

Waiting to *Exhale*: Somatic Responses to Place and the Genocidal Sublime

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Abstract

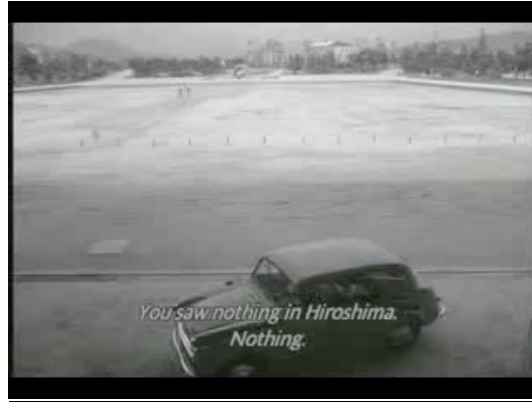
This paper examines various theories of trauma and representation to critically reflect upon the production of a digital diptych installation designed to reward stillness and contemplation. The exegesis considers various artistic strategies including eye-witness testimony, silence, place, ethnographic documentary and poesis.

Keywords: genocide, Rwanda, sublime, somatic

He (Japanese): You saw nothing in Hiroshima. Nothing.
She (French): I saw *everything*. *Everything*.¹

These words, spoken at the opening of the Alain Resnais film *Hiroshima non amour* (1958) based on the Marguerite Duras screenplay have come to symbolise for generations of cineastes the problematics of memory, perception and representation in films concerning mass human suffering, and in particular, the atom bombings of Japan.²





However, in the above sequence neither of the two protagonists speaking are *hibakusha* (i.e. those directly affected by the atomic bombs). Yet both parties proffer authoritative opinions about the meaning of ‘Hiroshima’ although neither individual has *directly* experienced the nuclear trauma. The Japanese man coldly refutes the French woman, denying her any possible knowledge of ‘Hiroshima’. There is an understandable arrogance to his tone (which belies a later admission that he too was not present on August 6th 1945). The woman's equally strong assertion that she saw ‘everything’ at Hiroshima simply by watching films at the Hiroshima museum, meeting survivors and visiting the hospitals, while expressed sympathetically, may at first appear insensitive and patronising. This is emblematic of what E. Ann Kaplan has described in *Trauma Culture* as ‘vicarious’ trauma or ‘empty’ empathy. This seeming ambivalence, however, is part of the film's strategy to undermine the viewer’s own assumptions. Indeed, the oppositions articulated in this opening exchange encapsulate in microcosm a perception of Hiroshima from ‘outside’—i.e. the non-*hibakusha* experience—namely, representative sentiments expressed from a Japanese and international (Western) perspective.

Critical myopia

But even a seasoned critic as astute as Kaplan can fall into the trap of homogenising and conflating national tragedies from ‘outside’, while perhaps protesting too loudly at the lack of compassion in others. In her meditation on the “disturbing remains” of 9/11, Kaplan foregrounds her personal and historical criticism of the “insidious role” of US foreign policy, particularly in terms of “postmodern, postcolonial global capitalism”, yet to her mind, unlike some of her colleagues, “these past actions did not ‘cause’ the terrorist attacks nor justify them” (15). This may or may not be the case as the volumes written on 9/11 (some by her colleagues) have exhaustively demonstrated.

However, Kaplan illustrates this peer tendency with a presumably unconscious, but paradoxical, anecdote that demonstrates her own critical myopia and historical amnesia. In a deeply problematic appropriation of terminology, all too readily transposed from one international tragedy onto another, Kaplan recounts:

Linking the attacks to the past actions of the United States was to collapse incommensurable levels of happenings and thought. It reminds me of a colleague who, when I arrived at the university on September 11 about three hours after the attacks, said: “What about Hiroshima? Didn't we do that?” Yes, indeed, and it was horrendous. But to evoke Hiroshima at this moment indicated an intellectualising of present, highly emotional happenings—a distancing and displacement characteristic of some political scholars. As leftists and political people, can't we also live in the present and relate to present emotions?

Part of the problem lay in people's different standpoints vis-à-vis the attacks, and their literal closeness or distance from Ground Zero. (15)

What is both surprising and lamentable in Kaplan's analysis is her failure to recognise the appalling irony of evoking “Ground Zero” so authoritatively (which she does throughout her book) while berating her colleague for similarly evoking “Hiroshima” in the immediate context of 9/11. To transpose and ‘collapse’ so casually the terminology of atomic warfare (from Trinity, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, etc.) instantly elides the traumas of the *hibakusha*, and demonstrates Kaplan's own literal and metaphorical “distance from Ground Zero”.

Kigali mon amour?

More than five decades on, after the ‘killing fields’ of Cambodia, but coeval with the continued ‘ethnic cleansing’ throughout the former Yugoslavia, genocidal slaughter in Rwanda claimed around one million lives in a little over three months, mostly from hand-to-hand murder with neighbour pitted against neighbour.

It was only in the lead-up to the tenth anniversary of the genocide that a number of Western filmmakers and documentarians eventually turned their attention towards the Rwandan catastrophe, and to a lesser degree, its legacy.

The initial cinematic response, *Hotel Rwanda* (2004), gained three Academy Award nominations for its producers, including its star Don Cheadle. However, the movie created significant agitation amongst the survivor NGOs in Rwanda, especially Ibuka, the peak agency representing the myriad of genocide survivor groups around the country, as well as upsetting many in the international (mostly Tutsi) Rwandan diaspora. The film was shot outside of Rwanda in South Africa with a foreign cast and crew and little economic benefit flowed back to Rwanda, let alone the genocide survivors. So aggrieved was Ibuka that they mandated a protocol for filmmakers to comply with when the Rwandan government negotiated offshore productions in the country on genocide topics.

More recently several prominent African commentators have expressed concern over influential figures residing outside Rwanda inflaming tensions and denying the genocide occurred. Paul Rusesabagina, the character who inspired the film *Hotel Rwanda* and recipient of multiple international human rights awards, has subsequently been linked to extremist elements plotting to violently overthrow of the Rwandan government.³ Fortunately a new generation of indigenous filmmakers, starved of audio-

visual culture under colonial rule and the previous government hate-media, are now emerging in the post-genocide recovery. Resident in New Jersey, actor-writer-director Gilbert Ndahayo is one such talent. His passionate, deeply moving and award-winning films such as the short drama *Scars of My Days* (2006) and the auto-documentary *Behind this Convent* (2007-8) screen at local Rwandan festivals and are seen increasingly overseas.⁴

Yet a core question remains — how can non-Africans, non-Rwandans and non-Tutsi filmmakers, artists and audiences legitimately respond to, and find expression in, such catastrophic events without succumbing to vicarious trauma or empty empathy?

What comes to mind when we contemplate genocide?

Is it ever possible to adequately represent mass trauma?

What are the limitations to artistic presentation, mediation and meditation?

These fundamental aesthetic and philosophical questions inform the research and on-site location production that ultimately became manifest as *Exhale*, a digital diptych that self-consciously attempts to approach and evoke the ‘unrepresentable’.

Initially conceived as a two-screen audio-visual projection, *Exhale* was designed to reward stillness and patience. In order to ameliorate the brief attention-span and fleeting gaze of most visitors to installation works, a strategic design of *Exhale* was to benefit gallery patrons with more information the longer they remained paused before one of the two screens. A computer algorithm measuring (multiple) movement, captured by a simple webcam, fed back into the digital projector interface.

The genesis of the digital installation emerged from my ongoing enquiry and contemplation of how media industries have (re)told narratives of millennium and apocalypse in popular, mass entertainment form (feature dramas, documentaries, songs, comic books, literature, toys and games). Traditionally these stories and artistic expressions foreground violence, spectacle and chaos as the necessary rupture of a social continuum in order to usher in a new, utopian, age. As Norman Cohn and others have demonstrated, millenarian fantasies have fuelled pogroms and genocidal acts for centuries.

Like many students of genocide and mass trauma I was greatly impressed by the modernist art cinema techniques of Alain Resnais (*Nuit et brouillard*, 1955 and *Hiroshima mon amour*) and their open, fragmented narrative assemblages that impart traces of traumatic events and place long after the respective films end. But mimicry of, or homage to, such techniques in the postmodern digital era seemed regressive and needlessly promoting yet another established orthodoxy. If poetry is barbaric after Auschwitz, so too, I came to realise, would be canonizing or revisioning Resnais’ brilliant film works, transposed out from their original contexts of production and circulation and grafted onto the Rwandan experience.

Poesis

In contrast to Adorno's oft-repeated, now almost clichéd, lament that "it is barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz" I have rejected this assertion by complementing the digital installation with my own attempt at *poiesis*, not to delegitimise Adorno's polemic, but to suggest ways in which poetry and written text can still approach the unassimilable, and the incomprehensibility of 'sublime' events, those simultaneously steeped in terror and awe. I deploy the term 'poiesis' here via Martin Heidegger's formulation that interprets both its Greek etymological origins (the root of 'poetry') as *becoming other*, and the German philosopher's extension of the definition to include 'unveiling', which also conjures, I would argue, revelation, apocalypse and the sublime. Hence, my untitled poem which adorns one of the installation walls is offered both as a counter-narrative to the digital video projection and seeks to open up a temporal fissure for contemplation and reflection, while inhabiting a formal space within the gallery adjacent to the 'performing' work of the video and stereo soundscape.

I know, I know
 we all saw it on TV
 Rwanda, genocide, Africa, 'basket-case'...

But one million killed
 in one hundred days
 not by mechanised gas chambers or industrial crematoria
 but by hand
 one after another
 day after day
 night after night

And the weapon of choice
 the machete ... or the club
 Not bullets
 that was a *waste* on the 'cockroaches'
 And rape
 systematic and systemic
 deliberately spreading HIV/AIDS

This was genocide in slow motion
 up close and personal
 with a long, decaying half-life

And yet, and yet
 Against all odds
 there *was* resistance (and betrayal)
 there was *victory* (and reprisal)

Today Rwanda lives
 and a million mostly nameless ghosts beckon
 as the architects of exterminism await
 International Justice
 while rank and file *Genocidaires* stand accused
 complicit
 sometimes defiant, sometimes remorseful

naming names and pointing fingers
 but mostly bowing heads, avoiding eye-contact
 at local Gacacas
 before their peers
 each and every day, all over Rwanda

Testimony,
 pragmatism,
 reconciliation,
 forgiveness ...
 But never forgetfulness

This is the lesson and legacy of Rwanda
 This is the victory of *survival*
 They live
 They know

Beyond Representation and the Sublime

As Stephen K. Levine counsels in his 2004 edited journal of writing on trauma, the task of artists and other creative practitioners in representing mass suffering is “to speak in a way that does justice to that of which one cannot speak [employing] a language that carries an awareness of its own difference from that which it designates”. A language “that recognizes itself as artificial, as art [and] knows that memory is always already imagination, that there is no way to overcome the past except to see it anew”. (4)

Similarly, in his evaluation “*Hiroshima mon amour*, Trauma, and the Sublime”, Andrew Slade draws from Dominick LaCapra and Slavoj Zizek to propose that Edmund Burke’s eighteenth century concept of the sublime is the most proximate to (post)modern notions of trauma. For Slade, that which combines the strongest emotions of pain, danger and terror, equates with “the inability of the mind to form the presentations of the world in a comprehensible fashion” (173). Like Cathy Caruth’s oscillation between two unbearable crises (one of death and one of the incomprehensibility of living) and trauma’s “enigma of survival”, Slade maintains that in the unassimilable nature of living past trauma, “the aesthetics of the sublime serves as a support for the existential fact of survival” (175).⁵ Learning to “think with pain”, and move beyond this, is a process Slade sees intrinsic to the (Burkean) sublime:

As in trauma, what is at stake in the sublime is a terror of endings. Trauma is the approach of death or its equivalents to a subject; historical events of a public or private scope foreclose the subject's future and scar him or her permanently. In trauma we remain, and rightly so, concerned with the terror of death. In the sublime we begin to consider the pleasures of life in survival. (175)

Jean-Luc Lucy’s analysis of a range of “various media” to evoke “(un)representability”, such as Auschwitz and the death camps, also embraces aesthetic strategies that offer resistance to representation and, parenthetically, “of a resistance to deliver the final and definitive work” (18). Such a resistive space or opening (an “interval or wound”,

according to Lucy), and the incompleteness which it enables, demands that the genocidal “not be shown as an object but rather that it be inscribed right at the level of representation, as its buttress even, as the truth of its truth.” (19) Such strategies, among others, inform *Exhale*'s execution.

Aestheticising Trauma

Prior to visiting Rwanda I was immersed in online and textual research that relied on cognitively synthesising the significant archive of evidence following the 1994 genocide. The primary artistic and research question for me was how can media engender the impact and affects of genocide in a manner that limits the human tendency to be numbed (and seduced) by such tragedy. To move beyond the self-satisfaction of ‘voyeuristic’ trauma (Kaplan and Wang, 9) towards identification that bypasses the *intellectual* shock and resistance to sustained imagery of mass suffering (while recognising its intrinsic fascination) and potentially moving towards the somatic and the emotional.

In *Trauma Cinema* Janet Walker defines both film and video “trauma cinema” as:

a group of films that deal with a world-shattering event or events, whether public or personal [...] those that deal with traumatic events in a nonrealist mode characterized by disturbance and fragmentation of the film's narrative and stylistic regimes. (19)

Trauma films depart from the “narratological *illusionist* system” of classical Hollywood realism and its corresponding tradition of audience identification with characters, mimesis and verisimilitude. For Walker trauma films are in contradistinction to this classical mode, they “‘disremember’ by drawing on innovative strategies for representing reality obliquely, by looking to mental processes for inspiration, and by incorporating self-reflexive devices to call attention to [...] audiovisual historiography.” (19) This is certainly an apt definition of *Exhale*, both in its design, execution and exhibition. Certainly the work is not dependent on Classical Hollywood narrative and foregrounds its construction and my own embeddedness in its production. But I would suggest further that *Exhale* purposefully moves both in concert and beyond Walker's parameters by concentrating on evoking the aural and somatic approaches to traumatic events, as well as through the previously articulated strategy of poesis, equally in terms of the images, sounds and dissolving inter-title texts.

Exhalation, the aural and somatic

It wasn't until I was immersed in the process of editing with repeated viewings of *Exhale*'s near-ethnographic recording of Rwandan trauma sites, as unedited ‘actuality’, that the interjection of phenomenological perspectives subtly but continually disrupted the flow of montage. Over and over again, in key sequences, I became aware of my own and other characters’ *breathing*.

This audible, repeated expulsion of air throughout the installation connotes a range of emotions, from bewilderment to shock and exasperation. My own automatic, non-intellectual cognitive bodily response to sites of trauma is echoed in the reaction of other Rwandans and Africans visiting the same locations. The control of breath, its unconscious eruption or its deliberate withholding, are all recognised in various therapeutic practices (yoga, rebirthing) to demonstrate or ameliorate traumatic reaction. From the ancient Greek association of *pneuma* with both “spirit” and “breath”, through to medieval beliefs that the expulsion of demons through the mouth and nose is a healing process of violent exhalation, breath and respiration have been important aspects of human wellbeing.

In order gesture at the somatic and aural, as well as to orient visitors to the installation of *Exhale* as a looped linear work, the following context statement is provided as an explanatory wall panel and as a one-page announcement of intent that can be taken off-site:

The (mostly) static digital video camera used here records stillness and tranquillity at places that ‘paradoxically’ endured sustained violence and atrocity.

A series of vignettes, looped after 35 mins, captures both human interaction and nonhuman indifference at these urban and rural trauma sites — Nyamata Catholic Church, Bugesera and the Kigali Memorial Centre in Rwanda’s capital city.

Yet these spaces somehow remain outside time with a distinct ambience and aura. Pilgrims and curious tourists come and go. Seemingly oblivious to the catastrophic milieu, life goes on.

At tropical dusk, amid places of unimaginable slaughter and brutality, the ochre brickwork diffuses and absorbs the haemorrhaging signs of assault.

In the brief twilight of evensong, African birds warble and cackle, schoolchildren play their street games, disembodied voices trail off, far away noises and incongruous sounds of motorbikes, cars and trucks erupt, disrupting the lilting cadence of birdsong, squeals of joy and peels of laughter, while roosters crow, and daily life ebbs and flows, with all its ambivalence and antipathy.

Be patient. Take your time. Bare witness.

Hence, the aural texture and sound design is promoted as a crucial element in the overall work. It aims to transcend the media emphasis on highlighting the devastating *imagery* of genocide by privileging ambient noise, human voices and oral testimony.

Waiting to *Exhale*

Exhale opens conventionally. From a black background the eponymous title in white fades-in and fades-out, with a corresponding audible ‘exhalation’. It is *my* breath, slightly distorted and enhanced with an accompanying echo that will become apparent a few minutes into the work. Two overlapping titles dissolve to read:

Nyamata Catholic Church
Bugesera, Rwanda

Massacre site of 10,000 Tutsi

The screen fades-in from black to reveal a hand-held camera, already in motion, with the sound of unseen birds calling and a slow pan left, revealing the interior of a seemingly cavernous red brick church. The camera proceeds forward with each of my steps clearly audible, past floral wreaths, toward a pile of hessian sacks and plastic garbage bags filled with bones and clothes stacked upon simple, broken wooden pews. A cock crows loudly (00:44) as the camera turns, panning right 180 degrees, to show the surprisingly small dimensions of this abandoned place of worship.

As quickly as this sequence orients the viewer it abruptly fades to black with a super title: “Eyewitness testimony” (00:57). Fading-up from black, in mid-sentence, we find our guide, Seraphim, in profile alongside our translator, Felly, in extreme close-up.⁶ The camera shoots over his shoulder. Seraphim talks perfunctorily, motioning listlessly with her hand and we follow her briefly as she exits right of frame. Her eyes have a depth and sadness that is immeasurable. What horrors these eyes must have seen.

The camera swiftly returns to Felly who points to the altar, where a heavily blood-soaked cloth still covers the sacramental table, having absorbed unknown numbers of blows, hacks and shots. Mostly off-camera Felly informs us that, as small as the church is, “ten thousand people were murdered here”. He continues, in close-up and over the shoulder: “You see those patches? Those patches there...” pointing to a nearby wall. “They used to get small children, kids who had been missed by the grenades they had thrown in, and they would throw them against those walls, to finish them off.” Felly, arm outstretch, finger pointing, cannot look at the wall. His eyes dart right and left in disgust and despair. What more is there to say?

The screen fades to black (02:01) then quickly fades-in on a medium shot of the wall Felly has just described. For nearly five minutes the camera remains static, capturing the wild sounds from within and outside the church. Increasingly the twilight call of birds merge with the murmurs of unseen visitors and the click of camera shutters. Standing alongside the red bricks is a wooden lectern, with a hand-carved icon/motif running nearly its entire length. The deity depicted appears to be Jesus Christ, facing out from the wall and its splattered, haemorrhaging sprays and stains. “Suffer the little children” indeed.



Exhale Clip 1 - Blood Wall., Rwanda.

[CLICK HERE TO LAUNCH VIDEO FILE \(MP4 – size 15.5 MB\)](#)

Another dissolve to black with a superimposed title in white: “A crypt below the church”. Fading-in mid-movement on my hand-held descent into the as yet unseen crypt, laborious steps clomp and echo, while the camera’s focus is on the altar opposite. I enter Hades. At 07:13 I slow my gate and *exhale* loudly — it is this same breath that accompanies the opening title. Nothing has prepared me for this. The audible deflation of my lungs is testament to literally having the wind taken from me. I pause, momentarily, each movement more considered now as I approach the adjacent set of white tiled steps, bathed in the diminishing light from upstairs. To my right panes of glass can be seen but it is only as I place the mini-tripod on the crypt’s steps and turn the lens around that my unduly laboured breath acquires meaning for the viewer. For an instant, before another fade to black, rows of human skulls in an open glass display are evident: “Nameless victims...”



Exhale Clip 2: A Crypt Entry

[CLICK HERE TO LAUNCH VIDEO FILE \(MP4 – size 4.6 MB\)](#)

I climb the steps and depart the crypt, my reflection captured on the display cabinet. Almost the entire 16:9 frame is occupied by the trapezoid structure. Once again the camera is static, recording the ambience of the empty, subterranean vault. But almost as soon as I leave, two young African men enter from the opposite direction. They quickly move towards the open display. One reaches in and picks up a club, examines it and returns it with a loud clank while his companion looks on. They pause and peer about in silence, heads craning upwards to view the hundred of ribs and scapulae bundled together. Both gaze in at the centre, one pointing to the artefacts. The other picks up a bracelet and then some rosary beads and then replaces them. My muffled voice and that of my colleagues upstairs is discernable from outside as the pair now move off-camera at right, noticing the digital video camera recording them.

They continue to observe the skulls and one exhales noticeably (10:25). Outside, birds are crying, seemingly frantic, their pitch and volume increasing disconcertingly.

As the men leave another visitor enters via the same steps. It is Theo, our cab driver. However, this young African immediately halts to take an image from his mobile phone (10:54). For the next three minutes we observe Theo continually viewing the spectacle before him solely through his phone's digital screen. He whistles nonchalantly and passes in front of the camera, all the while recording the skulls, clicking away. Theo then momentarily steps behind the static DV camera to record more images, his reflection captured in the glass before he exits. Unlike the tactile encounter observed with the initial visitors, Theo opts for a purely mediated experience.



Exhale Clip 3: Mobile.

[CLICK HERE TO LAUNCH VIDEO FILE \(MP4 – size 17 MB\)](#)

A party of four Africans enter the crypt (15:58) comprised of two women and two men. The women pause at the top of the steps to converse, while Theo descends from the other entrance and resumes his mobile recording, circling the cabinet. The quartet then mingle and continue to talk (in French) but only stay briefly before leaving. At 19:26 I enter the crypt again, carrying a Pentax while a cock crows. Standing behind the DV camera, I pause to take a photo, my shadowy reflection seen in the cabinet glass. The cock crows thrice at 19:59. Echoes of New Testament prophecy (denial and betrayal) uncannily ricochet in this incongruous site of worship and butchery.⁷ In between the rooster's call my flash photography fleetingly bleaches the video recorder's grainy texture through over-exposure. I return to remove the camera and the image fades-to-black with the supered inter-title: "Nameless victims ... except for one".

Fading-in from black, my colleague Dr Martin Mhando records Felly as he explains that the casket (previously unseen by my static camera) below the glass display case contains the body of a women, still clutching her infant child, who was brutalised, raped and murdered in perhaps one of the most abjectly abhorrent manners imaginable. Felly's testimony falters, stuttering as he reaches for appropriate words in English to describe the indescribable. But he perseveres and his witness prevails.



Exhale Clip 4: Nameless Victims- Felly

[CLICK HERE TO LAUNCH VIDEO FILE \(MP4 – size 11.2 MB\)](#)

After another fade-out a new series of three overlapping titles read:

Outside the church
a mass grave
with over 38,000 victims

Alongside Felly, I return to the underworld, clambering down the brick steps and into the massive tomb, setting up the camera to record this chamber of death, exhaling heavily (23:33). Row upon row of skulls are laid out across metal grills. To the left and right, unseen by the DV camera, chamber after chamber holds thousands of remains and countless wooden caskets, each containing a dozen or so genocide victims. Theo follows Felly closer into the crypt, as Felly breathes out forcefully. Despite numerous visits, the scene retains its visceral impact for him. Off camera, and situated on another level below, I ask Felly to describe this site.

He is visibly both perplexed and incredulous at what he encounters. Hands on hips he recounts that more bodies are being exhumed each day (the sacks seen in *Exhale's* opening seconds). He stops and stares into the camera and beyond, grimacing, seemingly incapable of cognitively processing what he has just related, and *sighs* despondently. Felly and Theo leave the tomb. But the static set-up is drenched in the ambient noise of the surrounding neighbourhood and the visible dance of shadows and light across the inanimate skulls. As the camera's unflinching gaze objectively records the static evidence of atrocity, the disembodied, joyful sounds of children at play in the late afternoon twilight incongruously reverberates across the high gain wash of the DV image.



Exhale Clip 5: Outside crypt.
[CLICK HERE TO LAUNCH VIDEO FILE \(MP4 – size 21 MB\)](#)

Another sequence at the Kigali Memorial Centre (KMC) depicts the pathetic “Wall of names” and its visibly meagre roll call of *identified* victims. A super title on black reads: “a drop in the ocean of dead”. The few hundreds of names are shown against a simple wall, surrounded by tropical plants and terracotta pots. A warm breeze brushes against swaying bougainvillea while the distant sounds of traffic and street life compete with a multitude of bird life. From off-camera left the crunch of quartz gravel underfoot becomes louder. Entering the frame (30:16) an Asian tourist approaches the wall, already looking into his viewfinder as he strides. He composes his shot and promptly turns back again, his steps trailing off in the distance as the cackle of birdsong once more dominates the audio.

Fade to black again with a final overlap of text:

Beneath the ground

at this place

in this time

lay more than a quarter million dead

In wide-shot, with maximum depth-of-field, the frame captures the gravel and concrete pathway that sits atop the massive KMC crypts, currently holding the remains of over 300,000 Rwandans from the 1994 genocide. It is a place of verdant tranquillity and simple beauty. A lengthy pergola covered with climbing plants is visible in the background. From this low angle the remaining black wall, unadorned with names, is hard to discern from the row of foliage at left and right. A bush fly meanders in from left of frame and the occasional butterfly flutters past. The sun peeks out from behind clouds, bathing the garden in dappled light, re-energising the squarking birdlife. In the far distance, a solitary human form emerges from off-camera walking, perhaps unwittingly, above the legions of dead as the screen once more returns to black.



Exhale 6: KMC ground.

[CLICK HERE TO LAUNCH VIDEO FILE \(MP4 – size 7.5 MB\)](#)

“As representational objects”, Janet Walker reminds us, trauma films “are by definition a generation removed from the catastrophes they depict, and their audiences may be a generation removed from the original sufferers. But in and through this remove, trauma films and videos model a new and empathic historiography after the demands of a world where audiovisual culture is extensive and people at odds live in close proximity to one another.” (193) *Exhale*, is one such attempt at empathic historiography.

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Notes

¹ Marguerite Duras, *Hiroshima mon amour*, (trans. Richard Seaver), Grove Press, NY 1982.

² Duras describes this post-coital conversation as "allegorical [...]. In short, an *operatic exchange*" [original emphasis] (Duras, 9)

³ See Arthur Asiimwe, "Hotel Rwanda hero in bitter controversy," *Reuters*, 4 April 2007, reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUSL0420968620070404 (accessed 4 July 2008), and William Church, "Rwanda: Hate Speech and Paul Rusesabagina," *American Chronicle*, 31 January 2007, americanchronicle.com/articles/19908 (accessed 9 May 2008).

⁴ Clips from Ndahayo's films are available on YouTube: *Scars of My Days*, youtube.com/watch?v=IVw1fCX17ek; *Growing Roses on a Bed of Skeletons* youtube.com/watch?v=SBfE5UH5e88; and a teaser/trailer for *Dirty Wine* (Uganda/Rwanda, 2008), youtube.com/watch?v=QE_14yQ1slg. For more information about the films, see Ndahayo's web site at ndahayofilms.wordpress.com/.

⁵ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996, p. 58.

⁶ "Seraphim", coincidentally, is the name of an angelic being, associated with light and purity.

⁷ The crowing cock engenders recollection of scriptural *denial* (the Testaments of Mathew, Luke and John), where Peter's disavowal of Christ is foretold resignedly as prophecy. The crowing also alludes to some Rwandan priests who turned their backs on fleeing Tutsis and moderate Hutus, or worse, those who deliberately betrayed the refugees from the genocidal onslaught by participated in the atrocities. (See *New York Times* 14 Dec, 2006). Throughout *Exhale*, the crowing of a cockerel can be heard on several occasions, significantly as 'wild' but non-diegetic sound from inside the Nymata Church and its backyard crypt.