

Critical Essay

Post-Genocide Rwanda: Arts as Healing Practice

by Faith Hart

The Rwandan Genocide of 1994 is inarguably one of the most atrocious and destructive conflicts in recent history. The devastation of the genocide was unfathomable: in only 100 bloody days, ten-percent of Rwanda's population of 7.7 million was massacred, national infrastructure was dismantled, and more than four-million people were displaced (Chu). Despite the genocide's quick time frame, the effects of its atrocity are lasting and deeply ingrained in the Rwandan people's cultural consciousness and physical bodies. In the aftermath of this horror, victims and survivors were left with the task of navigating the looming questions of healing and reconciliation: was it possible? What would it look like? Peace efforts in post-genocide Rwanda exemplify what those who have experienced trauma have always known: the horror of atrocity consumes every part of a survivor's life and healing is not a simple process. Some of the healing and reconciliation practices most effective in addressing this complexity in Rwanda have been facilitated by artists. Analyzing the legacy of art-based healing and reconciliation methods in post-genocide Rwanda gives insight not only to the powerful ways individuals and societies can respond to horrific violence and trauma, but to potential practices that can aid in preventing further atrocities.

In 1994, during a civil war between Rwanda's majority Hutu government and Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front, Hutu conspirators shot down a plane carrying Rwanda's Hutu president Juvenal Habyarimana with a plan to frame the Tutsis for the attack (Tack). Though horrifying on its own, this act of violence was not self-contained. In fact, Hutu leaders used the assassination they committed as justification for enacting a premeditated genocide on the Tutsi people that would explode the nation in violence and horror. In an interview conducted by Bob Simon, survivor Immaculee Ilibagiza recalls the first time she witnessed the violence of the Hutus, when someone

came into in her village and cut another person with a machete. She then realized that the scream of that first victim was only the beginning of the screams that would fill the Rwandan sky (Simon). Immaculee Illibagiza's memory of the scream still echoes today, as the blood of the Rwandan genocide has still not been washed completely clean. Operating outside of a "forgive and forget" mindset is critical in Rwanda because the memory of the genocide is still fresh. This establishes a powerful opportunity for artists to not only work to heal and reconcile the living, but to honor and remember those who were lost.

The arts are a field with a lot of potential for peace and justice work, because art can acknowledge the amorphous nature of trauma through its own fluidity of form and practice. Art has the ability to spur critical analysis, discussion, emotional breakthrough, communication, release, and rejuvenation of the physical body. Many community leaders approach trauma from an artistic perspective, exploring the benefits creative expression can have for those engaging in both individual and collective healing processes. In addition to being practical on many levels, the arts also hold an invaluable potential for joy and beauty that many other conflict resolution strategies do not necessarily prioritize or make possible. Therefore, arts-based healing practices are a critical component of any robust, holistic strategy for peace both for individuals and larger communities.

Valerie Chu is an American art therapist who has dedicated her career to using her artistic practice to assist individuals in overcoming anxiety, trauma, and grief. In her article "Within the Box: Cross-Cultural Art Therapy With Survivors of the Rwandan Genocide", she writes that Rwandans "bear not only the indelible physical marks on their bodies, but also deep psychological scars from being confronted with horrific trauma, continued poverty and deprivation, and high unemployment

and infant mortality.” Dr. Chu clearly names the continuous effect of the genocide: trauma.

Acknowledging trauma is the first step in a process of forgiveness and reconciliation. Though there is no all-encompassing methodology for resolving conflict, each member harmed must begin an individual healing process before interpersonal healing or togetherness can begin. For those living in the aftermath of brutal conflicts like the genocide in Rwanda, the trauma is inescapable.

In situations of atrocity where pain can become too grave to speak or previous platforms for sharing and community have been hijacked, the sharing of truth becomes critical work. Understanding what harm has occurred and what the effects of it are is the backbone of moving forward in a forgiveness and reconciliation process. Théogène Niwenshuti is a Rwandan artist who exemplifies the power of truth-seeking and truth-sharing in his artistic healing practice, which consists of dance, poetry, drama, and storytelling. A teenager in 1994, Théogène Niwenshuti was spared in a massacre against the hospital where he and members of his village were hiding. There, he watched as everyone he knew was murdered in cold blood. In an interview with Denise Slabbert, Niwenshuti rejects the silence of fear and pain, stating that “to be silent would be a betrayal of the memory of the people who lost their lives— parents, friends, neighbours, [his] whole nation and the whole of Africa.” Niwenshuti’s artistry is concerned with breaking the cycle of intergenerational trauma, because he believes that “psychological trauma is one of the factors that might fuel other atrocities and probably lead to further genocides” (Slabbert). Niwenshuti addresses this cycle both within himself and others by making and sharing original performance that tells the stories of those lost in the Rwandan genocide and navigates the complex emotional experience of being a survivor. He shares that his work is a daily choice to “live in a way that is transformative, peaceful and healing” (Slabbert). This illuminates the way that

individual healing and peacefulness can be a preventative, revolutionary act of nonviolence and community building. Well-equipped by his own healing practice, Niwenshuti creates opportunity for the reconciliation of others.

In the late 2000s, Niwenshuti began a dance group comprised of the children of both perpetrators and survivors. The dance group became a model for community-engaged reconciliation practices that not only confront the grim realities of the genocide and navigate difference, but provide space for joyous togetherness. And this joy is critical. Adrienne Maree Brown, author of *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*, writes that spaces of liberation are “one of the ways we actually create abundant justice, to understand that there is enough attention, care, resource, and connection for all of us to access belonging...” In accordance with Brown’s philosophy of pleasure as transformative justice, Niwenshuti found that dancing allowed the children to confront trauma and difficult emotions through physical release (Slabbert). Countless studies on healing indicate that people hold their traumas in the body, so it’s critical that reconciliation processes acknowledge and liberate the body. As Niwenshuti’s work exemplifies, the creative work of dance and song can release what cannot be simply put into words and “help us make sense of senseless stuff” (Slabbert). Niwenshuti described the participants of his group by stating that “dance energised their bodies and provided a release from negative tensions. They seemed to feel less fear, had gained confidence, and had experienced increased self-esteem, trust, and a sense of usefulness to each other and society” (Slabbert). Niwenshuti’s artistic practice has experienced this massive success because of its ability to not only facilitate healing in the bodies of Hutu and Tutsi descendants, but to put these bodies in a room together— to experience peace, communication, awareness, and empathy.

Art therapist Dr. Valerie Chu's work in post-genocide Rwanda was specifically focused around fostering artistic expression in children and youth survivors, a community with a complex set of needs for healing and reconciliation. For those who grew up amid the civil war and genocide in Rwanda, experiencing violence was a formative tenant of establishing personal identity and understanding the world. Children affected by such violence often accept both inhumane tactics and attitudes towards the perceived "enemy" as normal. Thus, Dr. Chu's work was not only in addressing the pain and post-traumatic stress resultant of the Rwandan genocide, but in offering a new, more peaceful alternative reality. In 2006, Susanne Schaal and Thomas Elbert conducted a study on young orphans in Rwanda and found that ninety-seven percent of sampled Kigali orphans had seen dead or mutilated bodies, over eighty-percent had witnessed another person be injured with a weapon, and eighty-eight percent had to hide during the genocide, primarily under dead bodies (Schaal and Thomas 99). Chu's work addresses the graphically visual nature of the trauma resulting from the Rwandan genocide, writing, "Because traumatic memories are often stored in the mind in the form of imagery, creating images through engaging in art therapy can be effective in reducing symptoms of posttraumatic stress" (Chu 5). By equipping traumatized youth with a positive, encouraging environment and art materials, Chu fostered the kind of truth-seeking Théogène Niwenshuti was leading at the same time— expressing the unspeakable.

Chu's study also found that using art as a healing practice allowed participants to garner new understanding of their histories and reintegrate the knowledge into their everyday life experiences. This work demonstrates the way that an artistic practice can educate and empower the victims of trauma, especially within a collective space where participants are exposed to the stories and truths of

other victims. One of the major components of a successful forgiveness and reconciliation process is reimagining and reclaiming narratives. Chu's artistic reconciliation work accomplishes this step by emboldening victims of violence and providing alternative, nonviolent coping methods for those previously compliant with violent histories. Additionally, Dr. Chu's work flipped the self-narratives of youth participants, because the tactile experience of creation allowed them to identify personal strengths and garner a new sense of control, out of prior feelings of powerlessness (6).

The Rwandan genocide is an example of a war conflict that was not contained to specific sectors or fixed areas. Instead, Hutu militias were ordered to kill Tutsi people wherever they could find them— in the street, in schools, in their homes. Violence had no bounds, as dead bodies and blood littered streets and buildings throughout Rwanda. What results from such a boundless, widespread atrocity is a physical environment plagued by traumatic memories of death, murder, and fear. Healing spaces is not as simple as merely cleaning them up or covering up the damage that has occurred but about acknowledging harm, cultivating reconciliation, and providing a sense of newness. It's easily understandable that if a space is still marked by pain and violence, the people who operate within it may find their own healing processes hindered.

Barefoot Artists is a non-profit organization that works to build community through art, learning, land transformation, and economic development throughout the world, with a specific project in Rwanda called the Rwanda Healing Project that ran from 2004-2014. Lily Yeh, the founder and director of Barefoot Artists, travelled to Rwanda in 2004 and met with Jean Bosco Musana Rurikande, who was the regional coordinator of the Rwanda Red Cross in Gisenyi. Musana showed Yeh a mass grave in his village that contained the remains of genocide victims, which was a dilapidated,

shabby structure urgently in need of repair. Yeh then shaped the project around the need to construct a Rugerero Genocide Memorial and to repair the survivors' village. Yeh writes, "How could people heal when their loved ones were buried in such a place? A survivor told me, 'Every time I passed there my heart broke. It was like killing us twice.'" The Rwanda Healing Project focused on collaborating with Rwandans to integrate beauty into the physical spaces affected by the genocide as a form of reclamation and reconciliation with the land. Its result was a beautiful memorial decorated with vibrant colors, intricate mosaics, and commemorative messages, such as "We will never forget" and "You died like heroes. We will never forget how you died" (Yeh). Yeh references the appropriate power of making mosaics in reconciling the grief and trauma of the Rwandan community, piecing what was once broken and divided into an entirely new, beautiful whole. The value of art-making is two-fold: process and product. Both of these components were valuable and healing, as the physical process of creating a new space was transformative in forging relationships and community for the Rwandan people involved. The final product of the Rwanda Healing Project is a permanent continuation of this reconciled community, exemplifying how artistry and cultivation of beauty can benefit a grieving community. On April 7, 2009, the national day of mourning in Rwanda, crowds of thousands travelled miles by foot in a procession to the memorial to gather in a space of honor, beauty, and dignity that was not possible before (Yeh).

Artistic approaches to healing and reconciliation in cultures responding to atrocity and violence can provide opportunities for people to acknowledge and reduce harm, build community, and flip narratives. However, it's critical to acknowledge that while reconciliation and healing practices transform victims' understandings of themselves and the past, they should not erase the past or

diminish its severity. Remembrance is critical work, both to honor those who have been lost to violence and to prevent the same situations from occurring again. Fostering remembrance is an active choice, which can occur through any practice that is ongoingly engaging with the difficult subject matter of violence and genocide. As demonstrated by many different artistic frameworks centered around truth and reconciliation in post-genocide Rwanda, the process of creating artistic and expressive work can be deeply healing in itself, as it can build community, boost self-esteem, make sense of the senseless, release tension from the body, and offer a sense of purpose. However, the benefits using art-making as an act of remembrance do not end when the creation process is over. The final product of a creative process, or the creation, is valuable in itself. To view a painting or a performance — or read a poem or a short story, listen to a song, encounter a tapestry — that deals with the Rwandan genocide is a way of making alive again the people who were lost at the hand of violence. It is a way of opening oneself to the collective unconscious of a culture and taking time to honor their pain, joy, love, and dignity. To experience art is to re-engage with the past and to ask oneself what its implications are for the future. The arts offer a valuable tool in this work of remembrance, as they can be used to form a catalog of people's experiences throughout history. In this greater catalog of artworks throughout time, patterns emerge. They offer warnings, lessons, and deep wisdom worth acknowledging. This larger tapestry of human history begs its viewers not to make the same mistakes those who came before them did. As one looks upon the collection of artwork— memorials, dances, songs, paintings, sculptures, poems, and more — made in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide, the lessons needed to hope for a world without genocide become clear. And in the silence of the past, art makes it possible to hear the voices of all who were lost in the tenuous journey to peace.

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