



AFTER GENOCIDE: MEMORY AND RECONCILIATION IN RWANDA

Nicole Fox

In the wake of unthinkable atrocities, how do communities move forward without forgetting the past? Simply remembering the past can, in the shadow of mass death and other abuses, be retraumatizing. So how can such momentous events be memorialized in a way that is productive and even healing for survivors? Nicole Fox's 2021 book *After Genocide: Memory and Reconciliation in Rwanda* (University of Wisconsin Press) investigates such questions through extensive interviews with Rwandan survivors decades after the genocide ended. Through qualitative research at national memorial sites throughout Rwanda, *After Genocide* reveals the relationship survivors have to memorial spaces and uncovers those voices silenced by the dominant narrative—arguing that the erasure of such stories is an act of violence itself.

Memorialization and Genocide in Rwanda

Over the past few decades, a global trend to memorialize past atrocity has emerged as a pathway forward after mass human rights abuses. Memorialization can be a mechanism of transitional justice in pursuits to support peaceful coexistence after violence. We see this in the US and abroad, with the development of the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Alabama (commemorating those who experienced racial terrorism and lynching), the Survivors Memorial in Minnesota (commemorating sexual assault survivors), and many other memorials throughout Europe, Africa, and elsewhere. Memorialization efforts have been diverse in shape and message, including cases that commemorate victims of police brutality, mass shootings, or atrocity, such as genocide.

On April 7, 1994, genocide erupted throughout Rwanda amongst a context of dire economic conditions, political turmoil, and a persistent civil war. Upwards of 800,000 Rwandans, mostly Tutsi but also Hutu and Twa, were murdered in one of the most heinous atrocities of the 20th century. In the years since 1994, over five hundred genocide memorials have been built throughout Rwanda. While these memorial spaces can empower survivors and their families, the narratives shared in these spaces can also further stratify already delicate social relations.

Based on years of ethnographic research and multiple interviews over time with 72 survivors, my research centers on how survivors articulate the meaning of memorialization and its impact on reconciliation. “Survivor” in this context is defined as an individual who feared for their life/family’s life during the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. Such fears were tied to being considered Tutsi, looking Tutsi, or having personal relations with Tutsi.

Memory and Reconciliation in Present-Day Rwanda



My research found that many Rwandan genocide survivors envision national collective memorialization as a central mechanism in the enduring quest for accountability of human rights violations, as well as a deserved right in the post-genocide period. Survivors with whom I spoke unwaveringly asserted that memorials prevent future violence. While there is no definitive evidence that Rwanda's many memorials prevent future atrocities, such assertions illuminate how memorials are a mechanism of transitional justice that provide needed hope for healing and community rebuilding.

When survivors participate in commemorative rituals or serve a memorial by cleaning the space or assisting with artifacts, they describe their memory work as a way to gain a sense of control over an uncontrollable past and future. The possibility of preventing future anguish makes the heartache of their own families' brutal murders slightly more bearable. Such hope also means that they have power and agency, even in a constrictive political climate, unlike when they were running for their lives or hiding under the dead bodies of their neighbors during the genocide. In short, memorials offer survivors imagined possibilities that sustain resiliency.

However, while national collective memorialization may bring hope and empowerment to some survivors, it can disappoint and exclude others. Not all survivors remember the genocide in the same way. The stories told at memorials can marginalize survivors when certain narratives linked to poverty, gender, and sexual violence are not included. These stories are often not shared in public spaces because they "lack hope" or could traumatize others, requiring additional psychological resources that memorial/ commemoration staff cannot access. In what I call the "stratification of collective memory," the survivors who are the most vulnerable in post-genocide society—particularly poor women survivors of sexual violence—endure public silence around their stories.

Rwanda is exceptional in its implementation of so many memorials in a relatively short period of time since the genocide—projects that were mobilized by the government, international and national NGOs, and survivor organizations. These memorials shape survivors' lives by offering physical spaces to honor loved ones and a chance to imagine a future without genocidal violence. Even with the stratification of collective memory that marginalizes some stories, survivors still find promise in rituals of memory. As cases of mass atrocity continue to unravel across the globe, communities more frequently turn toward memorials to engage with the enduring legacies of injustice and violence. While remembering demands bystanders bear witness to suffering, they must also listen closely for silences in memory and consider those who are not represented. Remembering has serious responsibility and great power: the power to marginalize, the power to heal, and the power to make our world a more just one.

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Implications & Recommendations

- Memorials matter to survivors of violence in significant ways, by providing hope that such spaces prevent future violence. These spaces can contribute to reconciliation projects and transitional justice pursuits. Communities recovering from mass violence should consider memorialization projects as an important option in the aftermath of violence.
- Narratives shared at memorials are not neutral but rather are part of a stratified process in which the stories of the most vulnerable survivors are marginalized. Communities recovering from mass violence would benefit from ensuring their memorialization efforts include women, poor survivors, sexual and gender-based violence survivors, and other marginalized victims and survivors.
- When memorials are not inclusive, this can impact reconciliation programs and civic engagement. Prior to recruitment of survivors in reconciliation programs and civic activities, ensure that the diversity of survivor experiences is present in public narratives of the violence, including who survived it and how they survived.

Recommended Reading:

1 Fox, Nicole. *After Genocide: Memory and Reconciliation in Rwanda*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2021.

2 Fox, Nicole. "Memory in Interaction: Gender-Based Violence, Genocide, and Commemoration." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 45, no. 1 (2019): 123-48.

3 Fox, Nicole, and Carla De Ycaza. "Narratives of Mass Violence: The Role of Memory and Memorialization in Addressing Human Rights Violations in Post-Conflict Rwanda and Uganda." *Societies without Borders* 8, no. 3 (2013): 344-72.

4 Berry, Marie. "When 'Bright Futures' Fade: Paradoxes of Women's Empowerment in Rwanda." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 41, no. 1 (2014): 1-27.

5 Jacobs, Janet. "The Memorial at Srebrenica: Gender and the Social Meanings of Collective Memory in Bosnia-Herzegovina." *Memory Studies* 10, no. 4 (2017): 423-39.

About the Author

Nicole Fox

Nicole Fox, Ph.D., researches how racial and ethnic contention impacts communities, including how remembrances of adversity shape social change, collective memory and present-day social movements. She is a professor of criminal justice at California State University Sacramento where she teaches on comparative criminal justice, history of the American criminal justice system and global criminology. Her 2021 book (University of Wisconsin Press), *After Genocide: Memory and Reconciliation in Rwanda*, focuses on how memorials to past atrocity shape healing, community development and reconciliation for survivors of genocide and genocidal rape. Her scholarship has been published in *Social Forces*, *Signs*, *Social Problems*, the *Journal for Scientific Study of Religion*, *Sociological Forum*, *Societies without borders*, among others. Her work has generously been supported by the Harry Frank Guggenheim Grant, the National Science Foundation, Andrew Mellon Foundation, University of New Hampshire's Prevention Innovation Research Center, Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, and the American Sociological Society's Fund for the Advancement of the Discipline and others.