive to Vestine’s agency and struggle.

In my research in Rwanda, I am undoubtedly an outsider. My privilege as a foreigner with the ability to travel and ask questions and my disadvantages as a foreigner who has none of the knowledge and expertise possessed by Rwandans were raised by nearly everyone that I spoke with. I sought to balance my outsider status in the country by gaining Kinyarwanda language proficiency, and where local dialects challenge my understanding, to partner with a Rwandan translator. Though certainly more familiar in culture and language than I, they are also a relative outsider to the communities we visited, for they did not grow up in those places. They prefer not to be identified. I describe our collaboration as one animated by questions regarding interpretation, un/ease, what was narrated and what was possibly left unsaid. Without their humanity and insight this work would have been both less joyous and meaningful. Forging some measure of intimacy with individuals and images in the course of writing this history has produced a body language of welled up feeling that always catches me by surprise. I hear continuities of the past in the passion, heartbreak, resolute determination, and resignation to larger forces in those moments when photographs were explained or experiences relived. I endeavor to see and hear despite my own substantial distance from the experiences relayed.

My research has also confronted another, unexpected outside: an aversion, particularly within forums related to architecture and architectural history, to engage with images that document genocide massacres and memory work. The most extreme of such reactions occurred in 2019 in a remote conference hosted by a European university. Halfway into my presentation, the panel moderator turned off my presentation screen, removing my slides from the audience's view. At another conference, in a panel on architectural histories of conflict, a senior professor expressed significant unease with the images that I showed. Audience members at both conferences challenged my intent in relation to the triggering effects they experienced. I had been most concerned with describing the traumatic experiences and memory activism of those represented in the photographs. Images of violence are never easy to receive and are furthermore overlaid with issues of vantage and power that can reproduce pain and harm. However, I present my research frequently within African Studies conferences and seminars and have never confronted similar refusals to engage.

Declaring the visual and spatial evidence of violence as outside the purview of architecture and its history has significant consequences for those seeking to confront the damage done to marginalized communities by design and planning. Prevalent abstractions of violence typically refer to dispossession as reform policies and acts of enclosure as modernization. Such abstractions rarely allow for causal relationships between policies and the loss of life and other forms of violence, and renders damaged homes and the destruction of civic space as if they were mere symbols of war. It is my hope that an intimate history of genocide memory work would help to inform the design and planning fields struggling to come to terms with the violence it has perpetrated and reproduced. An intimate, spatial historiography resists abstraction. It engages both repair and care as method to represent unruly sites of memory and the complex personhood of individuals. In doing so, an intimate spatial historiography foregrounds people and places that are erased and misrecognized, enabling discussions around topics otherwise wrapped in silence. Writing an architectural history from Rwanda's genocide memorials in this way requires that I confront, and not seek to resolve, the justice, politics, and trauma of memory work. It begs the intimacy that grows from attempted, close understanding, and a learning from—a transposition of—efforts of repair in the world to those in historiography.

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**Image Caption:** Residents living near Murambi, employed by the Genocide Memorial Commission, care for their children and clean the bones of genocide victims found in area mass graves, 1996. Ibarra personal archive, Chile