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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

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## Burial, Reburial, and the Securing of Memory

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### ABSTRACT (max 150 words)

*Drawing on the purported relationship between trauma and the desire to generate collective identity, this paper uses the framing of ontological security to examine burial as a mechanism of memorialization. I argue that states often turn to dead body management as a means of securing themselves and their identities. Burial and reburial can function as a mechanism of governance by states seeking ontological security. What happens to the dead is often politically contested. Because of this, states seek to intervene in contested spaces to solidify their identities through the mechanism of dead body management. I consider burial as a mechanism of state identity construction. Because graves, particularly mass graves, are sites where questions of human dignity are explored, they are also productive sites of examination of the logic of memorialization governing political violence. As a result, I seek to examine the processes by which gravesites and burial and reburial become mechanisms of the state performing ontological security.*

**KEYWORDS:** Genocide; Mass Graves; Trauma; Ontological Security

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## 1. Introduction

This article argues that memorialization is a key tool for states in their pursuit of ontological security and fulfils what Catarina Kinnvall (2004) has identified in the remit of ontological security as a key need for comfort after trauma. This often functions through the use of narrative construction, which, as Jelena Subotic (2016) has traced, is largely about what ought to be: a normative story told about the state that carries “a desire for a particular social order and a particular set of social practices and policies” (2016, 612). I argue here that memorialization functions as one method states pursue to tell their own stories, to perform who they are and who they want to be by fixing identity through narrative. This becomes essential to statecraft in the context of the ambiguities and contingent identities after a traumatic event. Indeed, several scholars have focused on the impact of narratives of historical memory on foreign policy, which is often seen as the way states project their identity into the world (Wang 2012; Gustafson 2014). Alexandria Innes and Brent Steele (2014, 20) have also emphasized the way in which states may use traumatic events to reconstitute the idea of the nation itself: “a particular trauma might be narrated in such a way in the collective memory as to be formative of the collective identity of a nation.”

Drawing on the purported relationship between trauma and this desire to generate collective identity, this paper uses the framing of ontological security to examine burial as a mechanism of memorialization. I argue that states often turn to dead body management as a means of securing themselves and their identities. To do so, I make three related points in the following sections: first, that burial and reburial can function as a mechanism of governance by states seeking ontological security, which I detail in Section Two. In Section Three, I trace what this looks like in a general sense, using several brief examples of contestation over singular dead bodies. I note that what happens to the dead is often politically contested. Because of this, states seek to intervene in contested spaces to solidify their identities through the mechanism of dead body management. In Section Four, I focus specifically on what this mechanism looks like in cases of mass atrocity and genocide,

using the case of Rwanda as an example. In this section, I seek to demonstrate how mass graves in Rwanda are inherently sites of contestation of memorial narratives, and that the project of ontological security in this case is top-down, often at the expense of survivors and their own conceptions of memory and memorialization. While much of my focus is on the post-atrocity context, what I aim to establish here is the existence of a larger politics through which states construct and revitalize their own identities, and thus my key argument is related to the ways in which managing dead bodies is a key part of maintenance of ontological security.

## **2. Burying the Dead: Ontological Security and Memory Management**

Ontological security scholarship emphasizes the way that “states pursue their needs through social action, yet not to impress an external society so much as to satisfy their internal self-identity needs” (Steele 2008, 2). Jelena Subotic has traced the way in which this becomes apparent through the use of narratives, emphasizing how political actors manipulate shared cognitive frames to achieve a particular political purpose (2016, 611). Her focus is on states’ autobiographical narratives, something which gestures to how ontological security scholarship emphasizes the importance of the construction and fixing of state identity. In this section, I take this framing of ontological security and examine the connections between the state’s desire for ontological security and the state’s involvement in burial and reburial of bodies. I acknowledge that not all burial is politicized, but rather argue that some cases of burying the dead are sufficiently public to form a mechanism through which states seek to solidify their identities. My main point in this section is to illustrate how ontological security helps us understand state identity construction through the management of the dead.

Ontological security scholarship focuses on how actors solidify the identity of the self in the midst of a changing world (Mitzen 2006, 342). Brent Steele has emphasized the way in which this becomes most apparent in responding to crises: “when this sense of self-identity is dislocated an actor will seek to re-establish rou-

tines that can, once again, consistently maintain self-identity” (Steele 2008, 3). Jelena Subotic also notes that “states need predictability and order; they thrive for routine and secure relationships with others” (2016, 614, see also Huysmans 1998; McSweeney 1999; Mitzen 2006). In other words, key to the idea of ontological security is the desire for fixity, achieved through an iterative social process.

Ontological security focuses on identity as a key factor. This follows on recent work in the ontological security literature that examines the relationship between trauma and ontological security seeking (Kinnvall 2004). Indeed, as Innes and Steele (2014, 23) note: “national identity and collective memory can be built upon formative traumatic events, but the nature of that identity may be either questioned or re-appropriated and reinforced after an insecurity-inducing trauma.” Memory studies scholars have also drawn attention to the relationship between trauma and identity, noting the ways that trauma disrupts linear time and blurs traditional mechanisms of representation, including language (Nichanian 2003; Viebach 2019). Though much of this focus tends to be on the individual level of trauma (Prager 2008), as ontological security scholars have noted (Mitzen 2006), we can allegorize from the psychology of the individual to the level of the state. Maria Malksoo (2009) similarly has noted that coming to terms with the past is reinforcement of one’s self-consciousness, following Theodor Adorno, emphasizing the identity-based dimensions of ontological security at larger levels, such as the community or the state. Additionally, Duncan Bell has drawn attention to the way events, such as war and genocide, “generate serious challenges to communal self-understandings” (2006, 5). While the language of community can be broad, I focus explicitly on the way one type of political community (i.e. states) comes together through shared memories of a traumatic event, and the particular efforts of the state to narrate one specific understanding of the event in the midst of contested meanings and trauma’s disruptions to linear time.

After a traumatic event or crisis, such as political violence, that poses a challenge to ontological security, the state often steps in to manage trauma via the mechanism of memorialization, primarily because of the threat posed to the cohe-

sion and identity of the self (in this case the state) by the traumatic event. Emma Hutchison and Roland Bleiker note that political elites often seek to impose order as a way of dealing with trauma, which can perpetuate exclusion through the reinforcing of the identity of the community (Hutchison & Bleiker 2008, 386; see also Bell 2006, Edkins 2006). Such language draws on the identity basis for the formation of the primary political community: the state. Indeed, as Andreas Huyssen (2000) notes, though memory discourses are globalized, at their core they remain inextricably connected to specific groups, often states. Others have begun to illustrate the connections between memory and ontological security more explicitly (Gustafsson 2014). Indeed, Alexandria Innes and Brent Steele note that “insecurity develops in the ontological security-seeking process in a variety of ways, and trauma presents a radical form of that insecurity – a rupture of the consistent self through time and space” (2014, 15). While such insecurity calls into question the very identity of the self, Innes and Steele note that “trauma can also serve as a springboard to political contestation, creating space for a biographical narrative to be reaffirmed or rewritten through political action” (2014, 17; see also Steele 2008).

Specifically, burial can act as a mechanism of establishing identity. Burial is a cultural practice which is heavily reliant on the relational bonds that bind families and communities. As Marina Kaneti and Mariana Prandini Assis note, “Because of their materiality and concreteness, dead bodies have the power to localize and give material meaning to a number of political claims and symbolic associations” (2016, 298). While this focus is often on the individual closure provided to family members through burial, burial is often key to our conception of community bonds, and more broadly, to belonging within the state. For this reason, burying those, understood to be outside of these communities, can be hotly contested. As an example, part of recent cultural genocide against the Turkic Uighur minority,<sup>1</sup> the Chinese government has not only destroyed mosques in the Xinjiang region of China, it has

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<sup>1</sup> For additional context, please see the September 2018 report by Human Rights Watch entitled “Eradicating Ideological Viruses”: China’s Campaign of Repression Against Xinjiang’s Muslims, available at <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/09/09/eradicating-ideological-viruses/chinas-campaign-repression-against-xinjiangs>

also desecrated Uighur cemeteries under the auspices of “urban development”, though some Uighurs also report that China has set up “burial management centres” which carry out an agenda of cultural destruction through unburying bodies. As one Uighur, whose ancestors’ graves were demolished, noted: “This is all part of China’s campaign to effectively eradicate any evidence of who we are...That's why they're destroying all of these historical sites, these cemeteries, to disconnect us from our history, from our fathers and our ancestors” (Smith 2019). In other words, who is buried and where is not simply a private discussion, but one which sheds light on borders of political communities: burial is one arena that enforces who belongs (Auchter 2013). “Who we are,” and perhaps, who “we” are not, is a key facet of state identity, as scholars have demonstrated (Doty 1996; Weldes 1996; Campbell 1998; Neumann 1999), and burying bodies in particular ways or places or desecrating graves can be a powerful message by the state about who belongs.

Ontological security framing extends this further and argues that such understandings of identity are themselves also practices of security, as I argue here. After genocide, this is, perhaps, even more salient, as identity of the state is thrown into disarray, and national memorialization efforts are often twinned with grave management.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, states engage in public grave management through burial, excavation, and reburial, as I illustrate more extensively in later sections, as a means of solidifying a particular identity drawn from an understanding of the past. Reburial was a common practice in the transition from the post-Soviet era, for example, such as in Estonia where de-Sovietization often involved exhumation of gravesites of Soviet soldiers from monuments to military cemeteries to rewrite the memory of the past (Kattago 2009). Katherine Verdery (1999) has similarly described how sovereignty coalesces around particular dead bodies and the use of ex-

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Young (1993) traces the way in which remnants of broken Jewish tombstones became iconographic ways of enacting public memory in Poland, and also draws attention to the use of tombstone imagery in the granite shards at the Holocaust memorial at the former site of the Treblinka concentration camp. As another example, at the Kigali Genocide Memorial in Rwanda, interior rooms display skulls and bones in display cases, and the outdoor area contains large slabs in which hundreds of thousands of victims are interred. The dignity given to human remains is then key to the larger story told at the memorial site.

humation as a tool in the context of 1980s Eastern Europe. Her main argument is that dead bodies are used to express a state's territorial claims, similar to my claim about how dead body management functions to construct and express identity. In short, there is widespread agreement that what is done to particular dead bodies can function as a form of crafting state identity in the midst of, or following, times of trauma and crisis which rupture previously held understandings.

To sum up, ontological security helps us understand state identity construction through the management of the dead. Precisely, states seek to impose linear narratives during moments of uncertainty and trauma. This is key to how they imagine themselves and construct notions of national or community identity. Management of graves, whether it be burial, reburial, or desecration, sends a powerful message about "who we are" and is key to the way states establish and reinforce their identities as political communities with particular sets of values and particular understandings of who belongs. These identities, as ontological security theorists note, are essential to states' practices of security.

### **3. Gravesites as Contested Spaces and State Management of the Dead**

Gravesites often raise larger questions about state management of collective memory. The significance of historical memory remains contested, and the debates over what should be done with dead bodies, both single and mass graves, shed light on contestations over state identity itself. Various types of actors seek to intervene in public narration of particular dead bodies, as I will illustrate below. This section uses two vastly different recent cases of individual bodies to draw out the argument that the story of what happened to the dead and the dynamics, in which they come into the public eye, are contested by various groups. This contestation forms a threat to the ontological security of the state, which the state responds to by managing bodies, often through the mechanism of burial or reburial. Specifically, I consider some cases of state burials and exhumations to be instances of the state's exercise of ontological security. First, I use recent debates over the exhumation of

Spanish dictator Francisco Franco to illustrate the relationship between the state and the question of dead body management. I argue that the state's management of this case represents its desire to craft its identity, to shore up its values and to circulate a particular image of the nation in relation to its history. Second, I examine the debate over refugee burial in Germany to illustrate how what happens to particular bodies can be something contested between non-state actors and the state. Ontological security seeking behaviour is a response to the trauma caused by the presence of particular bodies, but challenges to state authority can actually be challenges to state identity.

In September 2019, Spain's Supreme Court ruled that Francisco Franco's body could be legally exhumed by the Spanish government. Franco, whose dictatorial regime was responsible for the deaths of approximately 200,000 people (Payne 2012), had been buried in an underground basilica and monumental memorial which he had constructed. The Spanish government sought to excavate this grave as a means of atoning for the perpetration of atrocity under Franco. Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez noted that the exhumation was motivated by "the determination to compensate for the suffering of the victims" (Minder 2019). The exhumation was contested by Franco's estate and descendants, and by right-wing party Vox, which labelled the plan to exhume Franco's body a "profanation of graves" (Minder 2019). What is most interesting about this example is, first, that the debate over historical memory of political violence in Spain came to a head over one very singular dead body and its fate, and second, that the plan to exhume Franco's body was characterized by the state as "a great victory of Spanish democracy," (Minder 2019), in the words of Prime Minister Sanchez. In other words, Franco's exhumation was situated within a larger logic of dead body management in which particular dead bodies in particular places are potentially dangerous symbols of something which the state does not want to symbolize, and that the success of Spanish democracy was directly connected to the management of this particular body. There is also a wider context, here, of the way in which Prime Minister Sanchez came to power on a platform, that would seek to reckon with Spanish history. In 2007, Spain passed a law to fi-



nance the excavation of more than 2000 mass graves of Franco's victims from the 1930s Spanish Civil War era, but this policy was deprived of funding under Mariano Rajoy's government. Sanchez, then, seeks to expand the focus on historical memory through attention not only to these mass graves, but also to Franco's grave itself. In other words, dead body management is here envisioned as a kind of statecraft.

To connect this back to the larger discussion of ontological security, the decision of the Spanish government to exhume Franco's body, to be reburied in a private cemetery, is an attempt to construct, reinforce, and solidify the identity of the state by advancing a particular narrative of how Spain should relate to its past. In this case, Sanchez's goal is to mark a distance between the state as it was under Franco and the modern Spanish state, the need for a "stable self", that so many theorists of ontological security emphasize as a key component (Kinnvall & Mitzen 2017). The significance, then, is in the way that states tell stories of themselves as a means to construct their identities as stable selves (Steele 2008; Subotic 2016).

While states are often the key actors engaged in ontological security-seeking behaviour, non-state groups may use burial sites or debates about human dignity of the dead to raise critiques about state identity and management. In 2015, groups of protesters, critical of the failure of the European Union to account for the refugee crisis and the rising anti-immigrant and anti-refugee sentiment across Europe, converged in Berlin. The protesters' week of action art was entitled "Die Toten Kommen": The Dead Are Coming. Their focus was on the deaths of refugees crossing the Mediterranean to Europe. As detailed by von Bieberstein and Evren:

"The group had invited the residents of Berlin to join them in giving a proper burial to the dead refugees of the European border regime, often laid to rest in unmarked graves or simply crammed into morgues along the coasts and borders. 'The Dead Are Coming' began with the transport of the bodies of Syrian refugees who had died in the Mediterranean and were brought by the ZPS from Italy to Berlin to be given a proper funeral ceremony... According to news reporting of the initiative at the time it was first launched, ten grave sites had been opened, bodies had been exhumed, and hundreds of drowned dead were on their way to Berlin. According

to their own information, members of the group had collaborated with local authorities and networks. They had inspected graves and cold storage houses, where they found corpses in garbage bags negligently stacked upon one another. They succeeded in identifying and determining relatives, and together with the consent and support of those relatives exhumed bodies that had been buried without any care or dignity” (2015, 454-6).

What we see here is groups seeking to unbury the dead in an attempt to put into question the identity of the state: in this case specifically to critique its policy towards refugees. By articulating refugee dead as a contested issue, the protesters put into question the ability of the state to manage the crisis, but even more substantively for my analysis here, they put into question the very identity claims of the state as one which engages humanely with the vulnerable refugee figure. This not only demonstrates how dead bodies and the question of burial are contested, but also how burial can become an issue at the heart of how states build and structure their own identities, key to the framing of ontological security. There are also similar cases where family groups seek to materialize the bodies of the missing, such as the *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* in Argentina, who demand the reappearance of the missing from the Dirty War, or where relatives of those who die from drug cartel violence in Mexico have taken up their own forensic examination of the dead (Schwartz-Marin & Cruz-Santiago 2016, 484). These acts challenge the state’s narrative and its inability to protect people, and elucidate the everyday circumstances of political violence.

To sum up, dead body management becomes significant in its reflection on the state’s functioning (Auchter 2016) and to go further, on its identity. Grave-sites are contested spaces that are local, national, and transnational. In both the cases of the exhumation of Franco’s dead body and in the debate over refugee dead in the European Union, dead bodies act as potent political symbols. Managing and narrating these symbols, then becomes key to the identity construction of the state, as a means to manage the disruption these bodies, and the contestation over them, can cause. When it comes to mass graves, appropriate management is often envisioned in very different ways by genocide survivors, national governments and in-

ternational observers (Wagner 2008). What counts as giving dignity to the victims often wars with larger political narratives, as I explore in the next section.

#### **4. Reburial: Excavating Mass Graves and the Politics of Memorialization in Rwanda**

This section focuses on instances of genocide and mass atrocity and on the excavation of mass graves for the purposes of reburying the bodies, specifically in the case of the 1994 Rwandan genocide. I argue here that the burial of bodies after mass atrocity demonstrates how states secure identity through memorialization. In Rwanda, bodies were exhumed for the purposes of proper reburial and such reburial became a public exercise of memory that served to construct state identity in the face of the non-linearity of trauma. Because mass graves are sites where questions of human dignity come to the fore, they are also productive sites of examination of the role of the state and its management in memorialization as a form of governance, particularly considering their status as transnational memorial sites. It is, indeed, precisely because of their transnational nature that they become significant sites for the reassertion of governance via statecraft. As a result, I seek to examine the processes by which burial and reburial become mechanisms of the state performing ontological security. Specifically, I argue that imposing structure and organization on the bodies through reburial is exemplary of the state's desire to tell a particular memorial narrative that is inherently about constructing the nation, a key facet of identity construction identified by ontological security scholars as security-seeking behaviour, though it is often done in the name of providing dignity to the dead. This is not to suggest that it cannot do both at the same time. Instead, we should acknowledge that memorial practices have their own associated politics and are not necessarily apolitical the way they often claim to be. Burying the dead can be a useful tool of statecraft to construct and reinforce particular identities, and graves can be key material sites at which historical memory is contested or delineated. In other words, the Rwandan case should be seen as exemplary of a larger context of

the politics of burial as a mechanism of governance and identity construction and management, where states bury or rebury bodies as a way to assert particular features of identity, particularly in times of crisis or when they perceive that identity as under threat.

Rwanda, as a case, fits the larger discussion of ontological security in earlier parts of this paper in terms of the state's need to construct identity: after the genocide, individuals, communities, and the new government had to reckon with the larger trauma of the genocide itself. More than ten percent of the country's population had been killed (Cobban 2007). Because of the intimate nature of the killing and the large percentage of society that had been perpetrators, the Rwandan state had to deal with problems of social reconciliation, legal prosecution, economic instability, political rehabilitation, and international intervention. This trauma shattered conventional notions of time (Viebach 2019). Though the material problem of what to do about a large number of bodies was an issue for state management in these early days after the genocide, as I have noted elsewhere (Auchter 2014). My focus here is on the time period a decade later, when the Rwandan state began a large-scale effort to memorialize the genocide, a key feature of reconstructing the very identity of the Rwandan state. Along with this came the policy of excavating these primary mass graves to create proper gravesites for the dead.

I should note here that in the Rwandan case, there were often multiple burials, excavations, and reburials over time. Initial burials were often done at the sites of large-scale killing themselves, typically by the perpetrators, at times using heavy construction equipment (Korman 2015). Sometimes initial burials were done by the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) forces as they took over the country and felt the need to hastily bury bodies that they came across, and by returned survivors in the immediate months following the genocide, as they returned to their towns and villages, with bodies that had been left in situ where they had been killed. Some survivors, upon returning to their areas, exhumed bodies from graves and reburied them individually, typically on their own property (Jessee 2012). Though it is a bit imprecise, I adopt the term "primary graves" to refer to these.

Though at first, survivors organized ad hoc exhumations when they returned to their former homes, this posed some difficulty because of the cost associated with exhumation and reburial, particularly given that most survivor returnees were quite poor (Korman 2015). The Catholic Church often provided funding and logistical assistance, as Remi Korman (2015, 205) notes. In the years immediately following the genocide, burials took place under the auspices of the church. If a victim was identified after the exhumation by the clothing worn, families often wanted to bury the remains on their own property (Korman 2015). Still, due to the cost and logistics, “temporary mass graves would become permanent because it was too much work to find and exhume loved ones who might be entangled in the compost of cadavers underground” (Off 2001, 243).

In 1995 and 1996, a more substantive set of exhumations occurred, primarily in Kigali and Kibuye, conducted by the non-governmental organization Physicians for Human Rights, working alongside the new Rwandan government. These primarily served the purpose of evidence gathering for the growing body of evidence being used to support the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda’s indictment (Jessee 2012; Koff 2005). The government characterized these exhumations in terms of assuaging the “spiritual violence experienced by many Rwandans as a result of having been unable to bury and mourn their missing loved ones according to tradition” (Jessee 2013, unpaginated).

Over time, however, as state institutions rebuilt themselves, the government fully took over exhumations and reburials, focusing on the mass grave as a public space. The Ministry of Work and Social Affairs created the “emergency decent burial programme,” the objective of which was “collective reburial of victims exhumed from primary mass graves” (Korman 2015, 205). I refer to these new gravesites as “secondary graves.”<sup>3</sup> While it was first funded by the World Health Organization and UNICEF, in 1996, it became officially incorporated within the

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<sup>3</sup> This is complicated further by the fact that some of these secondary mass graves were also excavated and reburied, primarily for practical reasons such as they were not watertight. While significant, this is beyond the scope of my argument here, and thus I focus primarily on the state excavation of primary graves.

budget of the Genocide Memorial Commission within the Ministry of Culture (Korman 2015). In 2008, Rwanda passed a law that focused on genocide cemeteries and memorials: “memorial sites and cemeteries for victims of the genocide perpetrated against the Tutsi shall be in the public domain...remains of genocide victims which were formerly buried shall be transferred to genocide memorial sites and cemeteries as provided for by this Law” (as quoted in Korman 2015, 207). Indeed, the Rwandan government requires that all victims be reburied at a local state-funded genocide memorial (Jessee 2013 unpaginated). Burial, which started out as an individual process and event, over time became part of the state’s mechanism for reasserting its identity.

The official state policy of the Rwandan government, then, is that each genocide victim deserves a dignified burial. Concealing the location of graves from the genocide is a crime in Rwanda (Camino-Gonzalez 2019). This is why, even twenty-five years after the genocide, when new primary graves are discovered, the bodies are disinterred and then reburied at a central memorial site. In 2019, for example, 84,437 new bodies were discovered in a neighbourhood, underneath the foundation of houses, disinterred, and then reburied at Nyanza genocide memorial (Camino-Gonzalez 2019). At the reburial ceremony, Justice Minister Johnston Busingye noted: “Commemorating the genocide against the Tutsi is every Rwandan’s responsibility—and so is giving them [the victims] a decent burial” (Camino-Gonzalez 2019, unpaginated).

However, as Remi Korman (2015, 206) notes, the meaning of “decent burial” has shifted and been re-interpreted over time. Early on this meant

“bodies simply being placed in mass graves on top of plastic sheeting, sometimes still clothed and mixed in with the personal effects of the dead. With the improving economic situation of the early 2000s, this type of burial came to be seen as degrading. Some of the new exhumations of secondary mass graves can thus be explained by a desire to give a ‘proper’ decent burial, involving the washing of bones, the separation of bodies from other objects, and the placing of human remains in draped coffins...Lastly, this new interpretation of decent burial was accompanied from the mid-2000s onwards by an economic and administrative rationalization of

the treatment of bodies. This rationalization was first and foremost economic, owing to the cost of preserving and maintaining the cemeteries and memorials to the genocide. Genocide cemeteries were thus grouped with larger cemeteries and memorial sites...The most contentious matter in this respect concerned bodies being buried by surviving family members on their own land. Following numerous land reforms, in particular in the city of Kigali, large-scale expropriations and population movements have occurred since the end of the 1990s. This new situation has made keeping bodies on private land very difficult. These exhumation policies are often carried out in difficult circumstances. Such repeated exhumations are extremely painful for survivors. If the burial of a body is commonly considered as a moment of closure in the mourning process, what is one to make of the impact of a second, third, or even fourth official exhumation/reburial of this same body? These various policies of exhumation and reburial cut across one another, sometimes in quite contradictory ways, making the process of burial at a national level difficult to read” (Korman 2015, 206).

While Korman’s point is that burial narratives at the national level are muddled and contradictory, I would argue, instead, that the multiple layers of exhumation and reburial offer significant insight into the Rwandan state’s attempts to construct, reinforce, and reiterate its ontological security relative to the memory of the genocide. As Laura Major notes, “for the RPF, the genocide corpse as a symbol and as a spectacle is an entrenched and constantly circulating tool of political power, and these collective memorial remains have important capital in this respect” (Major 2015, 167). The repeated exhumations may seem contradictory, as Korman articulates, but when viewed within the context of the “genocide corpse” as a key political symbol to be managed by the Rwandan government, the repetitive process of exhumation and burial makes sense. That is, it can be contextualized within the larger need of the Rwandan state to perform its identity relative to the genocide.

When I last visited Rwanda in 2011, I stopped at the offices of IBUKA, the umbrella survivor’s organization, in Kigali. Outside, I saw people sitting on fabric that was spread out across the ground, sorting small pieces of something into stacks. Behind that was large excavator equipment turning over the ground. I as-

sumed something was being built. When I asked, I was told that this was the former site of a garbage collection area, that during the genocide had been used to dump bodies of the dead. The entire hillside had been covered with corpses that had, over time, been covered by dirt to form makeshift shallow mass graves. This was the site where many of the bodies of the victims, who had died at the ETO, had been placed. The construction project I had perceived was in fact an excavation project, to exhume the bodies, separate the fabric and other personal items from the bones, and to clean and organize the bones so that they could be buried in a mass grave. One interesting disjuncture in many of the mass graves in Rwanda is that they contain both individual coffins, which may hold multiple sets of human remains each, and typically shelving that holds bones sorted by type: a shelf of skulls, a shelf of long leg bones. The coffins are usually from more recent additions. As noted above, the sorting and cleaning of bones has become a ritualized part of dignified burial, even as the wishes of some survivors for individual gravesites and for private burials on their own land have been disregarded (Jessee 2012; Korman 2015).

This is not to say that all survivors want individual private burials. Indeed, many survivors have found comfort in the national forms of commemoration that have bolstered a strong sense of state identity. Some have suggested that, though mass burials were not part of Rwandan culture in the past, neither was genocide, extraordinary events require changes in cultural frames regarding what is done with the dead, as Julia Viebach has noted (2015). Other survivors believe that the government effort to excavate primary mass graves and rebury bodies is undignified and legitimizes government power rather than honoring victims, as Erin Jessee has noted (2013). This disagreement demonstrates that survivors in Rwanda are not a monolithic category, and their understandings of dignity and memory are varied. Viebach has also noted that survivors may experience time differently than others, and that the process of care-taking at memorial sites generates a different type of trauma time than we see typically attributed to memorialization (Viebach 2019). In this sense, graves and memorials are contested spaces in Rwanda, even among survivors, who do not necessarily agree on what constitutes dignity. Yet, the significant



process, for my purposes here, is how the state seeks to simplify some of this contestation and tension as a means to generate state-level memorial and reburial processes. For the Rwandan state, genocide memory is something which itself resides at the level of the state, key to its understanding of its own security.<sup>4</sup>

Laura Major notes the same thing with regards to her field work in Rwanda, emphasizing the way in which teams of largely Tutsi genocide survivors carry out the work of exhumation and sorting bones: “the human remains are unravelled, with personal possessions, clothes, identity cards, bones, flesh and other soft tissues separated one from another. If a skeletal structure is recovered intact, it is disarticulated. Separate piles of collected bones and amassed soft flesh are created. These exhumations therefore have a very particular outcome, regardless of their status when unearthed. Human remains that could bear the traces of individual identity are almost always rendered anonymous” (Major 2015, 165). She emphasizes the way in which these survivor-exhumers operate within a larger political context of tenuous economic and social security, making their allegiance to the RPF government a key way to ensure social and economic stability. She notes that, as a result, many survivors see the interment in central memorial sites as “an acceptable compromise in the absence of more traditional funerary rites and burial customs” (Major 2015, 167). The notion of what constitutes dignified burial is imposed from the top down, as part of the identity performance of the Rwandan state relative to the history of the genocide. Again, this is not to say that survivors may not in many cases support this type of memorialization, but rather that the reburial agenda is a state agenda, designed to reimpose a linear understanding of the historical event of genocide, rather than solely a communal mourning ritual.

The Rwandan state, then, has a larger aim in the context of these reburials. As Korman (2015, 207) notes, “for the majority of survivors, the priority since 1994

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<sup>4</sup> I should clarify here that I am not making a normative judgement about the Rwandan government in this regard. Rather, all states engage in ontological security seeking behavior. This provides an interesting case for what that looks like in a post-atrocity context. While there is room to critique the process in Rwanda, the creation of national memory and unity out of genocide is also a monumental and impressive task.

has been to identify individuals. Every survivor would like to find the body of every member of their family. For the state, the principal concern is the collective identification of victims. Victims are thus identified purely as victims of the genocide, and for the state this anonymity is a reflection of the identity of the crime itself. Genocide does not target individuals but rather a collective, and it is the latter which is identified as the victim". The burial of victims, then, is part of the mechanism by which the state constructs the narrative of the genocide via its victims. State management of the exhumation process emphasizes the public nature of burial by invoking the exceptional circumstances of genocide. As a result, the state can secure its own identity with reference to the event. Out of the trauma, the rupture to state identity, ontological security can be performed by regulating genocide discourse, a part of which is the ability to define what constitutes human dignity and instructing the memorial site visitor to engage with victims as a class of persons more so than as individuals, as I have noted elsewhere (Auchter 2014).

I want to return to the question posed in Korman's (2015) lengthy quote above, about the impact of multiple exhumations of the same body. While one way the state regulates genocide discourse, as a mechanism of ontological security, is via the idea of a "dignified burial", there is another narrative at play here, that invokes the importance of human remains as evidence of the genocide. Laura Major (2015, 168) describes the reburial at Nyanza as exemplary of this: A mass grave was constructed in 1995 by the new post-genocide state to give the victims a dignified burial. Yet, the graves were not watertight. A government official at the ceremony to open the graves suggested the bodies were at risk of "disappearing" and that they needed to be properly buried again to remain as "proof of genocide."<sup>5</sup> The government law about reburial emphasizes the significance of new secondary mass graves as memorial sites. These memorial sites function to perform a particular narrative

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<sup>5</sup> There is an interesting dynamic here with regards to bodies-as-evidence, since this same argument is made about proof to justify the display of bodies at memorial sites such as Murambi, as I have noted elsewhere (Auchter 2014). While a full analysis of body display is outside the scope of this project, given my focus on burial, the fact that the argument of evidence is mustered to justify multiple types of outcomes with regards to dead bodies does lend credence to my argument that this is a political narrative rather than one directly related to body dignity.

about the genocide, but perhaps more importantly, about the importance of evidence to guard against genocide denial. The current Rwandan government under Kagame paints the threat of genocide denial as ever-present. While genocide denial is certainly an issue, both for Rwanda and more broadly, the need for the state to control the way memorial sites function and the way they commemorate the past should be interpreted in light of ontological security seeking behaviours, specifically to solidify state identity in the face of contestation. The evidentiary component of mass graves, then, acts as a reminder that the potential for ethnic division remains, and if this is the case, there is increased legitimacy to the authoritarian moves the government has made to control the media and limit dissent (see Sundaram 2016).

To sum up, the Rwandan governments reburial programmes can be read in the context of ontological security seeking behaviour. Memory management emerges through exhumation and reburial of genocide victims as a means to construct the identity of the Rwandan state in relation to a particular understanding of its past, by performing the role of memory-actor through the reburial process. When the state defines and manages human dignity, this may bring order to a society fractured by genocide. At times this may be exclusionary, by coming at the expense of survivor perspectives, while at other times, it may be in line with the wishes of survivors. Memorialization in general may be a complex negotiation of multiple perspectives, holding inherent tensions within (Ibreck 2010). Regardless, we should consider memorial sites and processes of burial and reburial to be key meaning-making practices.

## **5. Conclusions**

This paper has suggested that burial and reburial are key mechanisms of governance utilized by states in seeking ontological security. In Section Two, I first traced how burial fits with the larger focus on national identity and memorialization in trauma governance in recent ontological security literature. Burying bodies can become public exercises that construct and reinforce state identity by delineating

notions of who belongs in the state and by emphasizing particular ways of engaging with the past. Examining multiple different cases in the rest of the paper allowed me to show how this logic manifests in different ways, even while the constant is state involvement in managing the dead as a mechanism of ontological security construction. In Section Three, I mobilized two disparate examples to illustrate how dead bodies and what happens to them can be politically contested. As a result of this contestation, states exert control over contested spaces by establishing a unitary narrative of the past through management of the dead that functions to solidify their identities. This has important implications for a variety of contexts, not least the post-genocide context, which I addressed in Section Four.

I noted that in Rwanda, processes of burial and reburial illustrate the ways in which memory is key to the identity of the Rwandan state, and they function as ways for the state to fix its identity in the face of the disruption of the trauma of the genocide. This generates some complex implications for the role of survivors in memorialization, as at times they benefit from the comfort provided by the fixity of state identity, while other survivors may feel excluded by state-centric processes. While I limited my focus to Rwanda, there is room for additional research on what this ontological security seeking behaviour looks like and the alternative forms it may take in other cases, such as Bosnia or Cambodia. Lingering questions still remain about how ontological security seeking behaviour, largely regarded as normatively positive by many scholars, may intersect with democratic decline when states mobilize control over the past in ways that are exclusionary. While it was beyond the scope of this paper to examine this, my focus on state control over memory raises questions about these dynamics that could be taken up in future research.

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