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Bobby Smith

Performance and the transnational public sphere in Rwanda: An ethnographic encounter with silence

Introduction

In this article, I tentatively suggest that there are emerging examples of performance in Rwanda which are fostering more inclusive conversations around the legacies of the genocide and that, with specific reference to the Ubumuntu Arts Festival, art and performance are key catalysts of conversations about globally important issues. I draw on notions of the transnational public sphere in order to consider this claim further and highlight that some limitations exist. Throughout, I aim to unpick my role as a British researcher and practitioner who is involved in socially engaged performance globally. This has been a challenging article to write – I reframed the piece many, many times and went through numerous drafts. While this is part of any writing process, I felt particularly torn politically and ethically in terms of what I was putting down on paper and the problems of wading into the legacies of the Genocide Against the Tutsi, which took place in Rwanda in 1994. As I began to redraft the article for the final time, I felt that this discomfort was important to capture, not least because reflecting on these challenges raises possibilities for further analysis: we are all, in varying ways, participants in the transnational public sphere. I am a participant through the research and practice I undertake and my involvement in discussions about a range of issues. I would therefore argue that personal reflection on how we participate, and what it feels like to do so, are significant since these reflections can highlight the possibilities and limitations of our involvement.

I consider examples of performance which all took place in 2019 - the 25th anniversary of the genocide in Rwanda. The first - *Kwibuka25* - was the latest iteration of the annual period of genocide commemoration, organised by the state and involving numerous performances,

public events and political speeches. *Kwibuka* is a Kinyarwanda word meaning ‘to remember’ and the events unfold over 100 days - 7th April to 4th July - the dates in 1994 when the genocide began and ended. The closing ceremony for *Kwibuka25* was staged at the Amohoro Stadium - a nationally symbolic site as during the genocide it was used by the United Nations as a refuge for thousands seeking to escape violence (Human Rights Watch 1994). I then reflect on two performances that were shown at the Ubumuntu Arts Festival (UAF), as well as consider the broader atmosphere of this three-day event. These events can be linked to acts of commemoration and ongoing reconciliation efforts in the country – indeed, as Rwandan scholar Chantal Kalisa (2006) has identified, the arts have played a key role in dealing with legacies of violence since 1994.

As I will show, the history of genocide heavily shapes politics and performance in Rwanda and its specific place on the world stage, framing the transnational public sphere in particular ways. Indeed, complex narratives of violence and genocide render certain perspectives and experiences unsayable and - for global publics at least - relatively imperceptible. To begin, I therefore consider the relationship between performance and the transnational public sphere, before then outlining how an initial encounter with silence framed the rest of my research trip. This focus is then applied and further developed throughout the rest of the article.

Performance and the transnational public sphere

In *The Theatrical Public Sphere*, Christopher Balme (2014) outlines the ways in which theatre and performance combine ‘discursive debate, affective bodily action and playful elements’¹ to make lively and important contributions to the public sphere - understood as a ‘fundamentally

¹ Balme, 2014, p. 202

political concept'². The term was coined by Jürgen Habermas, whose theorisation of the public sphere centres on the possibilities to debate and reach consensus that are offered when individuals come together and 'express and publish their opinions - about matters of general interest'³. Many forms of communication make up the public sphere, including television and radio broadcasts, newspapers and, as both Balme (2014) and Janelle Reinelt (2011) make clear, theatre and performance. These various modes of communication enable debate and reasoning between the private individuals who create and produce such work, or who gather publicly to read, spectate and discuss the ideas they advance. The public sphere generates and informs public opinion and is, therefore, an entity 'which mediates between society and state'⁴.

Nancy Fraser (2014) has sought to develop Habermas' ideas further, specifically by 'transnationalizing' the public sphere. She argues that many of the issues faced by publics in contemporary society are faced globally, and transnationally. Consequently, debate and action, the carving of new paths forward and the creation of new social movements now occurs within and between states, with the involvement of diverse participants. As she argues, a key element of an effective public sphere is that all those affected by the issues being reflected upon are included. The proliferation of global institutions and the transnational nature of issues including violence, climate crisis, inequality, and more, suggests that rather than a public sphere comprising individuals solely on the basis of their citizenship or nationality, transnational public spheres must instead be founded on the 'co-imbrication in a common set of structures and/or institutions that affect their lives'⁵. As Fraser goes on to argue, 'where such structures transgress the borders of states, the corresponding public spheres must be transnational. Failing that, the opinions that they generate cannot be considered legitimate'⁶.

² Ibid., p. 28

³ Habermas, 1964, p. 49

⁴ Eley in Howell, 1993, p. 309

⁵ Fraser, 2014, p. 30

⁶ Ibid.

The three events I consider all took place in public spaces in Kigali, Rwanda's capital city. There is not the scope in this article to engage in the complexities of debate between the public sphere and public space though, rather than see these as distinct and separate entities or incompatible terms, I agree with perspectives that public space is crucial to the public sphere (for example: Carragee, 2006; Cassegård, 2014). Considering public space in conjunction with the (transnational) public sphere allows us to retain greater specificity and pluralism. Notions of public space relate to actual, geographical locations but also, borrowing from Hannah Arendt (2018), issues related to power and politics. We may typically think of public spaces as squares, parks or symbolic monuments yet, in *The Human Condition*, Arendt proposes that any space where political speech and action takes place can in fact be conceptualised as public. As Seyla Benhabib states, 'diverse topographical locations become public spaces in that they become the "sites" of power, of common action coordinated through speech and persuasion'⁷. For Arendt, public spaces contrast with those of the private realm. She writes:

To live an entirely private life means above all to be deprived of things essential to a truly human life: to be deprived of the reality that comes from being seen and heard by others, to be deprived of an "objective" relationship with them that comes from being related to and separated from them through the intermediary of a common world of things, to be deprived of the possibility of achieving something more permanent than life itself. The privation of privacy lies in the absence of others; as far as they are concerned, private man does not appear, and therefore it is as though he does not exist.⁸

Such public, as opposed to private, spaces are thus integral to our humanity and, if we do not engage in the public realm or are denied access we might be considered not fully human. It is the way in which humans switch from the more animalistic requirements of survival in the private space of the home to the cultural, political and public facing versions of ourselves we

⁷ Benhabib, 1993, p. 102

⁸ Arendt, 2018, p. 58

present in public which makes us human. Arendt posits that bringing our private lives and concerns into the public realm is facilitated through ‘storytelling’ and the ‘artistic transposition of individual experiences’ that can make ‘intimate life - the passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses [...] fit for public appearance’⁹. Importantly, the potential for public space as a site of action, freedom and debate is not guaranteed. It can be eroded not only through restrictive institutions but also due to a lack of vitality resulting from disengagement and disinterest by individuals.

Setting the scene – an encounter with silence

The day after arriving in Kigali I attended the huge closing ceremony for Kwibuka25, held on the 4th July 2019 at the Amohoro National Stadium. The event included music, dance and theatre performances and speeches from politicians, including President Paul Kagame. In President Kagame’s address to the crowd he cast Rwanda as a ‘beacon of hope’ on the global stage. Throughout the event the audience was extremely silent. Once the performances and speeches were over, barely anyone spoke as they waited to leave the stadium. Confined behind closed gates, thousands of people watched quietly as cars and coaches of VIPs left the stadium. Through the gaps in the metal fence, more onlookers lined the streets across from the stadium, standing still and silent as they observed the mass of hushed bodies opposite and the procession of vehicles drive by. Standing at equal distances from one another, soldiers monitored the crowds. Once the gates were opened, people calmly and quietly dispersed, filtering into side streets to find their way to wherever they were heading next. As I stood with my partner and a friend – both German – among the silence, none of us sure how to act, I was only able to perceive the literal lack of sound. Ross Brown notes in relation to silence, ‘when part of a silent

⁹ Arendt, 2018, p. 50

*crowd, whether in a memorial or a theatrical setting, one's body bristles in omnidirectional affectiveness to the strangeness of the environment*¹⁰. As Susan Thomson (2011a) has noted, visitors to Rwandan often comment upon the silence they are met by - particularly when attempting to discuss aspects of the genocide.

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I have included this reflection on the first public event I attended as the silence I encountered stayed with me throughout my research trip. Ananda Breed (2014) explores how performance is integral to constructing a new Rwandan identity, post-genocide, noting that official commemorative and memorial events are some of the most visible ways in which the 'new Rwanda'¹¹ is performed for national and international audiences. She understands both performativities and performances of genocide as deeply implicated in such narratives. Regarding the former, performativities of politics, the wider landscape of reconciliation efforts and genocide commemoration all form a complex network of repeated statements about genocide and its legacies, and these are further upheld through the performances that artists create.

Kwibuka is an extremely important annual event not only because it marks the genocide and brings together Rwandans for 100 days of remembrance but also because, as Gretchen Baldwin observes, 'the events comprise a deliberate, nationwide exercise in genocide commemoration, both creating spaces for post-genocide catharsis and resurrecting pre-genocide identity divides'¹². Importantly, terms for ethnic identities in Rwanda were banned in 2014 as part of an attempt to create a homogenous Rwandan national identity. Yet, during *Kwibuka* these terms are explicitly bound up in processes of remembrance which, some argue, create a 'Tutsi - survivor/Hutu - perpetrator' binary¹³. This is further compounded by policies including

¹⁰ Brown, 2011, p. 9

¹¹ Breed, 2014, p. 182

¹² Baldwin, 2019, p. 356

¹³ Baldwin, 2019

the official naming of the genocide as the ‘Genocide against the Tutsi’ and the creation of the Commission Nationale de Lutte Contre le Génocide (CNLG) in 2008, resulting in State control of memorials and commemorative events. It is also important to bear in mind that Kagame’s party - the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) - was a primarily Tutsi-led group who fought against the Hutu-dominated government before and during 1994. They are also credited with bringing the genocide to an end, when the RPF captured Kigali in July 1994. The result of this history and consequent policies and framings of violence is that ‘the inherently political nature of nationalised, state-sponsored mourning practices and the RPF’s paradigmatic history of the 1994 genocide have pushed individual memories and interpretations of the genocide and civil war into hidden places’¹⁴. Some have further critiqued this reality. Scott Straus (2019) argues that this enables the government to sidestep discussions around violence against Hutus prior to, and since, 1994. He suggests that approaches taken by organisations such as Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) are more productive, since they both recognize the suffering of Tutsis during 1994 while also acknowledging Hutu victims of the genocide and other instances of violence that have involved a range of perpetrators and victims. Not doing so, it is argued, risks silencing certain individuals and communities and, in the process, heightening divisions and resentment that can lead to future violence.

My experience at *Kwibuka* took me by surprise. Before travelling to Rwanda, I continually came across positive representations of the country as a place of hope, optimism and success following its recovery from genocide. Outside of academic publications, little existed to complicate what I was engaging with and prompt deeper engagement. As Edmondson argues:

¹⁴ Burnet, 2012, p. 111

[The] Rwanda PR machine serves up a range of statistics as evidence for the country's seemingly miraculous rise from the ashes of genocide: Rwanda has more women in parliament than any other country in the world; nearly 98 percent of Rwandans have health insurance; the gross domestic product has more than tripled.¹⁵

An article in *The Guardian* by former British Prime Minister Tony Blair (2014) ran with the headline '20 years after the genocide, Rwanda is a beacon of hope' and proclaimed, 'Rwandans are increasingly united' and that the country is 'economically vibrant'. President Kagame has regularly invoked the narrative of Rwanda as a place of hope. In the final speech given at the closing ceremony for *Kwibuka*²⁵ he stated: 'in 1994 there was no hope, only darkness. Now light radiates from this place. How did it happen? Rwanda became one family again'¹⁶. However, my experience of silence disrupted these positive acclamations, prompting me to discuss this further with a Rwandan friend. They reflected on the different ways in which silence is understood through Kinyarwanda terms, stating:

Ubecece is the silence, then *bucece* means silently. There are other words that mean different things and they are very related to silence. *Gutwama* may be urging someone to stop talking about something inconvenient or undesirable and it may also have other meanings like the ceasing of a sound produced by something, like animals or bees. *Gutuza* means going quiet, or to stop talking. It can also mean becoming calm on the interior, or to stop worrying. It depends on the context.¹⁷

The initial frayed edges of silence as a conceptual thread thus emerged from a literal lack of sound - or *ubecece*. Engaging with more nuanced Kinyarwanda words for silence helps to create a more layered understanding. If we consider *gutuza*, which can connote going quiet, this

¹⁵ Edmondson, 2018, p. 112

¹⁶ Kagame, 2019

¹⁷ Personal communication with the author, anonymized, June 2020

can link to certain absences, omissions and perhaps the inability or refusal to speak about certain themes in performance that might otherwise be filled with noise. Furthermore, depending on context, *gutuza* might suggest calmness. Certainly, my initial impressions of the silence I experienced at *Kwibuka* - while confusing - was of calm. And yet we should resist conflating silence with calm, particularly at times of highly sensitive and extremely complex commemoration. Given arguments by others, outlined above, it is apparent that at *Kwibuka* certain stories and individuals are heard and others not. This is significant at both the national and international level, since *Kwibuka* remains the main outward-facing expressions of genocide commemoration in Rwanda, thus permeating global discourse and, for those who travel to Rwanda for research or to participate in events such as the UAF, shaping our participation in such events.

Before moving on, the absence that Baldwin (2019) identifies in terms of other experiences and perspectives being presented at *Kwibuka* is potentially problematic in terms of a functioning public sphere. However, we must question over whether discussion and debate is appropriate and can occur within this context particularly since, around this period each year, tensions flare and there are instances of violence between communities. The official activities at *Kwibuka* are unlikely to be able to provide a suitable space for such discussions to occur at present. Rather, as I consider next, the arts-based activities at the UAF offer the space for productive and important experiences to be shared. The UAF is, therefore, a key event due to the more nuanced conversations that can take place as the festival but also because of the ways in which the specific focus on Rwanda is broadened out and encompasses wider discussion on violence and discrimination. This enables comment and discussion on a range of global issues, forging networks of solidarity and action.

Global and local publics at the Ubumuntu Arts Festival

Ubumuntu is a Kinyarwanda word meaning ‘being human’. UAF’s central aim resonates with discourses of public space and the transnational public sphere. As the website states, the festival seeks to provide ‘an avenue where people from different walks of life can come together and speak to each other in the language of art’, and has the slogan ‘I am because you are, you are because I am: we are human together’¹⁸. For 2019, the festival aimed to engage with the question ‘what happens when the walls come down?’. More recent iterations have included reflecting on our relationship to the environment in 2020 and, for 2021, exploring the concept of rebirth. UAF was founded in 2015 by Hope Azeda, a prominent Rwandan theatre maker, and is held in the days immediately following *Kwibuka*. The performances I consider in this section are *Generation25*, directed by Azeda, and *Motherwall*, directed by David Cotterrell and written by Ruwanthie de Chickera. UAF is free to attend and takes place each year at the Kigali Genocide Memorial, the site of a mass grave for around 250,000 victims of the genocide as well as a permanent archive and exhibits funded by the Aegis Trust¹⁹. Alongside Rwandan artists, individuals and groups from across the world travel to participate, including from South Africa, the UK, Sri Lanka, Democratic Republic of the Congo, US, Austria and France. The international artists and audiences gathering at the Kigali Genocide Memorial imbue the festival with the sense of Rwanda having some special quality, owing to its tragic history. Further framed by the exhibits at the memorial (and others across the country), and by speeches and articles by politicians such as Blair and Kagame, the atmosphere of the festival is one of learning and sharing, of coming together at a site of unimaginable past violence in order to imagine new futures.

¹⁸ Ubumuntu Arts Festival website, 2019

¹⁹ Kigali Genocide Memorial website, 2019

The festival can be considered an event laden with possibilities, as reflected in an interview with Cotterell. He stated:

I think what's interesting is that those conversations [relating to art and violence] - what you realise is that at place like Ubumuntu is that those kind of conversation are extraordinarily narrow without being a melting pot of disciplines and nations having that conversation.

[...]

In Rwanda there is a very sophisticated very intelligent generation of people who have seen the absolute worst of global politics and societal collapse. Ubumuntu is an interesting place to reflect on nation states, represented by the performers and the audiences [attending].²⁰

Through the festival, Rwanda is both framed as an important context in which to create art that is responsive to legacies of violence of genocide while also being a place that, because of its past, has significance for global conversations about politics and issues such as nationalism and conflict more broadly. This atmosphere was produced and maintained not only due to external factors outside of the festival organisers' control but also because of the kinds of work shown. Broader choices, including a theme song played on loop throughout the festival with the chorus 'show me the way' echoing across the space, and the programme of seminars, workshops and panel discussions that ran alongside the art shown, also frame the festival in this way. Balme (2014) is critical of performances which are one-way and lack a dialogical quality. Instead, he appraises work that allows audiences to take on roles not only as 'aesthetic spectator[s]', but also 'informed listener[s]' through corresponding panel discussions with experts and 'actively involved discussant[s]' through post-show discussions²¹. Although the latter was missing at UAF due to a lack of post-show discussions that might provide the explicit space

²⁰ Interview with David Cotterrell, May 2020

²¹ Balme, 2014, p. 40

for public discourse, a range of workshops and panel discussions created dialogue, debate and engagement that went beyond merely spectating and consuming art.

Azeda directed two pieces entitled *Generation25* for the festival. The piece was originally devised with a Rwandan cast but, consistent with the atmosphere of connectedness and transnationalism, Azeda collaborated with American and British performers to create two new versions for the festival. The piece aimed to capture the different ways in which young people born in 1994 continue to experience the kinds of division in society that might lead to conflict and violence, with the cast addressing the audience and telling us about their specific experiences. At the UAF, engaging with genocide in Rwanda was not only about further understanding its causes and effects, but also how other peoples and places might learn from what took place. The global quality of *Generation25* is further enhanced by the international casts involved. In the collaboration involving US performers, this included a Puerto Rican now living in New York who had experienced discrimination, a Japanese-American whose grandparents had been persecuted by the Japanese government, and the experiences of young Rwandans. My goal here is to unpack what I consider the central aim of the piece - articulated in the lines:

Gaby: We hope you are listening. We must listen, dialogue, witness, remember, respond, otherwise 'never again' will remain 'again and again'.²²

The piece presents an interesting case study in terms of performance in Rwanda 25 years after the genocide. It demonstrates how narratives which audiences are likely more familiar with remain present in such work, while also demonstrating the emergence of new ways of talking about the genocide. These would seem to focus on the experiences and perspectives of a

²² Excerpt from *Generation25*, Azeda, 2019

younger generation. Furthermore, it also shows how performance made by Rwandan practitioners can make important contributions to the transnational public sphere. While *Kwibuka* is an annual event that focuses on the suffering of Tutsis during and after the genocide, it is my suggestion that UAF can open up different kinds of conversations. This is not to directly critique *Kwibuka* - indeed, in a context where millions have directly experienced persecution and mass violence, a period of commemoration and mourning is surely important. The kinds of reflective and nuanced conversations I think UAF can begin to foster could seem insensitive and even inflammatory if positioned within *Kwibuka*. More specifically, *Generation25* was able to critically reflect upon and explore what it means to remember violence. As two Rwandan performers stated:

Yannick: 1994 I remember what I am not supposed to remember, from 7th April to 4th of July, I remember because you told me to.

[...]

Ines: seeing and being seen. Bearing witness.

Yannick: It is to rewrite.²³

This dialogue is indicative of the performative nature of remembrance in Rwanda and the complex relationship between wishing to forget traumatic pasts and a necessity to remember and recognise suffering. *Generation25* provided a stage for global publics to witness testimonies relating to genocide and violence and, as suggested in the lines quoted above, enables a process of ‘rewriting’ such pasts. In one sense, this might be considered problematic and open to abuse or revisionism. However, it is my view that rather than *revising* the past, what is taking place is a *reconsideration* of the past, from a safer distance, through previously unheard or silenced voices. In terms of the Rwandan context, this was most clearly attained in

²³ Ibid.

relation to how legacies of genocide have impacted the children of Hutus. Whereas Baldwin (2019) argues *Kwibuka* remains the only public event in which such discussions can be had, this is limited to the use of the terms ‘Hutu’ and ‘Tutsi’ as signifiers of ‘perpetrator’ and ‘victim’. The UAF now offers another mode of engaging in such issues. In *Generation25* this issue was reflected on most clearly in two moments. First, in a rap it was stated that the performer was still ‘among those called *Interahamwe*’ (Azeda, 2019) - a Kinyarwanda word meaning ‘those who work together’ and the name for the paramilitary, rooted in ‘Hutu Power’ ideology, which carried out many of the killings during the genocide. These lines express the reality that, despite policies and programs such as *Ndi Umunyarwanda* (meaning ‘I am Rwandan), which aim to unite Rwandans around a single concept of national identity, divisions and discrimination linked to genocide still exist. For example, research shows those born during or after genocide, and who therefore could not have participated in it, experience persecution and fear of persecution because of their perceived ethnic identity (Baldwin, 2019). Therefore, the term *Interahamwe* continues to be used as a label for those who had not part in genocide but are identified as Hutu, or having Hutu ancestors. Second, the piece could foster conversations which are important and productive. For example, towards the end of the piece a performer addressed the audience in French (translated below into English), saying:

Yannick: We do not choose to be born ‘Hutu’ – it is forced on us. Life and society give us that title, we never wanted it. We are not like them but their blood runs through our veins and their crimes weigh heavy on our shoulders.

[...]

You might be thinking where the other children of the ‘Hutu’ are? And why I am not telling their stories? It is because, in your story you say *we* survived – that *they* [referring to Hutu parents] killed them. So, what happens to their children?

Who cares?

Our parents were killers, we learned from this story. We are silent because, after all, who cares?²⁴

This acknowledgement highlights the ongoing nuances of legacies of genocide, demonstrating that despite the ‘one Rwanda’ narrative such legacies are differently inflected and dependent on the identities of those in question. This piece offers a starting point for such conversations that is potentially productive. Although it stops short of the acknowledgement of Hutu suffering Straus (2019) argues is important, the piece gestures towards the struggles faced by those who are children of Hutus. In so doing, the festival momentarily became a space where the strict confines of only talking about Tutsi suffering were navigated. By extension, if we begin to care and talk more about this issue, we may move towards the more complicated kinds of conversations MSF have argued are important²⁵.

The piece, I would argue, therefore indicates new uses of performance that might catalyse new discussions among audiences. Breed provides an account of her creative work with a group of participants at an *Ingando*, or civic re-education camp, using theatre. She details how their ‘embodied “Hutuness”’²⁶ began to emerge through the performance of particular songs. Such embodied portrayals of identity seemed lacking from *Generation25* but what the piece also shows is that new ways of grappling with genocide and identities are emerging that are in contrast to the repression Breed encountered. While too early to tell, it could be that a new generation of Rwandans have had the time, and are sufficiently distanced from the violence of

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Straus, 2019

²⁶ Breed, 2014, p. 58

genocide, to construct new ways of being. As one Rwandan performer in the piece proposed, we could consider those born since 1994 ‘the post-memorial’ generation:

There’s a part of the piece which is about commemoration [...] we remember people who have passed - we don’t know what they look, sound, or smell like, but we remember and that to us is commemoration. Then there’s this other part where we are speaking for us. This is our generation. So it’s part commemoration, a bit of a manifesto to the future, it’s a little bit of us deciding and taking decisions or even just asking the right questions - questions we don’t have answers to yet, but we are hoping the if we ask them now it might allow us to start a debate or a conversation.²⁷

Generation25 therefore carefully navigated silences around Hutu victimhood and offered a space for future conversations around identity in Rwanda which must, in some ways, engage with ethnicity and identity despite these terms being banned. In considering the contribution performance and the UAF can make to the public sphere, we should bear in mind Reinelt’s (2011) assertion that this takes time, and that performance can lay the groundwork for future dialogue. The UAF therefore has a key role to play which is distinct from *Kwibuka*, where such conversations seem impossible.

The piece balanced the impacts of genocide on young people such as Yannick with the experiences of Tutsi victims of genocide and their children. Regarding the latter, victims of genocide were presented not only through the text but also the scenographic choices made. For example, a brief and deconstructed narrative of a young child whose Tutsi mother is murdered by Hutus is presented. Although we also hear about how she is given to a Hutu neighbour by her mother, who cares for her despite the rest of the family calling her *inzoka* (meaning ‘serpent’). At one point, old clothes were gradually hung across the stage (see figure 1) which

²⁷ Interview with a cast member, anonymized, May 2020

began to resemble exhibits of victims' clothes hanging in a rooms at genocide memorials such as that at Murambi, once a school where over 40,000 Tutsis fleeing violence during the genocide were murdered after a bishop lied and told them they would be safe there.



Figure 1. Clothes hanging across the stage, resembling an exhibit at Murambi Genocide Memorial. Photo: George Kamau and Daniel Ecwalu.

Operating as a mnemonic device, this image draws our attention to killings that took place at sites such as Murambi, framing the performance in terms of a notorious, and shocking, example of Hutu violence against Tutsis. It is the careful balancing of such imagery alongside acknowledging how Hutus also helped Tutsis, and that discrimination is experienced by some owing to them being perceived as Hutu, which enables the piece to resist the Hutu/perpetrator, Tusti/victim binary some argue is present in other work²⁸. In line with Straus' (2019) argument, the piece raises the possibilities of mutual suffering across a range of global contexts and, I would argue, begins to move forward conversations around legacies of violence.

²⁸ Baldwin, 2019

Alongside emerging ways of engaging with narratives of genocide, the piece also clearly demonstrates the kind of global connectedness the festival aspires to. At the start of the performance, the chorus of Rwandan and American young actors addressed the audience in English and French, reeling off statistics which drew our attention to past and, in some cases present, contexts of violence:

- The Khmer Rouge, 1.8 million killed
 - Arménie, Plus de 1.5 million
 - Bosnia and Serbia 31,000 deaths
 - In Brazil 87 of 230 Indigenous tribes extinct
 - Burundi en 2015 des centaines de personnes ont été tuées
 - 17% of Poland's population during World War II
 - Ukrainians by the Soviet Regime 7,510,000.
 - 50% of Cambodian Chinese and Cham,
 - 40% of Cambodian Lao and Thai, 100% of Cambodia Viets,
 - Armenian Genocide 1,800,000
 - The Herero Genocide, close to 1 million people.
 - The Holocaust, around 6 million massacred
 - 336,000 Tutsi fled Rwanda
 - More than 1 million Tutsi massacred
 - The Indonesian Genocide, death toll 3,000,000
 - Nagasaki and Hiroshima 202,118... and counting
 - Myanmar 2017 to the present.
 - Darfur, Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile...
 - ...in the present
 - Roughly 30,000 refugees in ICE detention camps in the USA, today
- [...]
- The Sudan.
- [...]
- Genocide of Yazidis by ISIL in northern Iraq and Syria
 - ...in the present.
 - I lost the love of my life,
 - My brother
 - My mentor.
 - Maybe, in our lifetime, we will see the last bullet fired.²⁹

²⁹ Excerpt from *Generation25*, Azeda, 2019

The direct links made to such global examples clearly demonstrate the ongoing urgency of reflecting upon, addressing, and preventing, violence. Invoking events in the past, as well as ongoing examples of violence, serves as an important reminder that humanity fails to learn from examples of large-scale and tragic violence. Indeed, some of the examples mentioned - whether past events such as the genocide of the Herero in Namibia or the ongoing violence faced by Rohingya in Myanmar - remain relatively under-represented by wider society. Building a transnational sphere, in which such contexts of violence and suffering can be discussed and, perhaps by extension acted upon, is important. However, this opening text does not meet with calls, such as that from MSF, to acknowledge both the victims of the Rwandan genocide and instances of violence since³⁰. Moreover, what remains unsaid is the impact of continued violence since 1994, particularly problematic given the piece dealt with the experiences of a generation born during and after genocide. While Kigali appears a clean and calm city, outside of the capital and beyond the Rwandan borders accusations have been levelled at the RPF of continued violence, which surely form part of the legacy of genocide, and yet are silenced. Or, to return to Kinyarwanda terminology - would seem to present an example of *gutwama*. Questions must therefore remain about whether *gutwama* in terms of other examples of violence jeopardises or belittles an aspiration for the UAF to become a place in which those from multiple contexts and places can reflect, through art, on the issues we face. In terms of the audiences attending the festival, such absence also results in the exclusion of other experiences and perspectives from being discussed in this space. The result is that contentious questions and issues in Rwanda are side-stepped, through the consideration of Hutu suffering, carefully framed, represents a step towards a wide-ranging discussion that moves beyond commemoration and towards young people considering how these legacies impact them, now.

³⁰ Straus, 2019

To further consider performance, the UAF and the transnational public sphere I now consider *Mother Wall*, an output of the Empathy & Risk project. This project is supported by Sheffield Hallam University, UK and was ‘born out of a conviction that artists’ perspectives have an important role to play in the framing of international, national and institutional responses to threat and conflict’³¹. The piece used voice-over, projected words and images and silent actors on stage, who repeated simple movements, to tell the story of a wall that was built between two groups, separating a mother from her son. Given the geographical setting of the festival, even where genocide is not specifically addressed on stage, we are aware of its presence. Exhibits at the Kigali Genocide Memorial provide examples of how families were divided by genocide. Often, others could be deemed Hutu yet their children Tutsis, and therefore murdered. In addition to the ways Rwanda is presented on the global stage, my perceptions of what was taking place, and how I read performances at the festival, were shaped by the information and exhibits I had been able to access and I therefore linked the piece to what I had heard of the *Interahamwe* and the ways in which communities and families were divided, often simply on the basis of physical attributes which were considered to make them look Tutsi.

³¹ Empathy & Risk project website, 2019



Figure 2. *Mother Wall*, a collaboration between UK and Sri Lankan artists being performed at the National Genocide Memorial in Kigali, Rwanda. Image: Bobby Smith.

Particularly striking was the projection of the words ‘silence’ and ‘dignity’ against a concrete wall, where festival attendees had also written words such as ‘unite’, ‘peace’ and ‘learn’ in chalk (see figure 2). The projection of these words transported me back to my encounter with silence at *Kwibuka25*, sparking a reflection that perhaps what I had experienced had something to do with respect and dignity. When considered against the broader context of the festival, with the atmosphere of hope and its framing as a transnational space where multiple individuals from different places come together, speak, listen and learn, feelings such as respect and dignity become powerful and evocative concepts that further cast Rwanda as a unique and special place, despite its horrific past. To an extent, Rwanda’s apparent recovery from genocide may also be taken as a sign that it has moved beyond the risks and challenges other places may face in terms of division and violence. As Cotterrell stated:

In some ways the wall [in *Mother Wall*] was reflecting on something of an international trend that was happening of isolation, defensive measures, nationalism and parochialism. In many ways, Rwanda is one of the countries which is least implicated by this. It just felt like a healthy place where there could be an intelligent conversation about that.³²

Gathering at the UAF therefore moves beyond attempting to unpick Rwanda's history, or to contribute towards reconciliation in the country. Rather, it might be that it becomes a space where we are simultaneously reminded of our own proximity to death, violence and division and that we can all too easily find ourselves in contexts of tyranny and violence. To be clear, traveling across Rwanda it is hard not to be moved by the ways in which communities seem to have healed, the many memorials that mark the violence of 1994, and taken aback by both the beauty of the country's landscape and the clean, orderly streets of Kigali. The impression is certainly that Rwanda has grappled with its past, but we must remain mindful that despite it seeming like a place that signifies hope, recovery, and peace such representations can silence more critical conversation. This is significant since some have argued that if it remains difficult to speak about violence and politics more freely, resentment and future violence may result. The conflation of 'silence' with 'dignity' clashes with arguments highlighting repressive attitudes towards freedom of expression and accusations that the representation of Rwanda as a place of hope serve those in power³³.

What this reveals is that the festival operates to both maintain certain silences while also opening up reflections and conversations which, at the national level are more nuanced than at some other events and, at the global level, can create links and ties between other experiences of violence. Such conversations are framed by the representations of Rwanda as a place of hope and learning. This is productive in terms of the transnational connections this

³² Interview with Cotterrell, May 2020

³³ Edmondson, 2018

fosters, and our attention to legacies of violence and the prevention of future violence. The size of the audience was small - not much more than a few hundred - yet it was also extremely mixed. I met Rwandans, Americans, Kenyans, Europeans, Congolese and the artists presenting work were similarly diverse. Whereas *Kwibuka* is an event with a large national audience which reaches global audiences through snippets of media coverage, the UAF therefore reaches a progressive set of artists and audiences, many of whom seemed committed to peace and the importance of networks of global solidarity in an increasingly polarised world. However, as suggested earlier, causes of silence may blur, with the distinctions between *bucecece*, *gutuzza* and *gutwama* remaining difficult to ascertain. Indeed, what might be read as ‘calm’ or dignified may instead be symptomatic of a wider context of repression and control. Seeking to speak directly about the wider context in which the performance was taking place was highlighted as difficult, or perhaps impossible, during the interview with Cotterrell for several reasons. First, he considered that it may be ‘too soon’ to challenge narratives of ‘one Rwanda’ or Rwandicity or to directly address legacies of guilt and blame through performance. As he stated, ‘as outsiders we don’t have the right to state that for people’³⁴. This sensitivity around what global publics can comment upon also extended into Cotterrell’s response when I asked him about accusations of government-led violence in Rwanda and neighbouring countries. He responded that talking about such issues was an impossibility at the festival, primarily due to his earlier identification of ‘not having the right’ to talk about such issues. Moreover, it was felt that discussion about legacies of violence and conflict could only be couched in one’s own experiences. For Cotterrell, this meant relating the work back to growing up during the Cold War and having connections to Eastern Europe. Such experiences of division and conflict could represent shared points of understanding and reference, which might enable people from differences

³⁴ Interview with Cotterrell, May 2020

to come together, find common ground, and to discuss the broader issues of violence and conflict.

The UAF simultaneously offers an effective, yet flawed, space for transnational discussion and sharing. It is particularly effective since global publics gathering at the UAF subverts unequal power dynamics, providing a platform whereby globally significant art and political speech can be shared in the global South. The artists presenting work and the panels curated thus decentred the global North, with challenges related to conflict and violence highlighted as globally important and mutually challenging. However, it has been argued that the specific national context in Rwanda, heavily shaped by ongoing concerns with genocide, identity and violence, permeates art and public space in the country. The wider socio-political context, presented as controlling and silencing certain views and perspectives, means that the conditions of freedom and equality that are necessary for the public sphere to thrive are somewhat limited³⁵.

Conclusion

At the events I have considered, it is clear that not all that needs to be said can be said. From my own positionality, I would also argue that participating in these events as an ‘outsider’ meant I was not able to perceive gaps or silences. ‘Outsiders’ like me miss nuanced cultural cues and may lack the language skills necessary to fully understand what is being represented, or to pick up on more subtle experiences and perspectives that cannot be so explicitly expressed. If we are to consider the ways in which festivals such as the UAF, and the performances and events they comprise, can contribute to the transnational public sphere we must pay attention to the complex political terrain in which such events take place. To miss this is

³⁵ Mgbako, 2005

particularly concerning, since the result is that artists and audiences become imbricated in the kinds of narratives of which Edmondson (2018) has been critical. That is to say, it is easy to be seduced by global representations of Rwanda as a beacon of hope. However, openly reflecting on such complications is extremely difficult and there is a need to balance open critique with the possibilities for repercussions for artists who are working in challenging contexts.

Regardless, the UAF also demonstrates the possibility to present new and emerging ways of engaging with violence and identity, and to forge networks of connectedness and solidarity which are surely important. The article should not, therefore, be read as a rejection of the UAF or similar international arts events. Whereas Reinelt argues performance is now part of civil society, and that ‘direct political efficacy is practically impossible within state-supported and subsidised theatres as well as within international art events [and] festivals’³⁶ I would argue that a point she later goes on to make, in the same article, is important to bear in mind here. She points out that performance can lay the groundwork for slow and gradual shifts in public opinion. With *Generation25* and *Motherwall* taken into consideration, I would argue that not only are more nuanced conversations beginning to emerge here, but that global connectedness has an important contribution to make. These are reason enough to argue for the efficacy and importance of the UAF. It offers a space for emerging conversations and a global site for artists and audiences to connect and reflect on challenges we all face and, importantly, positions a country in the global South as a meeting point for such work to take place.

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³⁶ Reinelt, 2011, p. 21

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Abstract: This article considers the relationship between performance and the transnational public sphere, understood as a space in which a range of international actors come together to discuss, debate and advance ideas on topics which are mutually important. It suggests that performance in Rwanda has an important role in terms of reflecting, and facilitating, emerging conversations around the legacies of violence. As evidenced by the Ubumuntu Arts Festival, held annually in Kigali, it is not only at the national level that these conversations are significant. Global publics, including artists, audiences and researchers are all travelling to Rwanda to participate in events which have broader, international, significance.

Keywords: Rwanda, transnational public sphere, performance

Performance et 'Transnational Public Sphere' au Rwanda : Une reconte ethnographique avec le silence

Résumé : Cet article examine la relation entre la performance et la 'transnational public sphere', comprise comme un espace dans lequel un éventail d'acteurs internationaux se réunissent pour discuter, débattre et faire avancer des idées sur des sujets d'importance mutuelle. Cela suggère que la performance au Rwanda a un rôle important en termes de réflexion

et de facilitation des conversations émergentes autour des séquelles de la violence. Comme en témoigne le Festival des Arts Ubumuntu, qui se tient chaque année à Kigali, ce n'est pas seulement au niveau national que ces conversations sont significatives. Des publics mondiaux, y compris des artistes, des publics et des chercheurs, se rendent tous au Rwanda pour participer à des événements qui ont une portée internationale plus large.

Mots-clefs: Rwanda; transnational public sphere; performance