

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

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Civil society groups and states grapple with how to represent their histories, 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 analyzes three memorials to the Rwandan Genocide that display bodily remains or other visualizations of violence. It considers critical accounts of depictions of bodies and bodily violence from Susan Sontag and several scholars commenting on Rwandan memorials. Finally, it expands Judith Butler's analysis of precariousness to explore the merits of an aesthetic that works to awaken the political imagination to ideas of interdependence and relationality. The Rwandan memorials depict the vulnerability and fragility of victims' bodies in a way that is effective at communicating the horror of genocide. However, they are being enlisted in the exclusionary government-sanctioned narrative of the genocide, in which Tutsis were the only victims and Hutus the only killers. It details how a reframed political aesthetic of bodily vulnerability that is more open to nuance and inclusive of multiple victim groups might work against a politics in which others are seen as disposable and help resist debasing forms of power.

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In both the immediate aftermath and the distant wake of violent conflict, states and civil societies grapple with questions about the ‘political aesthetic’, or how to represent ideas about politics and history in their physical landscapes through visual (and other sensory) depictions. Should they gloss over or acknowledge past genocide, colonial violence, and slavery? 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, states show no signs of ceasing to erect new commemorative markers, and citizens continue to live in physical environments saturated with historical reminders, from traditional memorials to subversive ‘counter-monuments’ (J. Young 1992) – so the pressing question is not whether but how historical markers should best reflect societies’ political 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 in the case that it is properly contextualized.

Although theorists of material culture, geography, and urban planning have long grappled with memorialization, normative political theorists have also turned to the political aesthetic of public and semi-public spaces (Bickford 2000; Forestal 2017) and of aesthetic representations of politics (Bleiker 2009). 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 political 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 states and civil societies can best reflect their ideals and priorities beyond deliberation, institutions, and public opinion. What kinds of expression and speech will we value and promote? What kinds of symbols and markers? What kinds of public ceremonies, art installations, architectural structures, and landscapes? Because our quotidian 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. There is 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 ongoing debates about memorials to Holocaust victims in Germany.

In the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust, many of the frameworks developed around commemorating historical mass violence centered around a key dichotomy: forgetting versus remembrance. An example is Theodor Adorno’s post-war 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). Although some recent work continues in the remembrance-forgetting tradition (ex. Waldron 2012; Rieff 2016), new debates around commemoration and memory have also circulated since the postwar years. Drawing on the work

of Maurice Halbwachs on collective memory (1980), Pierre Nora on spaces of memory (1989), and James Young (1992) on counter-memory, scholars of the multidisciplinary field of memory studies have moved beyond an initial focus on remembering and forgetting to explore how commemoration and the political aesthetic work at different levels to prop up or undermine various political projects. These include studies of patriotic Western monumental forms versus more tragic memorial forms (Johnston 2001; Lisle 2006); the rise of vernacular memorials and counter-monuments that resist state power (J. Young 1992; Stow 2012; Doss 2010; Auchter 2013); the give-and-take between state and civil society commemoration (Hite and Collins 2009); the role of commemoration in shaping national identities and vice versa (Bell 2006; Bartelson 2006; McDonald 2010); the state's creation of hierarchies of grief (Zehfuss 2009); the possibilities for trauma-informed memorialization (Edkins 2003); and the responsibility for commemoration to address past injustices (I. M. Young 2011; Thompson 2006; Poole 2008). Much of this scholarship has emphasized how the past is seen through the biases and frameworks of the present so that memorialization is itself an act of history-creating and selective forgetting (J. Young 1994; Anderson 2006; Wolin 1989; Zehfuss 2006).

This paper builds on that scholarship, focusing on the interplay of a particular aesthetic – one that emphasizes bodily vulnerability and violence – and the narrative framing of that aesthetic. The article proceeds as follows. It gives a brief overview of the Rwandan post-genocide commemorative effort 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 bodily violence from Susan Sontag and several scholars commenting on Rwandan memorials. Finally, it expands Judith Butler's analysis of precariousness and mourning to explore the merits of an aesthetic that works to awaken the political imagination to

the interdependence and non-disposability of others. 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 government-sanctioned narrative of the genocide, in which Tutsis were the only victims and Hutus the only killers. I detail how a reframed political aesthetic of bodily vulnerability that is more open to nuance and inclusive of multiple victim groups might work against debasing forms of power and against a politics in which others are seen as disposable.

Rwanda's Commemorative Environment

In 1994, a century of political and ethnic manipulation by German and Belgian colonial forces, regional political turmoil, and ethnic fearmongering cumulated 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 and most of the killers were Hutu. The Hutu-led government planned the genocide, buying weapons and distributing propaganda that vilified Tutsis and the Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA), the rebel army made up of Tutsi refugees who had fled from persecution in Rwanda to Uganda. 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, gained control during the tumultuous transitional period and began a program of economic development (Abbott, Sapsford, and Rwirahira 2015). The RPF still governs by what is effectively one-party rule. The genocide functions as the regime's *raison d'état* (Ibreck 2012) and a narrative around which political elites and citizens mobilize to unify 'One Rwanda' (Buckley-Zistel 2006). Citizens have a sophisticated understanding of this narrative of unity and consensus, sometimes adding nuance to it (Benda and Pells 2020);

sometimes reinforcing it (Bentrovato and Buhigiro 2020); and sometimes conforming to it out of fear, to assert their autonomy, to manage the inexplicability of the violence, or to create the very unity and peace that the official narrative claims is already in place (Eramian 2017). The regime has drawn criticism for failing to adopt democratic governance, suppressing civil society, intimidating or assassinating opposition politicians and activists, and tampering with election results (Longman 2011). These crackdowns have allowed the regime to frame itself as a ‘state-as-parent’ (Benda and Pells 2020) and 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), in the decade following the genocide the RPF-led regime began attempting to ‘legislate ethnic identities out of existence’ (Lemarchand 2008, 66) through vague legal restrictions on ‘genocide ideology’. This paradoxically perpetuated ethnic division and inhibited reconciliation because ethnic tensions may remain under the surface of a supposedly post-ethnic society (Buckley-Zistel 2006). These legal restrictions enable the state to punish dissent, degrade the quality of political discourse, create a culture of fear around commemoration, and impair history education in schools (Freedman et al. 2018; Waldorf 2011).

Despite restrictions on discussion of ethnicity, since the early 2000s the official narrative has ethnicized the genocide. The broad program of commemoration and memorial-building, which was started by civilians and churches and taken up by the government (Giblin 2017), initially sought to memorialize both Tutsi and Hutu dead (Vidal 2004). However, it was eventually replaced by a narrative about the ‘Genocide against the Tutsi’, language added to the constitution in 2003 (as the ‘1994 Tutsi genocide’) and incorporated into memorial sites, *ingando* civic education camps for returning refugees and released prisoners, and other reconciliation

programs run by the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission (Longman 2017; Waldorf 2011). Major discrepancies exist between this official narrative of the genocide, whose ‘language of victimization’ (Lisle 2006, 853) emphasizes mass Hutu participation and total Tutsi victimhood, and the far more complex and nuanced events of the genocide. This more nuanced account includes the RPF’s massacres of Hutu civilians during the genocide; the ensuing refugee crisis and massacres of Hutu refugees who had fled to then-Zaire; and the *génocidaires*’ killing of Hutus for their political positions, for rescuing Tutsis, or for being related to Tutsis (Des Forges 1999; Longman 2017; Straus 2007; Hölscher, Kanamugire, and Udah 2020). Problems with the ‘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; and centers the genocide in Rwandan history at the expense of a longer historical timeframe (Longman 2017). Some grassroots and grassroots-state hybrid efforts have provided more nuance and included more Hutu stories (Benda 2017, 11). However, the commemorative efforts sponsored by the state, including the frames around major memorial sites, overwhelmingly support the ‘Genocide against the Tutsi’ narrative through plaques and displays that place the blame solely on colonists and genocide ideology (Sodaro 2018) and obscure non-Tutsi victims.

I focus here on three of the country’s six national genocide memorials: the Kigali, Nyamata, and Murambi Genocide Memorials.¹ These sites are case studies in the political aesthetic of bodily vulnerability within the commemorations of violent histories, and they point to the successes, failures, and possibilities of this aesthetic. Problematic framings of historical violence are by no means restricted to the Rwandan case. Indeed, the politics of victimhood and

the exclusion of certain victim groups are widespread in the Global North, from 9/11 memorials to the Israeli state's justification of illegal settlements. However, the Rwandan memorials I discuss below are unique in their particular depictions of the aesthetic of bodily vulnerability, so it is critiques of these particular memorials that I address in this article.

The Kigali Genocide Memorial was opened in 2004 by the city, the national government, a panel of Rwandan civilian consultants, and the British nonprofit Aegis Trust, creators of a Holocaust memorial museum in Nottinghamshire, United Kingdom (Sodaro 2018). It is the country's main genocide memorial site, and it hosts visitors during both regular visiting hours and commemorative events during the annual period of mourning (Ibreck 2013). The memorial has played an important role in the production of the Rwandan genocide as a 'global injustice memory' alongside the Holocaust and other 20th century atrocities (Olesen 2012). 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 conforms to 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 (ex. 'Francine Murengezi Ingabire, 12. Favourite food: eggs and chips. Cause of death: hacked by machete'). Another room is 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. 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 (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 that 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 that contains over 45,000 bodies of those who were killed in the church and nearby. Banners and garlands in purple, the color of genocide commemoration, decorate the walls behind a Virgin Mary statue. The Church handed the site over in 1997 to the government (‘Nyamata Memorial’ 2015), which has retained control, with American preservationists consulting on the conservation of the site and its artifacts (Mason 2019).

In Murambi, an unfinished technical school stands on a hill in the countryside near the university town of Butare. Tutsis and moderate Hutus flocked to the school as a place of sanctuary during the genocide, but like in Nyamata they were targeted and killed. Starting on the second anniversary of the genocide, the mass graves surrounding the building were exhumed and the bodies of thousands of victims were laid out in the classrooms (Meierhenrich 2010). The Rwandan Ministry of Youth, Sports and Culture (the Rwandan agency then responsible for genocide memorialization) and the Aegis Trust took over the site, constructed exhibits, and began conservation of the site around the tenth anniversary of the genocide (Ibreck 2013). Human remains that were not claimed by relatives fill dozens of classrooms. These mummified

bodies are preserved with lye and displayed on pallets, not behind glass. Visitors witness twisted limbs and sometimes anguished facial expressions on both adult-sized and child-sized bodies. The exhibits include 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 France 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 (CNLG) ('Organizational Structure' 2020), and the Kigali and Murambi sites are managed in partnership with the Aegis trust (Jinks 2014). The Catholic Church and local survivors organized in the immediate aftermath of the genocide to turn massacre sites into memorials by preserving bodies and artifacts and building mass graves before the Ministry of Youth, Sports and Culture took sites over. Additionally, foreign state and nonstate donors from Europe, North America, and the U.N. provided substantial funding for memorial sites, including Kigali and Murambi, to promote reconciliation and express regret for the international community's failure to stop the genocide (Ibreck 2013). The audience for these memorials is both Rwandan (school trips of children born post-genocide, domestic tourism, and victim pilgrimages) and foreign (visiting dignitaries, business travelers, and tourists). The monuments remain an important part of Rwanda's annual commemoration ceremonies despite the fact that, starting in 2011, the ceremonies have moved away from 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 violence and the vulnerability of bodies. They exemplify the aesthetic of bodily vulnerability, or depictions of bodies as subject to visceral violence at the hands of others. Critics point out the monuments' use of bodily remains to exclude and marginalize those whose stories do not fit in with the regime'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. The aesthetic of vulnerability can be mobilized by different narratives but is also itself affectively powerful, regardless of its political context. Below, I detail Susan Sontag's influential critique of depictions of violence and show how this argument is reflected in many critiques of the Rwandan memorials. I detail what I see as these critiques' major flaw: that they conflate the historical narrative framing the memorials with their depictions of bodily vulnerability.

Negative Accounts of Bodily Vulnerability

Political thinkers 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 Susan Sontag's questioning of depictions of bodily vulnerability and I show how this negative account is reflected in contemporary (mostly Global North) criticisms of the Rwandan memorials. The major concern of the negative account is that depictions of bodily vulnerability will inevitably be politically counterproductive. I describe these claims below before arguing that the aesthetic of bodily vulnerability and its framing are separable and offering a positive account of such an aesthetic.

One prominent line of critique, advanced by philosopher and critic Susan Sontag,² argues that pain and bodily violence are difficult if not impossible to depict in a way that is helpful to

the victims of violence. Writing about viewing photographs of bodily violence like grisly images of bombing or lynching victims, Sontag counters the idea that such images will inherently convey the same meaning to all viewers – let alone an anti-violence message. One danger, she argues, is that violent images will promote complicity 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). Another danger, she argues, is that violent images of bodies will not ‘actually teach us anything’ but rather ‘just confirm what we already know (or want to know)’ (Sontag 2002).

Yet another problem with viewing images of bodily vulnerability and violence, Sontag argues, is that such images can be nefariously manipulated by their framing and require visitors to critically engage with them, which does not always happen. Because ‘No moral charge attaches to the representation of these cruelties’, images can ‘explained or falsified by their captions... the same photographs of children killed in the shelling of a village were passed around at both Serb and Croat propaganda briefings. Alter the caption: alter the use of these deaths’ (Sontag 2002). Thus, viewing images has to be accompanied by 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) to alleviate or prevent further pain (Sontag 2003, 150). Sontag argues that simply viewing graphic, violent images is not enough for this task of critical reflection because many people can avoid absorbing or even viewing upsetting images (Sontag 2002; 2003). Sontag leaves open the possibility for the effective communication of bodily pain and vulnerability, but she also worries they will lead to complicity, they are easily manipulated, and they require critical reflection that is rarely exercised.

Many critics of Rwandan memorials apply the general principles of Sontag's critique to the specific case of these memorials, taking issue with their depictions of bodily vulnerability but also connecting this critique to a charge that the memorials harmfully exclude those whose victimization does not fit into the state's official narrative. I argue they are misdirected: in their criticism 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.

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 current regime. For example, Sara Guyer argues that 'the traumatic silence that they [the Rwandan memorials] 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) 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.

Finally, Claudine Vidal writes that these depictions of bodily violence contribute to 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... *must be linked* to the forced memorization work committed by those in power' (2004, 590; my translation, emphasis added).

These scholars share some of Sontag's concerns while also criticizing 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 regime's exclusionary narrative about the genocide.³ 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 nuance and debate, include more Hutu victims and rescuers, and acknowledge the violence perpetrated by the RPA and the post-genocide regime. 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 the broader political environment tell the story. The separability of depictions of bodily vulnerability from their problematic context leaves open the possibility for such depictions to shape alternative political imaginaries rather than to merely prop up a repressive narrative. In the next section, I develop an account of these possibilities.

A Positive Account of Bodily Vulnerability

As I have shown, critiques of the aesthetic of bodily vulnerability abound. However, critics often fall short of proposing an alternative solution.⁴ Moving beyond critique, is there anything worth salvaging in a political aesthetic that depicts bodies as vulnerable to the violence of others? I argue that there is. 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 and oppose debasing forms of power. To do so, I draw on Judith Butler’s claims about ontological precariousness in order to rehabilitate the aesthetic of bodily vulnerability.

For Butler, the political power of mourning is that it can include or exclude categories of bodies and people as worthy of mourning. Although all lives should be mourned and respected, such respect is not equally distributed, creating a hierarchy of exclusion (Butler 2010). While grief is sometimes construed as privatizing, Butler argues, it can also build solidarity and community by reminding us of our bodies’ vulnerability, interdependence, and relationality. This

is an inevitable ontological 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). Butler simultaneously makes an ontological claim about a human condition of mutual vulnerability, or ‘precariousness’, and critiques the additional strain felt by groups who are unequally ‘exposed to injury, violence, and death’, or ‘precarity’ (Butler 2010, 25). For this reason, her critical theory that interrogates unequal precarity is often mistaken for an ideal theory that uncritically naturalizes precariousness (Kramer 2015).⁵

Butler points to the ways that, rather than ignore or try to fulfill ‘an institutionalized fantasy of mastery’ over our vulnerability, we can harness it as ‘the basis of claims for non-military political solutions’, asking, ‘Is there something to be learned about the geopolitical distribution of corporeal vulnerability from our own brief and devastating exposure to this condition?’ (Butler 2004, 29). That ‘something to be learned’ is an obligation to work against violence, a rebuttal to concerns like Sontag’s about cheap sentimentality and apathy (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?

What might it mean, in the wake of mass violence, for us to ‘stay with’ the thought of corporeal vulnerability? It would mean attending to the ways that our own experiences of witnessing bodily vulnerability or its representation can prompt a political obligation to ‘vow to protect others’. Witnessing violence and its aftermath permits a thoughtful engagement with that violence and the bodies it hurts, which, properly framed, can guide us toward a politics that resists viewing the bodies of others as disposable and resists forms of power that debase others.

Bodily vulnerability, the destructibility of our bodies, implies a kind of interdependence. Because vulnerability implies a (shared but not equal) ‘common physicality and risk’ (Butler 2005, 100), we all depend on each other not to hurt each other. Witnessing, experiencing, or attending to violence inflicted on bodies can uncover our vulnerability to violence at the hands of others. Considering the vulnerability of others’ bodies through the aesthetic of vulnerability can equip us to ‘critically evaluate and oppose the conditions under which certain human lives are more vulnerable than others’ (Butler 2004, 30). Witnessing violence or its remnants (like the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide or, in Butler’s example, the 9/11 attacks) can communicate this ontological condition of interdependence while also allowing room for critical inquiry into different groups’ unequal precarity. This interdependence may cultivate opposition to the politics of debasing forms of power that frame particular bodies as disposable: 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).

This is not to say a totally equal distribution of vulnerability is possible, only that a political aesthetic of vulnerability, such as depictions of violence that humans can inflict upon each other,

can remind viewers of their bodies' existing vulnerability as interdependence. Within a narrative framing of past violence as an *unequal* distribution of pain and suffering and of the current need for a *more* equal distribution of mourning, an aesthetic of bodily vulnerability may also work to cultivate a political imagination of non-disposability as we come to see each other as mutually dependent and constitutively vulnerable.

An aesthetic of bodily vulnerability can go beyond conveying our basic dependence on each other not to inflict harm. By emphasizing the ties of interdependence and shared ontological vulnerability, such an engagement may also lead us to 'a relationality that is composed neither exclusively of myself nor you, but is to be conceived as *the tie* by which those terms are differentiated and related' (Butler 2004, 22). That is, the aesthetic of bodily vulnerability may work against a vision of the self as independently constituted by emphasizing ties to vulnerable others and subjects' interdependence. In contrast to the liberal, sovereign subject, the relational subject resists the impulse toward the violence of mastery in favor of an selfhood that is grounded in others, in its own contingency, and in internal ambivalence (Rushing 2010). Memory work around violence, in particular, can reveal a relationality that resists the impulse toward mastery and seeing others' bodies as disposable (Butler and Gessen 2020):

If I think of myself not just as this bounded individual but as fundamentally related to others, then I locate this self in those relations... If the self I'm trying to defend is also in some sense related to the person I'm tempted to kill, I have to make sure not to do violence to that relation, because that's also me. One could go further: I'm also attacking myself by attacking that person, since I am breaking a social bond that we have between us.

If we see the bodies of others within such a framework of interdependence and relationality, it may become harder to see others' bodies and lives as disposable because we are mutually dependent and even mutually constitutive of others. That is, a political obligation not to see the body of the other as disposable and to oppose debasing forms of power may arise out of a view of bodies as mutually vulnerable and relational, a view that can be facilitated by a political aesthetic of bodily vulnerability in memorials.

Positioned within a political narrative that avoids a politics of victimhood and tells a nuanced version of history, an aesthetic of bodily vulnerability such as the representations at the Rwandan memorials can remind us that all life is subject to the violence of others. If we are reminded of the embodiment and bodily consequences of violence, it becomes more difficult not only to downplay historical violence but also to see others as disposable or to support debasing forms of power. This is because the aesthetic of bodily vulnerability can convey the visceral immediacy of bodily harm, our bodies' mutual dependence when it comes to violence, and our relational subjectivity. Statistics and death tolls often reduce the physical reality of bodies because death in large quantities is incomprehensible. In contrast, an aesthetic of vulnerability makes it difficult to ignore 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 bloodied 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, in the context of distributing mourning to marginalized groups, opens up the imagination to mutual vulnerability; reflecting on mutual vulnerability opens up the imagination

to interdependence and relationality; attending to interdependence and relationality opens up the imagination to a politics that resists debasing forms of power and seeing others as disposable.

And an aesthetic of vulnerability is not only *separable* from a politics of exclusion; it is *compatible* with a politics that acknowledges rather than sidelines the suffering of groups like Hutu refugees, Hutu rescuers, and Twa victims. Framed properly, an aesthetic of bodily vulnerability can orient us toward a politics that embraces ambiguity, the critical thinking Sontag encourages, and the non-disposability of plural others. Although the horror of bodily vulnerability does not have a normative orientation of its own, it is (on its own terms) affectively powerful (Asad 2007, 80–81), jarring, and upsetting. However, as Elizabeth Dauphinée puts it, ‘Images do not speak for themselves – they are made to speak for, by and about *us*’ (2007, 153).

Therefore, narrative framing *around* depictions of bodily vulnerability are crucial: a corpse depicted on a lynching postcard is framed as a spectacle subject to the carnival of Jim Crow, whereas a corpse depicted in an open casket at a funeral is framed as an entity worthy of respect and mourning. The same video of a surgery means different things in the context of an instructional medical school recording and in the context of a gruesome horror film. Images that glorify violence, such as photographs of prisoners’ bodies at Abu Ghraib, can fetishize violence when they are over-circulated to the point of objectification (Dauphinée 2007). Although we can never completely regulate or even predict how images are taken up by the public (Lisle 2006), the framing around an image or memorial ‘functions not only as a boundary to the image, but as structuring the image itself’, so what matters is not just what the image shows, ‘but also how it shows what it shows’ (Butler 2010, 71). In the Rwandan case, the current framing leaves no room for a nuanced history, instead promoting the ‘Genocide against the Tutsi’ narrative at the expense of other victims and thoughtful deliberation. Without leaving room for working through

contentious politics and marginalized histories, ‘practices of public mourning may merely serve to reinforce a cognitive and nationalistic dogmatism rather than providing an occasion to acknowledge corporeal vulnerability and ethico-political interconnection’ (McIvor 2012, 428). Depictions of vulnerability must incorporate counternarratives, subaltern voices, opportunities for the kind of critical thinking Sontag urges, and a vision of vulnerability as highlighting, not exploiting, our interdependence.

While such depictions can be, 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. An exclusionary narrative framing of historical violence that remains ‘trapped in a form of silence where the past continues to haunt’ (Hölscher, Kanamugire, and Udah 2020) is not inevitable. If framed, instead, by an inclusive narrative, this aesthetic is one powerful tool among many that could work toward a peaceful *and* inclusive politics based on the non-disposability of bodies and opposition to debasing forms of power. Indeed, the exclusive narrative around the memorials fails to account for the ‘political transformative learning and political contestation’ that is already playing out in civil society (Benda 2017, 5).

How can we avoid exploiting or marginalizing groups of people in the present by depicting past violence? One way is avoiding historical simplification and providing narratives that leave room for political contestation rather than or refusing to recognize the victimhood of certain groups. In Rwanda, this might involve framing the memorials (by changing some of the problematic assertions in signs, placards, and commemorative events) in such a way that recognizes the victims whose victimhood does not fit into the current narrative.

The ethnicization of the monuments, including the labelling of the genocide as ‘against the Tutsi’ (depicting Tutsi victims’ bodies as the only bodies that matter), only serves to retrench a politics of victimhood and exclusion. But if the memorials can be reframed to employ the aesthetic of bodily vulnerability toward an inclusive and open politics, then they could generate imaginative possibilities in which others are not seen as disposable and debasing forms of power are not acceptable. This might include acknowledging 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 blame on French troops, could be reworked tell a more holistic story of the genocide. The narrative around victims and perpetrators in all signage and online materials could avoid ethnicized national guilt and a repressive politics of victimhood. Instead, they could tell a nuanced history that recognizes the role of colonial powers in entrenching ethnic divides and avoids essentializing narratives about the precolonial origins of ethnic identity. They could acknowledge the long, complicated 20th century history of ethnic violence in the Great Lakes region. Tutsi victims of the 1994 genocide need not be ignored or undermined, but language including other victims and avoiding depictions of the RPA as martyrs would allow for a more open and accurate narrative. Attending to bodily vulnerability can ask us to imagine our common precariousness without erasing all politically meaningful differences and identities. Thinking through shared vulnerability to death and pain does not preclude us from maintaining other differences. These measures toward a more inclusive narrative would open the door for

responsibility-taking, social repair, and reconciliation while preserving the aesthetic of bodily vulnerability.

We should proceed with caution, as Sontag reminds us. There is a reason viewing gruesome images of hurt bodies is often considered prurient or even pornographic. But these memorials are physical sites that individuals visit in person, not a proliferation of images of mangled bodies in our environment. Moreover, we are often 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). That whispering voice may be accompanied by voyeuristic revulsion, but it may also provide 'moments of identification and reflection, moments of rejection and denial, and moments to be inquisitive about the dreadful fates of others' (Taylor 1998, 7). This is why such powerful images require context and narration. Although the political aesthetic has its own power to evoke disgust and horror, that power that can be used for divergent political goals, depending on the framing.

Scholars attentive to the problem of necropolitics (Mbembe 2019) have pointed out how the state often reproduces the (male, cis) Black body as a dead body; how racial politics has readily rallied around this version of the slain Black body (Threadcraft 2017); and how images of dead foreigners are used to support a distinction between the foreign other and the Western subject (Taylor 1998). Butler herself, in her reading of the Rodney King trial, warns that the visual field is 'itself a racial formation' at risk of reproducing a politics of victimhood in which the hegemonic group claims as its own the vulnerability of the actual victim (Butler 1993, 17). 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 Black and

Brown bodies): 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 post-colonial power? Can families claim and rebury the remains and artifacts of their loved ones? If a memorial is mostly viewed by Global North audiences, are the images of Global South bodies in danger of re-inscribing beliefs about the foreign other? If the audience is mostly Global Southern viewers, whom do these depictions serve, and how can they be framed in an expansive rather than exclusionary way? If the audience is international, how can frames around the images avoid reproducing a narrative that denies the specificity of the particular history being depicted? 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.

Conclusion

Many scholars and political observers doubt the potential for long-lasting peace in Rwanda as long as the RPF regime 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 of the critiques of the regime detailed earlier, about the suppression of minorities and political opposition, are legitimate. But the current memorials could be reframed around the kind of tragic stance that Simon Stow and Steven Johnston argue leave more room for contestation, deliberation, or peaceful political conflict (Stow 2010; Johnston 2015). Indeed, the memorials in some cases have already provided opportunities for processing and healing among survivors

(Berckmoes et al. 2017). Depictions of bodily vulnerability to violence do not preclude this; rather, within an inclusive framing, they can ask viewers to contemplate their own and others' bodily vulnerability, interdependence, and non-disposability.

How might a memorial resonate with members of multiple ethnic and social groups in Rwanda while avoiding the pitfalls of false equivalence? It would have to accept the contradictions and flaws inherent to Rwanda's post-genocide rebirth and the complexities of its history. It would have to give up on closed, self-resolving commemorative narratives and embrace open, contested, unresolved commemorative narratives. 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. And memorials depicting an aesthetic of vulnerability can be used outside the Rwandan context; depictions of bodily vulnerability and violence can operate in Global North contexts, for example, to memorialize victims of colonial violence, genocide, and slavery.

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 CNLG could 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 vulnerability to violence criticize the danger of such depictions, I want to refocus on the purpose of memorials. One way we can open up the political imagination to a politics of non-disposability and resistance to debasing forms of power is through an aesthetic of bodily vulnerability in memorials.

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¹ Aside from the six national 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 *lieux de mémoire* (Nora 1989) – contrast with the government-created sites. Underprivileged memorials display human remains less often and less conspicuously (Meierhenrich 2011, 290). This article analyzes these three memorials because of their specific use of bodily remains and violence, which is fairly rare among the world's genocide memorials. I chose these particular sites because I (a Western visitor) have visited them, in 2008 and 2012, and because they are the subject of scholarly critique, as documented in this article. These highly documented sites are no more worthy of analysis than *lieux de mémoire*, but they are at the center of a debate about the political aesthetic of vulnerability.

² Similarly, literary theorist Elaine Scarry argues that while bodily pain exposes the person in pain to others, it does not open up the possibility of solidarity or fellow-feeling; instead, pain isolates us from others, providing '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).

³ 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’). However, an aesthetic of bodily vulnerability is just as separable from de-individualization as it is separable from exclusion. For example, we could still depict violence and vulnerability alongside details about individuals, like the plaques about children in the Kigali museum. Indeed, an aesthetic of vulnerability could disrupt practices that *name* the dead whose lives are valued while only giving *counts* of the dead whose lives are not valued (Lloyd 2019).

⁴ See, for example, Jens Meierhenrich (2011), Chérie Rivers Ndaliko (2018, 277), or Annalisa Bolin (2012).

⁵ For debates around Butler’s ontological claims about precariousness, see Bonnie Honig’s argument against Butler’s ‘mortalist humanism’ (Honig 2013). Scholars have also argued that basing a more equal distribution of safety on an ontology of vulnerability obscures differential experiences of vulnerability (Cole 2016) such as racial and colonial injury (Michel 2016), disempowers or overlooks certain types of political action (Honig 2019), or requires further politicization (Shulman 2011; Murphy 2012) or historical contextualization (Lloyd 2008). However, others argue that many of these critics’ claims that Butler’s ontology lies outside of politics is overstated (Kramer 2015) and that attending to mourning, especially if divorced from the melancholic and grounded in the political, need not preclude working through internal ambivalence and contradiction (McIvor 2012; 2016). Butler herself anticipates these critiques by claiming that ontological precariousness is organized by politics and arguing for ‘the intellectual projects of critique, of questioning, of coming to understand the difficulties and demands of

cultural translation and dissent, and to create a sense of the public in which oppositional voices are not feared, degraded or dismissed' (Butler 2004, 151).