

A Political Aesthetic of Bodily Vulnerability in Rwanda's Genocide Memorials

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Citizens and states grapple with how to represent their histories of violence, including in their physical and visual environments. This ‘political aesthetic’ is an important and increasingly controversial topic, especially around debates over how to depict historical mass violence. This article takes up the case of Rwandan genocide memorials that display visceral bodily violence as a way to negotiate between differing accounts of bodily vulnerability and its depiction in public commemoration. I detail negative accounts of an aesthetic of bodily vulnerability by Elaine Scarry, Susan Sontag, and contemporary critics of Rwandan memorials before showing how an aesthetic of bodily vulnerability is separable from its repressive political context. I ultimately provide a positive account of an aesthetic of bodily vulnerability, arguing for the potential political utility of a political aesthetic of bodily vulnerability that works to awaken the imagination to political futures in which we avoid seeing others’ bodies as disposable.

Keywords: vulnerability, Rwanda, genocide, commemoration, memory, aesthetic

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In both the immediate and aftermath and the distant wake of violent conflict, states and civil societies grapple with how to represent histories of violence in their physical landscapes. Should political societies gloss over or acknowledge past genocide, colonial violence, and slavery? How should the physical environment commemorate victims? Should they aim to be politically instructive? And how visceral should the depictions of violence and human remains be – should we show the public sanitized or jarring images? Since at least the Cold War and with renewed fervor in recent years, citizens have acted on the urge to topple memorials and other visual reminders of injustice. However, societies show no signs of ceasing to erect new commemorative markers, and citizens continue to live in physical environments saturated with historical reminders, from permanent memorials to subversive ‘counter-monuments’ (Young 1994) – so the pressing question is not *whether* but *how* these markers should best reflect societies’ political or ethical priorities. In this article, I take up the case of Rwandan genocide memorials that display violence inflicted on bodies as a way to negotiate between differing accounts of bodily vulnerability and its depiction in public commemoration. I detail the most compelling critiques of depicting bodily vulnerability before showing how this aesthetic is separable from its repressive political context and providing a positive account of such an aesthetic.

Although theorists of material culture, geography, and urban planning have long grappled with memorialization, normative political theorists and political philosophers have only recently turned to the political importance of the aesthetic of public and semi-public spaces (ex. Grosz 2001; Bickford 2000; Forestal 2017). The ‘political aesthetic’ (Waldron 2012) is the way our

public and semi-public spaces look (or are perceived by the other senses) and how they reflect various public values or ideas. Monuments, statues, public buildings, ceremonies, uniforms, signs, and posters are all elements of the political aesthetic. It provides an alternative framework for questions about how societies can best reflect their ideals of justice beyond deliberation, institutions, and public opinion. What kinds of expression and speech will we value and promote in a just society? What kinds of symbols and markers? What kinds of public ceremonies, art installations, architectural structures, and landscapes?

Because our quotidian aesthetic environment is accessible to interpretation by all, the political aesthetic is an important point of entry for everyday citizens to engage in debate about political ideas. Despite widespread recent interest in the political aesthetic among citizens of the United States, South Africa, Europe, and elsewhere – as seen in efforts to take down or protect Confederate monuments, the #RhodesMustFall movement, and public art such as the *Stolpersteine* in Germany – political theorists have largely overlooked the political implications of the aesthetic commemorative environment.

Moreover, many of the frameworks first developed around the political aesthetic of historical mass violence¹ after the Holocaust still dominate scholarly and popular debates about the commemoration of violent events. These conversations, in wake of the imperative to ‘never again’ allow atrocity after Auschwitz, often center on a key dichotomy: harmful forgetting versus painful remembrance. An example is Theodor Adorno’s post-Holocaust rejection of *aufarbeiten* (‘working to overcome the past’), or forgetting, in favor of a painful but necessary reckoning, *verarbeiten* (‘working upon the past’) (Adorno 1998). Similar fears of sweeping history under the rug or failing to remember the past have reappeared in contemporary conversations about Confederate monuments and other politically contentious symbols; the postwar dichotomy of

forgetting and remembrance continues to dominate discussions of historical commemoration of atrocities.

But it is important to move beyond this impasse. For one thing, the remembrance-forgetting framework is not so stark a dichotomy as it might first seem. Those who pit remembrance against forgetting or erasure (ex. Waldron 2012; Rieff 2016) fail to recognize that remembrance always entails forgetting. As James Young and others (ex. Anderson 2006; Wolin 1989) have shown, remembrance always encompasses some selective forgetting, contributing to collective amnesia because of the narratives that commemoration ignores, eclipses, or minimizes (Young 1994). When we fail to recognize how all commemoration involves both remembrance and forgetting, uncritically repeating the idea that remembrance and forgetting are binary opposites, we contribute further to the effacement of both terms, eroding their meaning. Moreover, a single-minded focus on remembrance at the risk of forgetting or erasure simplifies history, ignoring the way in which the past is always seen through the biases and frameworks of the present.

For these reasons, I am less interested in whether commemoration remembers or forgets history and more interested in *which* narratives we choose to emphasize and *how* an aesthetic of commemoration can employ concepts aimed toward a positive political project. Rejecting the notion that monuments to historical violence could ever be apolitical or solely honor victims, I instead make a pragmatic argument that political societies should consider what kinds of messages might be politically productive. As such, my analysis is descriptive, critical, and prescriptive – it describes current aesthetic representations of historical violence and associated political themes, critiques their problems and failures, and suggests the merits of a political aesthetic of historical violence.²

The article proceeds as follows. It gives a brief overview of the Rwandan post-genocide political moment and analyzes three memorials to the Rwandan Genocide, all of which display bodily remains or other visualizations of violence. It then considers critical accounts of depictions of bodies and bodily pain from Elaine Scarry, Susan Sontag, and several scholars commenting on Rwandan memorials. Finally, it expands Judith Butler's analysis of the precarity of the body and political mourning and Theodor Adorno's theory of the visceral to explore the merits of an aesthetic that works to awaken the political imagination and invite viewers to work against violence. The Rwandan memorials depict the vulnerability and fragility of victims' bodies in a way that I argue is effective in communicating the horror of genocide. However, they are being enlisted in the exclusionary and false government-sanctioned narrative of the genocide, in which Tutsis were the only victims and Hutus the only killers – so these memorials represent unfulfilled promises and untapped potential.

Rwanda's Commemorative Environment

In 1994, decades of political and ethnic manipulation by Belgian colonial forces, turmoil in national and regional politics, and socio-economic fearmongering and exclusion culminated in genocide in Rwanda. In one hundred violent days, between 800,000 and a million people were killed. Most of the victims belonged to the Tutsi minority group or were moderate Hutus, and most of the killers were Hutu. The Hutu-led government planned the genocide, buying weapons and distributing propaganda that vilified the rebel army of Tutsi refugees, the Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA). Pastors killed members of their congregation; neighbors killed neighbors; husbands killed wives.

The Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), the party that evolved from the RPA once it toppled the genocidal government and ended the genocide, gained control during the tumultuous

transitional period and still governs by what is effectively one-party rule. The genocide functions as the regime's *raison d'état* (Ibreck 2012), with its continued effects acting as a narrative around which political elites and citizens mobilize to unify 'One Rwanda' (Buckley-Zistel 2006). President Paul Kagame enjoys international support despite using a referendum to extend his term limits via constitutional amendment and Rwanda's intervention into conflicts in the neighboring DRC. The government has drawn criticism for failing to adopt liberal democratic governance, suppressing civil society, intimidating or assassinating opposition politicians and activists, and tampering with election results (Longman 2011). These crackdowns have allowed the government to frame itself as a 'custodian of security', whose absence would mean the end of the post-genocide peace (Buckley-Zistel 2006, 144).

On top of strong social norms against discussing ethnicity (Longman 2011), the government has attempted 'to legislate ethnic identities out of existence' (Lemarchand 2008, 66), paradoxically perpetuating ethnic divisionism and inhibiting political reconciliation because ethnic tensions may remain under the calm surface of a supposedly 'post-ethnic' society. Legal restrictions on 'genocide ideology' rely on vague definitions that give the state the broad ability to punish dissent (Waldorf 2011), degrade the quality of political discourse, create a culture of mistrust and fear around commemoration, and decrease the legitimacy of the implicitly Tutsi-identified RPF regime (Waldorf 2011).

Despite restrictions on discussion of ethnicity, since the early 2000s the government has ethnicized the genocide. The broad program of commemoration and memorial-building, which was started by civilians and the churches and taken up by the Rwandan government (Giblin 2017) and sought to memorialize both Tutsi and Hutu dead (Vidal 2004), was eventually replaced by a narrative that labels 1994 a 'Genocide against the Tutsi', language added to the

constitution in 2003 (as the ‘1994 Tutsi genocide’) and incorporated into the Kigali Genocide Memorial Centre (Longman 2017; Waldorf 2011). Major discrepancies exist between this official narrative of the genocide, which emphasizes mass Hutu participation and total Tutsi victimhood, and the far more complex and nuanced events of the genocide. The latter account includes the RPF’s massacres of Hutu civilians during the war; the ensuing refugee crisis and killings of Hutus for their political positions, for rescuing Tutsis, or for being related to Tutsis (Des Forges 1999; Longman 2017; Straus 2007).

I focus here on three of the country’s six major genocide memorials.³ These monuments are case studies in the puzzle of emphasizing bodily vulnerability when commemorating violent histories, and point to successes and failures of this emphasis. I discuss them here to tease out this puzzle rather than to praise them as ideal monuments or perfect depictions of bodily vulnerability.

The Kigali Genocide Memorial was opened in 2004 by the capital city and national governments and the British nonprofit Aegis Trust. Visitors walk in to a courtyard with a fountain surrounding an eternal flame burning for genocide victims. Inside the museum, photographs, videos and informational signs detail pre-colonial history; colonization and the ethnicization of the Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa groups; decades of ethnic conflict; the 1994 genocide; and its aftermath. The museum emphasizes the ‘Genocide against the Tutsi’ narrative; for example, a video displays a survivor suggesting that only five percent of Hutus were innocent (Doughty 2008, 198, cited in King 2010, 299). There is a room of photographs of child victims labelled with their names and biographical details (example: Francine Murengezi Ingabire, 12. Favourite food: eggs and chips. Cause of death: hacked by machete). There is a room filled with hundreds of family photographs of victims pinned to wires. Outside, a wall with names of the

dead stands near the mass graves containing at least 250,000 bodies, with window-ceilings visitors can peer through or even stand on. There are graphic photographs, bones, skulls, dirtied weapons, and piles of victims' belongings under glass cases.

At Nyamata, in a Catholic Church where Tutsis gathered to hide from *génocidaires*, bodies of victims are interred in a crypt, while their bloodied clothes lie on the church pews, standing in for the bodies that once wore them in what François Debrix calls the 'fusion/confusion of the human and non-human' remains (Debrix 2017, 126). Visitors walk among the pews, with no glass or sanitized images between the viewer and the artifacts of the massacre. The smells and sight of bloodied clothing – the clothing victims were wearing as they were slaughtered – arrests visitors immediately as they walk into the church. Sun and fresh air outside contrast with stuffiness and darkness inside; light streams through the bullet holes in the ceiling and through the holes that attackers made so they could throw grenades inside. The altar cloth is stained with blood; the church that the victims thought would be their sanctuary was instead the site of their massacre. In the basement of the church is a crypt; visitors can see down into the mass grave. Banners and garlands in purple – the color of genocide commemoration – decorate the walls behind a Virgin Mary statue.

In Murambi, an unfinished technical school stands on a hill in the countryside near the university town of Butare. The campus never became a school; instead, bodies fill its classrooms. Tutsis and moderate Hutus flocked to the school as a place of sanctuary, but around 40,000 were killed. Hundreds of bodies preserved with lye are displayed on pallets in classrooms, not behind glass. These bodies are mummified; visitors can see the twisted limbs and anguished facial expressions. There are adult-sized and child-sized bodies. There are placards displaying information critical of the French intervention during the genocide; these replaced exhibits

depicting the plight of Hutu refugees, and they originally appeared around the time of President Kagame's denunciation of the French following French-issued arrest warrants for RPF affiliates. These placards, which provide what little historical context there is at the site, describe French troops raping Rwandan women and building a volleyball court over mass graves (Giblin 2017).

All three memorials are currently run by the Rwandan government's commemorative agency, the National Commission for the Fight Against Genocide. The Catholic Church and local survivors organized many of the massacre sites into memorials by preserving bodies and artefacts and building mass graves before the government took these sites over. The audience for these memorials is both Rwandan (school trips of children born post-genocide, domestic tourism, and victim pilgrimages) and non-Rwandan (foreign dignitaries, business travelers, and tourists engaging in 'dark tourism' (Lennon and Foley 2000) or 'thanotourism' (Friedrich and Johnston 2013)). The monuments remain an important part of Rwanda's commemorative project despite the fact that, starting in 2011, national annual commemoration ceremonies have moved away from the use of bodies and burials and toward more sanitized language about healing, reconciliation, and resurrection (Korman 2015).

Sights and smells at these memorials graphically convey the reality of the 1994 violence and the vulnerability of bodies – purposely, in an effort to rebut genocide denial (Eltringham 2014) and to symbolize the genocide to domestic and international audiences (Korman 2015). They exemplify the aesthetic of bodily vulnerability. Critics point out the monuments' use of bodily remains to exclude and marginalize those whose stories do not fit in with the government's political agenda. However, I will argue, the aesthetic of bodily vulnerability and the way that aesthetic has been enlisted in a politics of exclusion are separable. Below, I detail

Susan Sontag and Elaine Scarry's influential critique of depictions of violence and show how this argument is mirrored in many critiques of the Rwandan memorials.

Negative Accounts of Bodily Pain and Vulnerability

Theorists have long been wary of the power of human remains and depictions of bodily violence, as early as Plato's parable about Leonitus, whose appetitive element of his soul urges him to look at the gruesome sight of a pile of criminals' corpses (Plato 1992). I examine critics who question the safety and utility of depictions of bodily pain and violence and I show how this negative account is reflected in contemporary criticisms of the Rwandan memorials. The major concern of the negative account is that depictions of bodily pain and violence will inevitably present an incomplete and potentially dangerous narrative. I describe these claims below before offering a positive account of depictions of bodily vulnerability and violence.

One major line of critique, what I'll call the 'danger critique', argues that pain and bodily violence are rarely depicted correctly, and that such depictions will either cause harm or at least not do much good. Literary theorist Elaine Scarry (1985, 14) expresses this concern:

The failure to express pain – whether the failure to objectify its attributes or instead the failure, once those attributes are objectified, to refer them to their original site in the human body – will always work to allow its appropriation and conflation with debased forms of power; conversely, the successful expression of pain will always work to expose and make possible that appropriation and conflation.

Scarry argues that while pain exposes the person in pain to others, it does not open up the possibility of solidarity or fellow-feeling; instead, pain creates 'an almost obscene conflation of private and public... all the solitude of absolute privacy with none of its safety, all the self-

exposure of the utterly public with none of its possibility for camaraderie or shared experience’ (Scarry 1985, 53).

Writing about viewing photographs of bodily violence, philosopher and critic Susan Sontag gives a similar danger critique. While Scarry worries that pain isolates us from others, Sontag is wary of the possibility for depictions of violence, like in grisly photographs of bombing or lynching victims, to allow further complicity toward violence in the viewer. ‘If one feels that there is nothing “we” can do – but who is that “we”? – and nothing “they” can do either – and who are “they”? – then one starts to get bored, cynical, apathetic’ (Sontag 2003, 129). The real task, Sontag argues, should be to ‘set aside the sympathy we extend to others beset by war and murderous politics for a reflection on how our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering, and may – in ways we might prefer not to imagine – be linked to their suffering, as the wealth of some may imply the destitution of others’ (Sontag 2003, 131). Simply viewing graphic photographs of the impacts of violence is not up to this task of critical reflection (Sontag 2002; 2003); viewing has to be accompanied by a critical self-reflection in which viewers become ‘participant witnesses who, by looking... become aware of their own involvement in the scenes depicted’ and their responsibility as global spectators (Möller and Sontag 2010, 131). Sontag leaves open the possibility for the effective communication of bodily pain and vulnerability, but she also worries their shocking nature will lead to dangerous sentimentality.

Although Sontag thinks shocking images can sometimes successfully convey pain and lead us to feel for others, she is skeptical how widespread this will be. Describing ‘shock images’ of cancerous lungs on Canadian cigarette packaging, Sontag wonders how many people will actually absorb these images. ‘Shock can wear off. Even if it doesn’t, one can *not* look. People have means to defend themselves against what is upsetting... This seems normal, that is,

adaptive' (Sontag 2003, 103). Although shocking representations can provoke pathos among those who desire to feel saddened, those who do not (most people) can avoid it. While we could never look away from our own bodily pain, we can look away from others'. And for Sontag it is normal if we are not 'seared' by violent images every time. The important thing is that we think about the context surrounding these images and reflect on what we can do to alleviate or prevent further pain (Sontag 2003, 150).

Many critics of Rwandan memorials apply the general principles found in Scarry and Sontag's danger critiques to the specific case of these memorials, taking issue with the sites' depictions of bodily violence and vulnerability but also connecting this critique to a charge that the memorials harmfully exclude those whose victimization does not fit into the government's official narrative. These reflect the critiques of Rwandan politics in general, and I argue they are misdirected: in their critiques of the memorials they lump together the aesthetic of bodily vulnerability with the exclusionary genocide narrative, but there is no intrinsic connection between the sites' aesthetic of vulnerability and their enlistment in this narrative.

Problems with the Rwandan government's 'Genocide against the Tutsi' narrative include that it gives Tutsis as near-exclusive right to victimhood, enabling 'an avoidance of blame' (Williams 2007, 133); refuses to recognize crimes perpetrated by current political leaders during the genocide; emphasizes the heroism of the RPF; centers the genocide in Rwandan history at the expense of a longer historical timeframe (Longman 2017); and promotes the post-ethnic 'One Rwanda' that obscures underlying ethnic identities, paradoxically increasing ethnic tensions remaining under the surface (Buckley-Zistel 2006; Chakravarti 2013) while inhibiting long-term reconciliation (Vidal 2004; King 2010).

Memorials such as the Kigali, Murambi, and Nyamata sites are enlisted in this exclusionary political narrative through plaques and displays that blame colonists and genocide ideology (Sodaro 2018) and obscure non-Tutsi victims and non-Hutu perpetrators. Below, I give several examples of the danger critique made of Rwandan memorials' depictions of bodily vulnerability and I detail what I see as these critiques' major flaw: that the historical narrative framing the memorials is separable from the memorials' depictions of bodily vulnerability.

Several critics have argued that depictions of bodily vulnerability cause, aid, create, have been used to promote, or are constitutive of the exclusionary narrative propagated by the Rwandan government. For example, Sara Guyer argues that 'the traumatic silence that they [the Rwandan memorials' bodies] generate can be *difficult to distinguish from* the enforced silence that the regime demands and indeed operates as a supplement to it' (Guyer 2009, 162, emphasis added). Laura Major causally links the memorials' bodily remains to exclusionary commemoration: 'The affective ability of human bones to demand attention, and the sense of ongoing and disruptive presence that they exude, *has become the means through which* a collective, politically amenable, identity is being consolidated' (Major 2015, 177–78, emphasis added). John Giblin argues that 'the post-genocide Rwandan government's approach to its architectural heritage *can also be understood as* a form of "past mastering"... post-conflict actors have taken control of the re-telling of divisive events by turning physical remains into objects of evidence with the intention of promoting their own causes' (Giblin 2017, 117, emphasis added). Jens Meierhenrich (2011, 288–89, emphasis added) also links visceral displays of bodies to tyranny:

[T]he Nyamata memorial, and *lieux de mémoire* like it, *can be said to service* privileged memory, that is, memory that is officially sanctioned because it is in accordance with the

post-genocidal *raison d'état*... By appealing to emotions rather than reason, Rwanda's national memorials keep observers at bay. It is indeed difficult to formulate critical questions about the legitimacy of the post-genocidal regime when one is face to face – both literally and figuratively – with the legacies of the genocidal regime that preceded it. By remembering the past in a very particular, macabre manner, these memorials *facilitate* a forgetting of the present.

Timothy Longman (2017, 5, emphasis added) argues that the depictions of bodies and violence have been used to prop up the state's exclusionary political project:

The use of bodies to manufacture a scene of horror and provoke a reaction seemed to contradict the intent of remembering the genocide and honoring the dead... This massacre site [Murambi] and this commemoration, I realized, *allowed* the government installed by the RPF to promote a crucial political message: the genocide was so horrible that it justified any actions that the new government had to take to maintain security. The bodies of genocide victims *were being used* to make a political point.

Claudine Vidal writes that these depictions of bodily violence contribute to constructing further violence: '[c]ommemorative ceremonies in Rwanda, far from euphemizing the violence internal to the commemorative process, *have externalized it and explicitly constructed it*... an extreme symbolic violence... such violence *must be linked* to the forced memorization work committed by those in power' (2004, 590; my translation, emphasis added).

Each of these scholars criticize the Rwandan memorials' use of bodies and depictions of violence on the grounds that these depictions are themselves the cause of, or are intrinsically linked to, the government's exclusionary narrative about the genocide.⁴ Indeed, many of these critiques discount the possibility that the memorials could depict the bodily pain of victims

separately from the Rwandan government's exclusionary narrative of the genocide. However, there is no reason the Murambi, Nyamata, and Kigali memorials cannot be reframed within a more inclusive politics of commemoration that would allow rather than foreclose discussion and debate,⁵ include more Hutu victims and rescuers, and acknowledge the violence perpetrated by the RPA and the post-genocide government. As Susan Cook puts it in her account of Murambi, 'The physical remains themselves do not "tell the story"' (Cook 2004, 290). Rather, signage, tour guides, and framing of the remains tell the story. The separability of depictions of bodily vulnerability from their problematic context leaves open the possibility for such depictions to be politically productive rather than to merely prop up a repressive narrative.

A Positive Account of Bodily Vulnerability

As I have shown, critiques of bodily displays (and of commemoration in general) abound. However, critics often fall short of proposing an alternative solution.⁶ Moving beyond critique, I want to explore how a political aesthetic can open up a positive political imaginary. I respond to the danger critique and, acknowledging that all monuments are inherently political and thus must be enlisted in *some* political project, show how the aesthetic of bodily vulnerability might be enlisted in a positive political project. By inviting a reading of the Rwandan memorials' depictions of bodily vulnerability in a way that highlights their successes while acknowledging their failures, we can imagine a political aesthetic that considers bodies and bodily harm as a way to see others' bodies as non-disposable. One way such an aesthetic can do this is by returning to the subject of violence itself: the body. Here, I extend Judith Butler's claims about ontological vulnerability in order to rehabilitate the aesthetic of bodily vulnerability.

Butler describes how political structures can fail or succeed in honoring the frailty of all bodies. Although all lives and bodies should be mourned and respected, power dynamics

replicated throughout history mean that such respect is not equally distributed (Butler 2010). While grief is sometimes construed as privatizing, she argues, it has great potential for building solidarity and community because it reminds us of our bodies' vulnerability and interdependence. This is a universal and inevitable condition: 'we all live with this particular vulnerability, a vulnerability to the other that is part of bodily life, a vulnerability to a sudden address from elsewhere that we cannot preempt' (Butler 2004, 29). Rather than ignore or try to fulfill 'an institutionalized fantasy of mastery' over vulnerability, we can harness it (Butler 2004, 29):

Mindfulness of this vulnerability can become the basis of claims for non-military political solutions... We cannot, however, will away this vulnerability. We must attend to it, even abide by it, as we begin to think about what politics might be implied by staying with the thought of corporeal vulnerability itself, a situation in which we can be vanquished or lose others. Is there something to be learned about the geopolitical distribution of corporeal vulnerability from our own brief and devastating exposure to this condition?

That 'something to be learned' is a lesson about accountability to others who are equally vulnerable, and ultimately an effort to ward off the kinds of violence we have already experienced, a rebuttal to concerns like Sontag's about cheap sentimentality and culpability (Butler 2004, 30):

If we stay with the sense of loss, are we left feeling only passive and powerless, as some might fear? Or are we, rather, returned to a sense of human vulnerability, to our collective responsibility for the physical lives of one another? Could the experience of a dislocation of First World safety

not condition the insight into the radically inequitable ways that corporeal vulnerability is distributed globally?... From where might a principle emerge by which we vow to protect others from the kinds of violence we have suffered, if not from an apprehension of a common human vulnerability?

This is what Bonnie Honig calls (and criticizes as) Butler's 'mortalist humanism',⁷ which she sees Butler and other theorists of tragedy and death as using to claim that seeking commonality through bodily vulnerability can erase 'the divisions of the political world' (Honig 2013, 24). However, Honig's alternative – agonistic and natalist humanism, based on politics and birth rather than sameness and death – does not fully address her critiques of mortalist humanism. Natalist humanism, which emphasizes our commonality in birth, hunger, and pleasure, seems no more capable of attending to difference and politics than is mortalist humanism, which emphasizes our commonality in death and pain. Mortalist humanism can ask us to imagine our common vulnerability without erasing all politically meaningful differences and identities; thinking through one shared characteristic does not preclude us from maintaining other differences. There is nothing about Butler's mortalist view of vulnerability that precludes attention toward internal ambivalence and contradiction, which David McIvor calls for in his refinement of Honig's agonistic humanism (McIvor 2016). Indeed, an aesthetic of vulnerability is compatible with nuance, which is sorely missing from the Rwandan memorials. Honig also accuses mortalist humanism of lying in the domain of the ethical (where agonistic humanism lies in the domain of the political) because those who insist on pure mourning balk at the perceived intrusion of politics into mourning. However, the Rwandan memorials exemplify both how

mourning is inevitably political and how we might mobilize an aesthetic of commemoration toward a political imaginary that is more attentive to difference, conflict, and history.

What might it mean, in the wake of a genocide, for us to stay with the thought of corporeal vulnerability? For Butler, it means attending to the ways that our own experiences of violence – such as the 9/11 attacks – can prompt us to ‘vow to protect others’ from violence as well. Because we have suffered and witnessed violence, a thoughtful engagement with that violence and the bodies it hurts can guide us toward an anti-violence politics, a politics that does not view the bodies of others as disposable.

Bodily vulnerability tells us that all life is subject to the violence of another, which implies a kind of interdependence. We all depend on each other not to hurt each other; witnessing, experiencing, or attending to violence inflicted on bodies can uncover this. As Dustin Howes writes, ‘Only hermits or hermetically sealed bodies can dream of being invulnerable. Physically being with one another is full of horrific possibilities’ (Howes 2009, 33). If we see the bodies of others within such a framework of interdependence, it becomes harder to see others’ bodies and lives as disposable. This interdependence may cultivate solidarity: we begin to realize our bodies are like others’ in their destructibility, and this common ground can be a basis for acknowledging and politically or ethically supporting others (Rorty 1989; Hooker 2009). It can also be humbling – my body is not indestructible – and equalizing – my body is basically no more indestructible than anyone else’s. The implications of any equalizing theory are politically useful for democracies that rely upon notions of equality to legitimize their popular sovereignty. This is not to say a totally equal distribution of vulnerability is possible, only that a political aesthetic of vulnerability reminds viewers of their bodies’ existing vulnerability to each other and therefore of their non-disposability.

And an aesthetic of vulnerability is not only separable from a politics of exclusion, as I have shown. Indeed, it is *compatible* with a politics that acknowledges rather than sidelines the suffering of groups like Hutu refugees, Hutu rescuers, and Twa victims. Bodily vulnerability implies we are not so far removed from our history of hatred and violence as the Rwandan government's post-ethnic narrative would have us believe. If we are reminded that the bodies who were subjugated and oppressed in the past are no different than our own bodies, it becomes more difficult to abstract away, excuse, or downplay historical violence because we are reminded of its visceral immediacy.

Historical representations that do not shy away from the visceral prevent such downplaying. Here we might think of Theodor Adorno's critique of culture and philosophy, in which he urges us to consider the visceral body in pain, arguing that, rather than in rationality or metaphysics, 'the true basis of morality is to be found in bodily feeling, in identification with unbearable pain' (Adorno 2000, 116). For Adorno, the stench from the 'flayer's zone, from carcasses, from the repulsively sweet odor of putrefaction' is the corrupt foundation of 'culture' (Adorno 2004, 336). It is that 'zone' of the visceral and the bloody that contains 'where the truth is hidden' and 'exactly the things which matter' (Adorno 2000, 117, 118). Thus, morality – 'that which can be called moral, i.e., the demand for right living' – is irreducible to rationality or 'the pure idea' (Adorno 2000, 117). That is, there is no more compelling moral argument than the argument that bodies and a focus on the visceral make. There is no more compelling reason not to inflict violence upon others than the 'corporeal, physical reality' (Adorno 2000, 117) of the harm violence does to the human body. By temporarily dwelling in the grotesque details of bodies and of violence's impact on them, we may imagine such violence inflicted on our own bodies, recognize our bodies as interdependent on others', and attend to the commonality of our bodies

as mutually vulnerable and non-disposable. By seeing the disposing of other bodies and imagining the disposing of our own, we might begin to see others' bodies as non-disposable.

Statistics and death tolls often reduce the physical reality of bodies because death in large quantities is cognitively and emotionally incomprehensible. An emphasis on the body makes the tragedy of violence unavoidable to viewers in a way that a death toll or statistics never could. These depictions of violence and vulnerability make it difficult to feign ignorance or disinterest in the plight of victims. At Murambi and Nyamata, nothing stands between the visitor and the human remains. Rather than holding viewers at arm's length, they purposefully evoke the visceral, the affective, and the emotional. Once you have seen the bloodstain where children were smashed to death against a church wall, it is difficult to unsee it. The immediacy of bloodstained clothing, bullet holes in walls, dirtied weapons of genocide, and preserved corpses mirrors the immediacy of our own vulnerability and that of others. Dwelling in these visceral realities opens up the imagination to our mutual vulnerability; reflecting on our mutual vulnerability opens up the imagination to our independence; attending to our interdependence opens up the imagination to a politics in which we do not see others as disposable.

While such depictions can, and in Rwanda, are, framed in such a way that they justify a politics of exclusion, they are at least powerful representations of the vulnerability of our own bodies to others and of the horror of violence. And if framed, instead, by an inclusive politics of commemoration in Rwanda, such an aesthetic offers itself up as one powerful tool among many that could work toward a peaceful *and* inclusive politics based on the non-disposability of human bodies and life.

We should proceed with caution, as Sontag (2003) reminds us. She worries these images might feed our appetites for the gruesome, and there is a reason viewing gruesome images of

hurt bodies is taboo in many societies, considered prurient or even pornographic. But these memorials are physical sites that individuals visit in person, not a proliferation of images of mangled bodies all around our physical environment. Moreover, we should recognize rather than avoid our inevitable fascination with death and the gruesome. We are fascinated by the visceral whether we admit it or not – when we see gruesome images, ‘[a]n unconscious knowledge whispers to the child what is repressed by civilized education; this is what matters, says the whispering voice’ (Adorno 2004, 336).

Scholars attentive to the problem of Achille Mbembe’s problem of ‘necropolitics’ (Mbembe 2019) have pointed out the ways that the state often uses and reproduces the (male, cis) Black body as a dead body – and how racial politics has readily rallied around this version of the slain Black body (Threadcraft 2017). It is important that any attempts to bring to the forefront a political aesthetic of bodily vulnerability are attentive to the problems surrounding the use and depiction of bodies (especially the bodies of people of color), including questions such as: which bodies are being depicted? What do these depictions mean in the context of the aesthetic norms and culture of the community? Are these depictions replicating or resisting postcolonial power? Do families of the deceased have the ability to claim and rebury the remains and artifacts of their loved ones?

Additionally, while the use of actual human remains will not be appropriate in all cases, memorials can depict the fragility of human bodies through other means. For example, in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, visitors walk past piles of hundreds of pairs of shoes taken from Jews before their deaths. Statues depicting violence, even without depicting the dead body, can use facial expressions, movement, and light to communicate the fragility of human bodies.

How can we avoid exploiting or marginalizing groups of people in the present by depicting past violence? One way is to avoid historical simplification and to provide narratives that leave room for political contestation rather than propping up authoritarian politics or refusing to recognize the victimhood of certain groups. In Rwanda, this would involve framing the memorials (by using signs and placards and changing some of the problematic assertions in the Kigali museum) in such a way that recognizes the victims whose victimhood does not fit into the current narrative. All signage at memorials and online materials should avoid the label ‘Genocide against the Tutsi’. The Kigali Genocide Memorial Centre, in particular, should also include information about other victim groups (the millions of displaced Hutus and the thousands of Hutu refugees who died as a result of the refugee crisis; Hutu rescuers; victims of different ethnic categories who were killed by the RPA as it advanced toward Kigali; Twa genocide victims; victims of Rwanda’s military interventions into the DRC; and Hutu moderates who were punished for helping Tutsis). The Murambi site’s signage, which focuses on placing blame on French troops for the genocide in general and the Murambi massacre in particular, should be reworked to tell a more holistic story of the genocide. The narrative around victims and perpetrators in all signage and online materials should avoid ethnicized national guilt and a repressive politics of victimhood. This does not mean that Tutsi victims need to be ignored or undermined, only that language including other victims and avoiding depictions of the RPA as martyrs would allow for a more open and accurate narrative. These measures toward a more inclusive genocide narrative would open the door for responsibility-taking, social repair, and reconciliation while preserving the aesthetic of bodily vulnerability.

The ethnicization of the monuments, including the labelling of the genocide as ‘against the Tutsi’, is an important problem with the narrative of the genocide they convey: if Tutsi victims’

bodies are the only bodies depicted as mattering, then the memorials will only further entrench ethnic and political tensions in the country. But if the memorials can be reframed to employ the aesthetic of bodily vulnerability toward an inclusive and open politics, then they could open up imaginative possibilities in which others are not seen as disposable.

Conclusion

Many scholars doubt the potential for long-lasting peace in Rwanda as long as the government continues to depict the ‘Genocide against the Tutsi’. But the past two and a half decades have seen a tentative peace, the growth of some democratic institutions (even as others remain weak), and a lack of widespread ethnic violence. Of course, many societies have aspirations beyond avoiding genocide, and there the Rwandan state has left much to be desired: free and open elections, civil liberties, and a more open civil society are all important goals for those who support liberal political institutions. But the current memorials, if reframed, could leave room for contestation, deliberation, and peaceful democratic conflict. Depictions of bodily pain and violence do not preclude this; rather, they ask viewers to contemplate their own and others’ bodily vulnerability and the political implications that follow from this.

How might a memorial resonate with members of all ethnic and social groups in Rwanda while avoiding the pitfalls of false equivalence? These memorials would have to accept the contradictions and flaws inherent to Rwanda’s post-genocide rebirth and the complexities of its history. They would have to give up on the kind of closed self-resolving commemoration Simon Stow calls ‘romantic mourning’ and embrace the type of open, contested, unresolved commemoration he calls ‘tragic mourning’ (Stow 2017). A gradual opening of political restraints is compatible with a more inclusive narrative of the genocide in Rwanda’s memorials, national day of mourning, national curriculum, and other commemorative efforts.

Memorials should not be expected to do this work on their own, but rather as part of a larger program of political commemoration that includes civic education, commemorative holidays, and museums. For example, the inclusion of more Hutu voices in victims' rights groups and the removal of the 'Genocide against the Tutsi' from commemorative markers, memorials, events, media, and speeches are small steps the government can take to include more voices and narratives. We cannot expect memorials alone to further the anti-violence project. After all, they are 'just' memorials.

If we are willing to accept that memorials are instruments – that is, they have a political or social purpose within the political and are not just art objects or representations of 'pure' remembrance – then we should think critically about what that purpose should be. Whereas negative accounts of memorials that depict bodily violence and pain criticize either the danger of expressing pain or its inherent incommunicability, I want to refocus on the purpose of memorials. One way we can open up the political imagination to a positive political vision is through an emphasis on bodily vulnerability and its implications for interdependence. If we are to work toward a politics in which others are not seen as disposable, a political aesthetic of bodily vulnerability provides some useful resources for commemoration and commentary that is willing to move beyond critique and onto politically productive possibilities.

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¹ I use ‘violence’ in reference to physical violence inflicted on human bodies. Dustin Howes’ definition is useful here: he adapts Carl von Clausewitz’s definition of war to suggest a definition of violence as ‘the use of our body by another, who intends to submit or destroy our will for their purpose or purposes’ (Howes 2009, 41). Thus, violence includes only the use of bodies as means to an end if that end is the subjection of the body of another. Natural disasters, necessary medical procedures, pulling someone from a fire, stealing or destroying property, suicide, and nonviolent sources of injustice like employment discrimination or hate speech are not violence. Nor are representations or misinterpretations, such as when scholars describe the display of bones as violent (Guyer 2009), call photographing corpses ‘soft murder’ (Sontag 1977, 15), or speak of ‘doing violence to a text’. Including non-violent sources of injustice or misunderstanding as violence dilutes the force of the idea of violence itself. This article uses the term ‘violence’ as shorthand for historical instances of mass violence, leaving interpersonal violence aside.

² I do not discuss what people ‘will think’ when they see memorials, not least because it is difficult to measure the emotional impact of viewing memorials. I want to resist strong prescriptions that argue either for a single correct narrative through which people *should* interpret them or exhaustive description of all the frames through which people *could* interpret them. I instead subject the memorials in question to close textual reading, following Roland Barthes’ (1984) work/text distinction. Here, the work is consumed while the text is played with and caught up in discourse; the work is taken at face value while the text is seen as symbolic; the work is examined as a product of the author and her historical time while the text is examined as a network of connections to readings and interpretations. Textual analysis values interpretation over trying to divine ‘a single “theological” meaning (the “message” of the Author-God)’ (Barthes and Heath 1977, 146). This certainly does not mean that historical context is

unimportant – merely that it is also useful to read texts such as monuments through careful analysis of their outward aesthetic in order to analyze them within our current political context. Textual reading also opens up possibilities for critical analysis that can identify the racism, sexism, or other oppressive meanings of a ‘text’ even when its history, creation, or author predates feminism, anti-racism, etc. or its original authors did not intend such oppressive meanings (Britt 2000).

³ Aside from the six major genocide memorials, there are hundreds of more informal and local memorials erected by communities. As Jens Meierhenrich documents, these ‘underprivileged’ sites – many of them unmarked places where atrocities occurred that exist as *lieux de mémoire* (Pierre Nora’s (1989) term for salient memory sites) only in the minds of witnesses – contrast with the official, government-created sites. Underprivileged memorials display human remains far less often and less conspicuously (Meierhenrich 2011, 290).

⁴ It should be noted that there are other grounds for critique of these memorials’ use of bodies, including the desubjectification or de-individualization of the dead by the presentation of bodies or bloodied clothes as piled together (Bolin 2012; Guyer 2009). The concern here is that aesthetic representations of bodies might replicate the effects of what François Debrix (2017, 6) identifies as horror (the paralyzing attack on ‘unity, individuality, integrity, and identity... of the human and its alleged singularity’). One response to this critique might come from skeptics of subjectivities of atomistic individuality who argue that we are better served with an intersubjective view. Another response is that, even if we are committed to an individual subjectivity, an aesthetic of bodily vulnerability is separable from de-individualization just as it is separable from exclusion. For example, we could still depict violence alongside details about individuals, like the plaques about children in the Kigali museum. Indeed, naming practices in art

can disrupt practices of inequality that *name* the dead (and living) whose lives are valued while only giving *counts* of the dead (and living) whose lives are not valued (Lloyd 2019).

⁵ For a discussion of collective commemoration that encourages rather than forecloses democratic deliberation and debate, see Simon Stow's (2010; 2017) framework of romantic public mourning versus tragic public mourning. The former focuses on consensus, sentiment, death, and unity and thus can silence minority or dissenting voices. The latter is 'pluralistic, critical, and self-consciously political', allowing for agonistic politics and irreconcilable disagreement (Stow 2010, 682). James Scott's invocation of monuments' openness to play, interaction, and participation makes similar points about openness and contention versus fixedness and closedness (Scott 2012, 61–63), as does Steven Johnston's (2015) argument for a tragic democratic sensibility of commemoration.

⁶ For example, Meierhenrich laments the loss of spontaneous and locally created memorials but recognizes that development and generational turnover will inevitably erase these sites' salience (Meierhenrich 2011). Chérie Rivers Ndaliko says, 'commemoration calibrated to a real or imagined West suffocates African laughter along with African lives. This is not to say I have an alternative; I most certainly do not' (Ndaliko 2018, 277). And Annalisa argues Western tourists 'can be seen, through their inadvertent erasure of victims' individuality, as participating in the same genocidal logic as 1994's *génocidaires*' (Bolin 2012, 201), but she does not offer an alternative to this 'genocidal logic'.

⁷ While I make no particular commitment to *humanism* or an idea of the human (and I am attentive to accounts such as François Debrix's (Debrix 2017, 7) that show horror dismantling any 'hope for a reconstitution of humanity'), I think mortalism's emphasis on bodily vulnerability has much to offer the political project of working against future mass violence. In

fact, I think that the aesthetic of vulnerability is open to David McIvor's prescription for mourning as 'acknowledging ambivalence within the self and within the broader social world and of working through the losses (of absolute moral certainty, of convenient scapegoats, of an omnipotent 'killing rage') that accompany such acts of recognition' (McIvor 2016, 56).