

**The Power to Name: Narrative Governance, Memory Regimes, and the Afterlives
of Genocide in Rwanda**

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Abstract

This paper argues that genocide is not only the result of physical extermination but built through the symbolic architectures that precede and follow mass violence. Bringing together genocide studies, decolonial theory, and social psychology, the paper suggests a decolonial psychology of memory to examine how narrative, discourse, and symbolic power structure both the conditions of possibility for genocide and the governance of life afterward. Drawing on Rwanda as a primary case and carefully compare specific structures to the Holocaust and Palestine, the analysis demonstrates how coloniality, state-backed memory regimes, and narrative control produce moral hierarchies, legitimize exceptional violence, and delimit what forms of grief, history, and identity are permitted to exist publicly.

Using Connerton's (1989) modes of remembering, Assmann's (1995) distinction between communicative and cultural memory, Alexander's theory of cultural trauma, Bourdieu's symbolic power, van Dijk's critical discourse analysis, Staub's model of escalation, Rothberg's multidirectional memory, Trouillot's (1995) concept of silencing, Mignolo's coloniality of power, and decolonial thinkers such as Simpson and Battiste, the paper maps the narrative infrastructures that prepared Rwandan publics for genocide and the post-genocide memory governance that regulates reconciliation, justice, and national identity. Testimonies, public records, and survivor narratives provide grounded illustrations of how individuals experience these symbolic systems in embodied ways.

The paper contends that memory and narrative are not passive, they are a domain of power that can either perpetuate harm or open pathways to repair. A survivor-centered, plural, decolonial memory practice is proposed as essential to prevention and non-recurrence. In this context, the paper reframes genocide as a process inseparable from narrative: the power to name, the power to erase, and the power to imagine otherwise.

Introduction

Genocide is often approached as the result of extraordinary violence, a momentary collapse of moral and political order. Yet as scholars such as Jones (2016) and Staub (1989) insist, genocide is not the sudden failure of a system, it is a system itself. It is prepared discursively, normalized symbolically, administered bureaucratically, and only then executed physically. What this suggests is that the preconditions for genocide reside not merely in weapons, the military, or state capacity, but also in the narrative, and psychological and epistemic infrastructures that define who is human, whose suffering matters, and what forms of violence seems necessary, defensive, or inevitable.

This paper argues that genocide must be theorized as a memory event: not because memory comes after violence, but because memory (its construction, distortion, circulation, and silencing) is what makes violence thinkable in the first place. As Trouillot (1995) demonstrates, the power to produce history is inseparable from the power to erase it. Connerton's (1989) analysis of how societies remember shows that rituals, commemorations, and official narratives naturalize regimes of meaning that shape moral perception. Assmann (1995) says that long-duration cultural memory becomes a

stabilizing force that fixes identities and hierarchies across generations. Bourdieu (1991) reminds us that symbolic power operates by making such classifications appear evident. Mignolo and Quijano add that these epistemic hierarchies are not accidental but rooted in coloniality, because it still ranks lives, knowledges, and peoples.

In the context of Rwanda, these dynamics were catastrophic. The genocide against the Tutsi in 1994 did not emerge spontaneously; it was the culmination of decades of narrative engineering: colonial racial inventions that devided; state propaganda portraying Tutsi as “threats”; the construction of a chosen trauma around Hutu victimhood; and the spreading of hatred through institutions, schooling, political speeches, and especially radio broadcasts. Public records, including the Hutu Ten Commandments, RTLM scripts, and political speeches, show how narrative frames of purity, betrayal, contamination, and sacred threat structured the moral exclusion that enabled ordinary people to participate in extraordinary violence.

If narrative and symbolic power structure the conditions for genocide, they also shape what comes after. Post-genocide Rwanda offers one of the world’s most complete information of memory governance: national memorials, annual commemorations, a state-directed unity narrative, gacaca courts as juridical-ritual memory sites, school curricula, and legal restrictions on genocide ideology. These institutional practices do more than organize grief, they regulate citizenship, legitimate history, and delimit what stories may be told. As Olick (2007) states, memory regimes are forms of governance; they produce subjects and manage political temporality. As Rothberg (2009) shows,

memories do not exist in isolation but entangle with other histories, opening possibilities for solidarity or competition.

The central question of this paper is to know how do narrative and memory regimes, shaped by colonial and symbolic power, construct the moral and political conditions for genocide, and with what consequences for life afterward?

To answer this, the paper study three specific areas: (1) A pre-genocide analysis of narrative and symbolic power through archives, RTLM materials, and testimonies, it maps how racialization, chosen traumas, “accusation in a mirror,” and moral boundary-making prepared Rwandans for mass participation. Drawing on van Dijk’s critical discourse analysis (1993), it shows how discourse, power, and cognition interacted to produce a moral universe in which killing appeared self-defensive, necessary, and patriotic. Then, (2) a post-genocide analysis of memory governance by examining *gacaca* as an example of juridical memory ritual; national memorials as sites of both recognition and narrative control; school curricula as tools of symbolic power; and the unity narrative as a mechanism that both stabilizes peace and plural memory. Survivor testimonies illustrate how lived memory exceeds official frames. Brison’s (2002) work on testimonial repair shows why narrative ownership is crucial for reconstructing the self after violence. And finally (3) it offers a decolonial psychology of memory as an original theoretical contribution by building on Quijano, Mignolo, Simpson, Battiste, and Indigenous trauma theorists, it propose a framework that integrates memory studies, social identity theory, trauma psychology, and decolonial epistemology. This framework argues that memory is a site of both symbolic violence and potential resurgence. Survivor-led, plural, community-

rooted memory practices, rather than state-monopolized narratives, offer the most credible path toward repair and non-recurrence.

This approach also clarifies why comparative references to the Holocaust and Palestine must be handled with intellectual precision. The Holocaust provides a foundational template for understanding cultural trauma (Alexander 2004) and memorial ethics (Young 1993), yet its universalization has sometimes obscured other genocides. Meanwhile, the struggle over Nakba memory in Palestine, well documented in Finkelstein's forensic critique of Israel's violence in Gaza, illustrates how the suppression of a people's narrative functions as an ongoing technology of domination. These comparisons are not analogies but parts of memory politics that illuminate how power governs what may be remembered.

Thesis

Genocide unfolds through a politics of memory: before genocide, narrative and symbolic power construct the epistemic and moral conditions that make exterminatory violence imaginable; after genocide, memory regimes govern survivors' lives, delimit political possibilities, and shape the terms of justice, repair, and national identity. A decolonial psychology of memory reveals that only survivor-centered, plural, counter-symbolic practices can intervene in these cycles and contribute to genuine prevention.

Theoretical Framework

To understand that genocide is also narrative and memory process, we must examine how societies construct meaning, organize moral structures, and distribute symbolic authority before violence occurs. This study reviews memory studies, discourse analysis, symbolic power, trauma theory, social identity, and decolonial thinking to show how narrative regimes prepare the ground for genocide and shape its aftermath. Together, these frameworks illustrate that genocide is fundamentally a struggle over memory, narrative, and epistemic control.

Memory as a Social and Political Infrastructure

Genocidal acts depend on memory, not only on what is remembered, but on how societies assign meaning to the past, what is silenced, and which narratives become authoritative. Maurice Halbwachs's establishes that memory is socially framed (1992) help to understand this statement: individuals recall the past through the categories and narratives available to them. In Rwanda, the colonial racial schema of Hutu and Tutsi, institutionalized through Belgian administration, reorganized how communities remembered themselves, retroactively producing a myth of fixed ethnic difference.

Aleida Assmann's (1995) distinction between communicative and cultural memory helps clarify how these constructed identities became durable. Communicative memories of colonial favoritism or past violence circulated through interpersonal stories, while cultural memory like school curricula, state propaganda, and political rituals stabilized

these narratives across generations. Cultural memory thus becomes a moral compass, shaping what threats appear plausible, what grievances seem justified, and who is imagined as a potential enemy.

Paul Connerton's (1989) emphasis on embodied memory extends this analysis by showing that memory lives not only in discourse but in ritual. Pre-genocide political rallies, community work programs, and the performative practices of the National Revolutionary Movement rehearsed a vision of the nation that normalized obedience and the police presence that encoded how they were seen in everyday life. Rituals constitute memory through the body; they create continuity between past and present, and in moments of crisis, they can make violence feel like a fulfillment of inherited obligation.

Taken together, these theorists suggest that memory is not a passive record of past events but an infrastructure that shapes attention, perception, emotion, identity, and action. Genocide occurs within, and through, this infrastructure.

Trauma Narratives and the Construction of Collective Identity

If memory is a social infrastructure, trauma is one of its most powerful organizing narratives. Jeffrey Alexander's theory of cultural trauma (2004) demonstrates that trauma is not simply a wound but a meaning-making project. A group becomes "traumatized" when powerful actors successfully frame an event as a fundamental threat to collective identity, thereby redefining the group's mission and moral boundaries. Therefore, the ability to create a social identity based on how events are seen becomes a genocidal

technology: “trauma is not something naturally existing; it is something constructed by society” (Ben-Yehuda, 2005, p. 1848).

In Rwanda, political elites crafted a trauma narrative of Hutu oppression: memories of the 1959 revolution, the violence of the 1960s and 1970s, and the threat posed by the Rwandan Patriotic Front were taken into a story of perpetual Tutsi dominance. Cultural trauma theory reveals how such narratives convert fear into political identity, positioning the out-group as an existential threat whose elimination becomes a moral duty. After 1994, the RPF constructed its own trauma narrative, the genocide against the Tutsi, as the foundation of national unity. While this narrative enables memorialization and justice, it also centralizes symbolic authority, determining which memories may circulate publicly (Olick, 2007).

Taking this frame, cultural trauma functions as a bridge between emotion and ideology, showing how suffering (real or imagined) is mobilized to legitimize violence before genocide and to govern identity afterward.

Discourse, Cognition, and the Production of Moral Exclusion

Violence on the scale of genocide requires more than fear, it requires a transformation of moral perception. Critical discourse analysis provides the tools to understand this transformation. Teun van Dijk (1993) argues that social dominance is reproduced through control of discourse and, crucially, of the cognitive models through

which people interpret the world. As he writes, “dominance is reproduced by the control of discourse” (p. 254).

In Rwanda, state media, political speeches, and RTLM broadcasts did more than convey information, they reshaped the cognitive categories of ordinary listeners. Narrative frames such as “accusation in a mirror,” painted the Tutsi as “infiltrators” or “subhumans”, and the endless exposure of threat discourses established an interpretive schema in which extermination appeared defensive rather than homicidal. Van Dijk’s model positions propaganda not as persuasion but as mind management, a mechanism through which symbolic elites define the boundaries of empathy.

Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1982) and moral exclusion research (Opotow, 1990) deepen this analysis by showing how groups establish moral communities. When discourse constructs the out-group as fundamentally dangerous or morally inferior, they are pushed outside the boundaries of ethical concern. Ervin Staub (1989) demonstrates how difficult conditions, grievance narratives, and ideological framing escalate ordinary people from bystanders to perpetrators. These psychological models clarify how the cognitive and moral world of a society can be reorganized to permit mass participation in violence.

Symbolic Power, Hegemony, and the Naturalization of Violence

If discourse explains how individuals come to think genocidally, symbolic power explains how societies come to accept genocidal categories as truth. Michel Foucault’s

conception of power as productive by creating truth, regimes of knowledge, and the very categories through which reality is perceived (1980, 1982), reveals how the Rwandan state manufactured an epistemic environment in which violence became legible.

Antonio Gramsci's (1971) theory of cultural hegemony shows how dominant groups normalize their perspectives, making alternative interpretations unthinkable. In the years leading up to 1994, Hutu Power ideology became the hegemonic frame through which political, historical, and moral narratives were understood.

Pierre Bourdieu's (1991, 1998) concept of symbolic power synthesizes these insights by explaining how classification systems (such as ethnicity) gain authority and appear natural. Symbolic violence occurs when dominated groups internalize the dominant worldview, accepting harmful narratives as common sense. In Rwanda, both the pre-genocide racial taxonomy and the post-genocide unity narrative demonstrate how symbolic power structures the possibilities of identity. Gacaca courts exemplify symbolic power in practice: a judicial-ritual space where the state's version of truth is institutionally performed.

Therefore, symbolic power operates at the intersection of memory and discourse, transforming narratives into reality and shaping the moral universe in which genocide becomes possible.

Silencing, Archival Power, and the Politics of History

Memory regimes not only produce narratives, they also suppress them. Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) identifies four stages at which historical silencing occurs: fact creation, fact assembly, fact retrieval, and retrospective meaning; at each stage, actors with greater access to institutional, narrative, and symbolic authority shape not only what is remembered but what is possible to remember. As he writes, “history is the fruit of power” (p. xxiii). Silencing is not accidental but structural.

In Rwanda, silences accumulated across decades: The muted memory of moderate Hutu victims, the marginalization of women’s testimonies, the restricted discussion of RPF crimes after 1994.

These silences shape not only historiography but the emotional and political landscape of survivors’ lives. Trouillot’s framework reveals how narrative absence is itself a form of violence, one that persists long after physical harm has ceased.

Trauma, Testimony, and the Reconstruction of the Self

Genocide produces both individual and collective trauma, and the ability to narrate that trauma becomes central to recovery. Judith Herman (2015) argues that healing requires safety, remembrance, and reconnection; without the freedom to remember, survivors are trapped in the unresolved present. Susan Brison (2002) adds that testimony

allows survivors to “rebuild self and world” (p. 15) and that enforced silence constitutes a second injury.

In Rwanda, many survivors, particularly women, articulate memories that do not fit easily within the state’s unity narrative. Their testimonies expose the gaps between official memory and lived experience, reminding us that memory governance has psychological consequences.

Decolonial Epistemology: Memory as a Site of Resurgence

Finally, decolonial theorists situate genocidal memory regimes within broader histories of epistemic domination. Quijano (2000) and Mignolo (2009) show that modernity’s “darker side” is coloniality, the global system that ranks knowledge, humanity, and identity. Rwanda’s racial categories themselves are artifacts of coloniality, and the struggle over memory after 1994 remains entangled in this epistemic order. Mignolo emphasizes that “modernity hides its darker side: coloniality” (2009, p. 39) .

Simpson (2017), Smith (2012), and Battiste (2013) propose relational, land-centered, community-rooted epistemologies that resist the dominance of state-controlled narratives. Battiste (2013) warns that education can reproduce or dismantle domination, urging educators to “rebel against our lack of imagination and caring” (p. 190). Their insights offer methods for creating survivor-centered, plural memory practices as alternatives to state hegemony.

Decolonial theory reframes memory as a site of resistance, where communities challenge imposed narratives and reclaim epistemic authority.

Pre-genocide memory regimes in Rwanda

Understanding how Rwanda arrived at the genocide of 1994 requires examining not only political events but the deeper symbolic, narrative, and mnemonic structures that made exterminatory violence imaginable. Genocide does not arise spontaneously; it is cultivated through decades. Before machetes were distributed or roadblocks made, memories were curated, silences manufactured, myths institutionalized, and identities reorganized. These pre-genocide memory regimes that were shaped by colonial authorities, postcolonial elites, educational systems, political rituals, and media discourses, constituted the conditions of possibility for mass violence. They established who counted as human, who counted as threat, and which futures could be imagined.

This section analyzes the long construction of Hutu and Tutsi as racialized and moral categories; the production of chosen traumas and heroic myths; the embedding of these narratives in cultural memory; the circulation of fear through propaganda; and the epistemic silences that made genocide thinkable. Memory emerges not as the residue of history but as a central technology of power and a precursor to atrocity.

Colonial Racialization as Epistemic Foundation

Any examination of Rwanda's pre-genocide memory regimes must begin with colonialism, which did not simply influence social structure but fundamentally reorganized the cognitive and symbolic world in which identities were understood. Before Belgian rule, "Hutu" and "Tutsi" referred fluid socio-economic categories, often overlapping through marriage, cattle exchange, and patron–client relations (Mamdani, 2001). Colonial administrators, however, governed through race-thinking. Drawing from Hamitic hypotheses circulating in European anthropology, they formalized Tutsi as a racially superior group and Hutu created identity around the idea of being the "authentic" African population.

This racial ontology was validated through identity cards, census reports, missionary schooling, and ethnographic writings. In Assmann's (1995) terms, these practices transformed a fluid, communicative memory into a rigid cultural memory, a institutionalized story about difference that shaped the social imagination: It established a racial hierarchy that naturalized Tutsi dominance, and it produced a reservoir of grievance among Hutu, framed as historical trauma.

Quijano's (2000) and Mignolo's (2009) concept of coloniality illuminates how these racial classifications became embedded in the epistemic order. By presenting race as a "scientific truth", the colonial state reshaped the categories through which Rwandans understood themselves. This symbolic power, what Bourdieu (1991) would call the "power to make the world with words", set the stage for future political mobilization. The memory of colonial injustice was not purely experiential; it was produced through colonial archives,

educational curricula, and missionary texts. It established the narrative that later mobilized for violence.

Postcolonial Nation-Building and the Mythology of Hutu Emancipation

Following independence in 1962, the new Hutu-majority government inherited both the colonial racial categories and the historical narrative of Tutsi domination. Rather than dismantling these categories, postcolonial leaders reinscribed them into national mythology. The 1959 “Social Revolution,” which resulted in the overthrow of the Tutsi monarchy and the killing or exile of many Tutsi, was framed as a moment of liberation, an origin story for the new nation.

This revolutionary narrative became a chosen trauma (Volkan, 1997): a memory of collective suffering elevated into a foundational identity marker. Alexander’s (2004) theory of cultural trauma offers insight here. The pain of colonial subjugation was reconstructed as a shared Hutu trauma, but crucially, it was linked to Tutsi presence. The trauma narrative framed Tutsi not simply as a rival group but as the source of historical decadence. In this singular narrative, Hutu emancipation required perpetual vigilance against Tutsi.

School textbooks, political speeches, and state commemorations cultivated a story in which the nation was forged through escape from Tutsi tyranny. Connerton’s (1989) emphasis on ritual becomes essential here: national holidays, commemorations of the revolution, and public celebrations reinforced this memory through embodied practices.

Children learned the nation's origin as a bodily, emotional truth. Over time, this memory regime solidified a moral geography: Hutu as rightful owners of the land; Tutsi as dangerous remnants of a vanquished order.

The Accumulation of Grievance Narratives and Chosen Traumas

Throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, every political crisis was interpreted through this memory template. Attempts by Tutsi exiles to return from Uganda were framed as evidence of Tutsi ambition. Violence perpetrated against Tutsi civilians slaughter in 1964, massacres in 1973, and structural exclusion was rationalized through these grievance narratives.

This is where van Dijk's (1993) contributions become essential. He argues that elites sustain dominance by controlling the narrative structures that shape public cognition. In Rwanda, the media and political rhetoric recycled interpretive frames in which any Tutsi political activities became proof of conspiracy. Discourse established a schema: Tutsi = threat; political tension = Tutsi plot; violence = Hutu defense.

By the late 1980s, these narrative schemas converged into a fixed cognitive model. The legitimacy of Hutu rule was tied to the suppression of Tutsi influence. In Tajfel's (1982) terms, the in-group's identity was understood through contrast: the nation was what Tutsi were not.

Alexander's trauma framework helps explain why these narratives were so resilient. Trauma (especially when institutionalized) creates a deep sense of historical necessity. The story of Tutsi domination became a past that needed constant reminders in the present.

The Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) and the constant reminder of Historical Fears

When the RPF invaded Rwanda in 1990, political elites activated this preexisting trauma narrative. Newspapers and radio stations immediately reframed the invasion as proof of a long-standing conspiracy: "the return of feudalists," "the foreign Tutsi threat," and "Hutu under siege."

The Hutu Ten Commandments published in Kangura magazine in 1990 distilled decades of narrative production into a codified ideology. Women were cast as biological conduits of Tutsi infiltration; men as traitors if they employed or married Tutsi. Social identity became intertwined with national security. Van Dijk's (1993) model of discourse and cognition is particularly relevant: the commandments used moral evaluation, lexical choices, and narrative frames to map "the Tutsi problem" onto every domain of social life.

This moment represents the intensification of what Staub (1989) describes as the path from difficult life conditions to genocide. Economic crisis, political uncertainty, and civil war created an environment in which narratives of existential threat felt plausible. The government's messaging did not need to persuade; it needed only to activate existing

interpretive schemas. Trauma narratives that had been dormant now surged to the foreground.

Propaganda as Memory Governance: RTLM and the Discursive Preparation of Violence

Beginning in 1993, Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM) functioned as the most powerful instrument of narrative governance. RTLM did not invent new stories, it amplified and ritualized the memory regime already in place. Through humor, repetition, music, and pseudo-intimacy, it created a sense of shared participation in the national crisis.

RTLM's power lay in its ability to convert memory into immediacy. Past grievances were narrated as unfolding in the present. Tutsi were not only historical enemies but "imminent killers"; neighbors became infiltrators. Van Dijk's (1993) theories of mind management apply directly: propaganda reshaped cognitive maps through constant activation of fear and identity.

RTLM also engaged in deliberate dehumanization, referring to Tutsi as "inyenzi" ("cockroaches") or ibyitso ("accomplices"). This lexical shift reorganized moral perception. As Opatow's (1990) research on moral exclusion suggests, once a group is placed outside the sphere of moral concern, violence against them becomes permissible, even virtuous.

In Rwanda, propaganda functioned as a memory regime in real time, fusing history, affect, and identity into a single moral narrative.

Silences, Erasures, and the Strategic Production of Ignorance

While propaganda shouted loudly, silence remained equally powerful. Trouillot's (1995) insight that history is produced through silences reveals how the erasure of particular memories made genocidal narratives plausible.

Three forms of silencing were especially consequential: (1) Silence about pre-colonial interdependence: The narrative of primordial enmity erased centuries of cultural overlap, intermarriage, and shared economic life. (2) Silence about past anti-Tutsi violence: The massacres of 1959, 1964, and 1973 were framed as justified self-defense, not atrocities. Their victims disappeared from public grief, they became perpetrators. (3) *Silence about internal diversity among Hutu*: Moderate Hutu, political opponents, and critics of the regime were not incorporated into national memory. This silence enabled their later targeting during the genocide.

These omissions were not accidental; they were structural features of the pre-genocide mnemonic order, shaping what stories were thinkable, what emotions could circulate, and what fears seemed legitimate.

Pre-Genocide Memory Regimes as Early Warning Indicators

The Rwandan case demonstrates that memory regimes, when shaped by coloniality, monolithic trauma narratives, and discursive domination, can be early-warning indicators of atrocity. Before violence erupted: Identity was racialized and moralized, history was curated into a narrative of perpetual threat, silences obscured complexity and dissent, propaganda amplified existing cognitive schemas, and trauma narratives framed extermination as protection.

In this sense, memory was not a reflection of past violence; it was the infrastructure of future violence.

A decolonial psychology of memory recognizes these patterns as intervention points. Narrative does not simply record genocide; it anticipates it.

Narrative, symbolic power, and coloniality during the genocide

By April 1994, Rwanda's symbolic, discursive, and mnemonic landscape had been prepared for genocide. Yet the transition from fear to extermination was not automatic; it required the activation of narrative infrastructures capable of converting identity into destiny. Genocide operates not only through weapons but through semiotic systems (words, images, myths, silences, rituals) that produce the conditions in which mass killing feels morally necessary, socially expected, and emotionally coherent. Symbolic power, as Bourdieu (1991) argues, is most effective when it goes unrecognized, when the

dominated experience domination as the natural order of things. This section examines how, during the genocide, narrative and symbolic power intensified to the point of annihilation.

It traces five fundamental dynamics: (1) the consolidation of a totalizing narrative, (2) the transformation of the neighbor into an enemy through moral reclassification, (3) the operationalization of coloniality in the logic of extermination, (4) the ritualization of killing as a symbolic act, and (5) the systematic production of silences that enabled and legitimized violence. Each dynamic reveals how genocide is enacted through meaning as much as through force.

The Construction of a Totalizing Narrative

During the genocide, the Rwandan state and extremist media created an interpretive universe in which every event, rumor, and interaction confirmed the inevitability of Tutsi extermination. This was not simply propaganda in the traditional sense; it was what van Dijk (1993) describes as mind management, the control of interpretive frameworks that organize perception and action. Discourse did not merely persuade, it supplied the cognitive architecture through which the world became legible.

RTLM radio played a central role. Its broadcasts wove together references to history, rumor, humor, music, and direct calls to violence into a narrative tapestry that felt immersive and intimate. The station addressed listeners in a way that was constructing a shared identity grounded in fear, resentment, and righteousness. This “we” was

constantly reinforced through affect: laughter at dehumanizing jokes, musical interludes that evoked national pride, and conversational tones that implied personal intimacy between announcers and listeners.

The power of RTLM lay not simply in incitement but in its ability to produce narrative inevitability. Once listeners accepted the premise that Tutsi were infiltrators that wanted domination, every action became evidence of guilt. This what Alexander (2004) calls a fully internalized cultural trauma narrative: a moral universe in which the meaning of events is fixed in advance.

In this frame, genocide became not one possible response among many, but the logical extension of a worldview.

The Moral Reclassification of the Neighbor

The genocide unfolded in intimate spaces (villages, churches, markets, fields) where killers and victims often knew each other personally. Moral proximity did not prevent violence; instead, it became a site where symbolic power operated with particular force. Bourdieu's (1991) concept of misrecognition is crucial here: the dominated accept the categories imposed upon them because these categories have been naturalized through years of state and cultural reinforcement.

During the genocide, categories of "neighbor," "friend," or "kin" were overwritten by the category "Tutsi," redefined as an existential threat. This reclassification was the result

of decades of symbolic work. Once Tutsi identity had been cast as biologically determined, treacherous, and collectively responsible for historical suffering, individual relationships could not override the structural narrative. The neighbor was no longer a person with whom one shared daily life but a threat in a dangerous collective.

Moral exclusion theory (Opotow, 1990) helps explain this: Tutsi were moved outside the “scope of justice,” making harm against them appear not only permissible but necessary. Van Dijk’s (1993) discourse analysis clarifies how media rhetoric operationalized this moral shift linguistically, repeatedly describing Tutsi as “inyenzi”, “ibyitso”, or “snakes.” Such metaphors produce what Lakoff and Johnson (1980) call cognitive frames: they structure thought at a deep level, making the extermination of human beings feel analogous to the extermination of pests.

Once this moral reclassification became hegemonic, violence no longer felt transgressive. It felt protective, righteous, and expected.

Coloniality Within the Logic of Extermination

As Quijano (2000) and Mignolo (2009) argue, coloniality persists long after formal colonial rule through classifications of race, knowledge, and humanity. Rwanda’s genocide exemplifies this persistence. The racial schema imposed under Belgian rule did not simply outlast colonialism; it structured the ontological assumptions behind extermination.

The genocide's logic followed the colonial narrative: Tutsi were positioned as invaders, their bodies were racialized, marked as visibly distinct even when phenotype did not reliably correspond, their political aspirations were framed as domination, and their elimination was framed as restoration, a return to precolonial "authenticity," despite the fact that the categories themselves were colonial inventions.

This is not to say colonialism caused the genocide, but that the genocide's symbolic architecture was impossible without the epistemic logic colonialism left behind. In this sense, the genocide represents not only a political crisis but an epistemic one.

Killing as a Ritual of Belonging

Genocide is often described as chaotic, but in Rwanda it was profoundly structured. Killing was not only an act of violence; it became a ritual of belonging. Connerton (1989) emphasizes that societies reproduce their structures of meaning through ritualized practices. During the genocide, participation in violence functioned as a performative affirmation of Hutu identity.

Roadblocks (sites where citizens were required to identify, expose, or kill Tutsi) operated as ritual spaces. They enforced categories, demanded participation, and performed state ideology through the body. The act of killing, often conducted publicly

and collectively, affirmed the symbolic order. Those who refused risked being labeled accomplices.

Killing thus became a rite of institution in Bourdieu's (1991) terms: an act that does not merely reflect the social order but actively constitutes it. To kill was to become a certain kind of subject. To refuse was to reject the symbolic universe the state had constructed.

This ritual dimension also drew from affective energies cultivated through propaganda: Genocide became a social performance where belonging, loyalty and betrayal were enacted.

The Strategic Production of Silence During Genocide

Silence was not only a condition of genocide; it was a tool. Trouillot (1995) reminds us that silencing occurs not only when stories are erased but when alternative interpretations are rendered impossible. During the genocide, silence operated in several ways: Through terror, confusion, performativity and the impossibility of alternative stories.

Silencing was a structural feature of genocide, not simply a by-product. It ensured narrative hegemony at the very moment when alternative meanings could have saved lives.

Symbolic Power as the Engine of Genocide

Symbolic power does not wield machetes, but it determines when machetes are wielded, at whom, and with what moral justification. During the genocide, symbolic power operated through narrative: the story of existential threat; Myth: the return of past domination; Classification: racialized identity categories; Embodiment: rituals of participation; Affect: fear, rage, righteous indignation; Silence: elimination of competing meanings.

This set of dimensions produced a logic in which genocide was not a rupture but a culmination. Symbolic power turned neighbors into enemies, identity into destiny, and killing into duty. It transformed history into a weapon and memory into a battlefield.

Aftermath Memory Regimes: Gacaca, Memorials, and The Unity Narrative

If the genocide was made possible through a long prehistory of symbolic power and narrative control, its aftermath has been shaped by a new, equally powerful set of memory regimes. These regimes (legal, commemorative, pedagogical, and performative) have profoundly shaped how Rwandans understand the past, relate to one another in the present, and imagine collective futures. While they have enabled crucial processes of justice and mourning, they also consolidate state authority over historical truth, narrowing the space for plural memories and survivor agency. Understanding these dynamics is essential to a decolonial psychology of memory, which views the post-violence terrain not merely as a setting for recovery but as a continuation of the struggle over meaning that precedes and structures genocide.

Gacaca as Juridical Memory: Repair, Ritual, and Regulation

The gacaca courts represent one of the most ambitious experiments in transitional justice anywhere in the world. Drawing on precolonial communal practices but redesigned by the state, gacaca sought to process over one million genocide-related cases through community participation. As Connerton (1989) reminds us, rituals are not simply commemorations, they constitute social reality through embodied performance. Gacaca was a ritualized form of memory governance. It asked communities name perpetrators and victims, reveal truths, and perform reconciliation.

For many survivors, gacaca offered the first opportunity to speak publicly about their experiences. Testimony often provided forms of recognition crucial to narrative repair, reinforcing Brison's (2002) argument that recounting trauma helps "rebuild self and world" (p. 15).

As Bourdieu (1991) would argue, the symbolic power embedded in the state's design of gacaca determined its epistemic boundaries: who could speak, which truths counted, and what forms of reconciliation were imaginable. Gacaca achieved profound transformations in local accountability and truth-telling, yet it also served as a regulatory mechanism that aligned collective memory with the state's vision of national unity.

Memorials and the Architecture of Public Grief

Post-genocide Rwanda is marked by dense memorial landscapes: Kigali Genocide Memorial, Murambi, Nyamata, Ntarama, and dozens of community sites. These spaces function as cultural memory institutions in Assmann's (1995) sense: they stabilize historical meaning, define who is recognized as a victim, and articulate the moral vocabulary of the nation.

Memorials in Rwanda perform several key functions: recognition of the genocide against the Tutsi (anchoring national identity around a shared trauma), education, and mourning.

Yet memorialization is never neutral. The design of these spaces constructs a particular affective experience emphasizing vulnerability, rupture, and loss. This form of "aesthetic governance," as Young (1993) would describe it, shapes public ethics: visitors encounter a history where the categories of victim and perpetrator are stabilized, even as lived memories remain far more complex.

Many survivors find peace in these memorials, but others express ambivalence: some feel their grief is nationalized, others worry that their personal memories are subsumed under the state's master narrative. Several communities have struggled over whether to display remains, how to represent sexual violence, or how to address local complicity. These debates reveal that memorials can honor the dead while simultaneously narrowing the spectrum of permissible memory for the living.

The Unity Narrative: Stability Through Symbolic Compression

The post-genocide government abolished ethnic identification in official discourse, replacing the categories “Hutu,” “Tutsi,” and “Twa” with a unified “Rwandan” national identity. This move was intended to prevent the reemergence of racialized divisions, and in many ways, it successfully reduced overt ethnic mobilization. Yet the unity narrative also represents a powerful form of symbolic compression, a narrowing of the memory field.

Within the unity framework, discussing ethnic identity publicly is discouraged, and in some contexts, punishable under laws against “genocide ideology.” Olick (2007) notes that memory regimes are forms of governance: they regulate not only what can be said about the past but how subjects understand themselves in relation to it. In Rwanda, this regulation operates through legal structures, education, commemorative rituals, and social expectations. While it has produced political stability, it has also constrained plural memory expressions, especially for survivors whose experiences do not fit neatly within the official narrative.

Moderate Hutu killed during the genocide, or Hutu who risked their lives to save Tutsi, occupy a complicated position in public discourse. Their recognition threatens to complicate the moral clarity of the genocide narrative, but their erasure risks creating new silences that reproduce harm. Trouillot’s (1995) framework of silencing helps to understand that the unity narrative is powerful precisely because it simplifies history, but that simplification also marginalizes stories that resist that categorization.

Post-Genocide Education and the Pedagogy of Memory

Education plays a central role in shaping long-term cultural memory. As Battiste (2013) argues, schooling can reproduce domination or foster resurgence depending on whose knowledge it centers. Post-genocide curricula in Rwanda emphasize national unity, the genocide against the Tutsi, the dangers of ethnic division, and the values of reconciliation. These lessons are essential for peacebuilding, yet they also shape what future generations can know about the past. This pedagogical narrowing echoes Mignolo's (2009) critique of modernity's tendency to frame its own narratives as universal truths.

Survivor Memory and Counter-Narratives

Despite the power of official memory regimes, survivors generate their own forms of remembrance with oral histories, women's storytelling circles, church testimonies, and community rituals. These counter-memories often articulate experiences that state narratives cannot contain: sexual violence, family betrayal, survival through silence or compliance, or ambivalence about reconciliation.

Brison's (2002) insight that trauma recovery requires narrative agency resonates powerfully here. Survivors who cannot fully articulate their stories (because doing so would conflict with the unity narrative, jeopardize safety, or violate social norms) experience a form of ongoing symbolic violence. At the same time, survivors who cultivate

their own storytelling practices often describe a sense of reclaiming meaning, identity, and future orientation.

These counter-narratives remind us that memory is lived, embodied, relational, not only transmitted through official channels. They also provide the epistemic foundation for a decolonial psychology of memory: one that values multiplicity, relational accountability, embodied storytelling, and survivor-led truth-making.

Memory Regimes as Conditions for Repair

Rwanda's post-genocide memory landscape has achieved things few expected: relative stability, significant justice processes, widespread acknowledgment of the genocide against the Tutsi, and a national identity that discourages ethnic mobilization. Yet the same structures that safeguard unity also concentrate symbolic power in ways that risk reproducing silences and narrowing democratic space.

A decolonial psychology of memory recognizes this. It affirms the achievements of Rwanda's memory governance while asking what forms of plurality and survivor voice remain constrained. It emphasizes that preventing future violence requires not only a shared narrative but space for contested narratives, difficult truths, and ongoing reinterpretation.

In this view, memory regimes are not the final chapter of genocide but the terrain on which prevention, repair, and political possibility unfold.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that genocide unfolds not only through physical destruction but through the narrative, symbolic, and epistemic infrastructures that precede and follow mass violence. Memory is not a secondary domain of aftermath governance, it is foundational to how societies imagine threat, justify violence, grieve loss, and rebuild life. The genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda reveals a that: before a life was taken, a symbolic universe had already been constructed in which extermination felt necessary, righteous, and inevitable. After the killing ended, memory continued to shape political life, determining which stories could be told, which identities could be expressed, and which futures could be imagined.

Through theoretical frameworks, Rwanda's pre-genocide memory regime emerges as an extended process of narrative construction: colonial racialization, post-independence revolutionary mythology, trauma narratives of Hutu victimhood, discursive fear, and strategic silences. These narratives organized moral worlds, established cognitive frames, and produced a sense of inevitability that made genocide imaginable and actionable. Genocide, then, was not an interruption of Rwandan history; it was a catastrophic culmination of its narrative and mnemonic architectures.

During the genocide, these symbolic infrastructures crystallized into a totalizing worldview. Propaganda transformed history into an unfolding present. Neighbors became enemies through moral reclassification. Colonial logics reemerged as racialized ontologies that framed extermination as the restoration of order. Killing became a ritual of belonging, reinforcing the very symbolic order that demanded violence. Silencing through

terror, confusion, and narrative compression, ensured that alternative meanings could not been shown. Symbolic power determined who was killable, what killing meant, and how communities experienced participation.

After the genocide, memory regimes took new forms: gacaca courts, national memorials, the unity narrative, educational curricula, and laws regulating genocide ideology. These institutions achieved extraordinary outcomes, accountability, recognition of the genocide against the Tutsi, and a shared commitment to national rebuilding. Yet they also consolidated state authority over memory, narrowing the spectrum of permissible histories and sometimes constraining survivor testimony. Gacaca facilitated unprecedented truth-telling but operated within a state-defined epistemic framework. Memorials honored the dead but stabilized particular affective and narrative interpretations. The unity narrative discouraged ethnic mobilization but limited public discussion of complexity, ambiguity, or counter-memory.

These tensions reveal the dual nature of memory regimes: they can be instruments of repair or tools of control. A decolonial psychology of memory, as developed in this paper, insists on holding this duality with care. It recognizes the achievements of post-genocide Rwanda in preventing renewed violence while also foregrounding the need for plural memory practices, survivor-led testimony, and communities' right to narrate their own experiences outside state-sanctioned boundaries.

From this perspective, prevention cannot rely solely on legal frameworks or international warnings. It must intervene at the level of narrative, challenging harmful memory regimes before they explode, amplifying marginalized voices, destabilizing

hegemonic trauma stories, and supporting relational, embodied, community-rooted modes of remembrance. Prevention is not merely the interruption of violence but the active cultivation of narrative environments where violence is no longer imaginable as a solution.

The afterlives of genocide are inseparable from the afterlives of memory. The stories societies tell (and forbid) shape not only how they understand their past but how they live in their present and imagine their futures. Rwanda shows the power of memory: its capacity to heal and its capacity to harm. A decolonial approach asks us to build memory practices that honor complexity, resist silencing, and restore agency to those whose worlds were shattered in a relational way.

Genocide begins in meaning; so too must prevention and repair. Narrative is where violence is born, and where new futures can be made.

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