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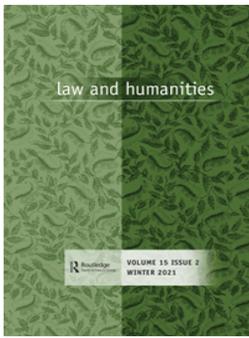
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An atrocity archive: sensory expression of past-present-future

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ESSAY



An atrocity archive: sensory expression of past-present-future¹

Benjamin Thorne

Socio-Legal Studies

ABSTRACT

The violence and related crimes committed during the genocide against the Tutsi, April–July 1994, led to the creation of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. This international machinery of justice was located in the neighbouring country of Tanzania. The often complex, draining, meandering, problem-prone legal proceedings, sprawling across 21 years generated a rich and diverse archive containing fragments of pre-genocide, genocide and post-genocide periods. This somewhat side-lined archive is an interplay between plural experiences, memory, dialogue, power, and users. Atrocity archives and their material are sites of stimulation. They stimulate memory, dialogue, and the senses. The senses accompany all those who adventure with archive material. Accompany in both obvious and more subtle ways, which nonetheless can be profound. The stimulation of visual material is compelling, although sound, taste, touch, smell can equally weave, entwine and manifest during archival encounters.

KEYWORDS Legal Atrocity archives; memory; critical theory; plural experiences; Sensory (Criminology) theory; post-conflict communities; Rwanda

Synopsis

The violence and related crimes committed during the genocide against the Tutsi, April–July 1994, led to the creation of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. This international machinery of justice was located in the neighbouring country of Tanzania. The often complex, draining, meandering, problem-prone legal proceedings, sprawling across 21 years generated a rich and diverse archive containing *fragments* of pre-genocide, genocide and post-genocide periods. This somewhat side-lined archive is an interplay between plural experiences, memory, dialogue, power, and users.

Atrocity archives and their material are sites of stimulation. They stimulate memory, dialogue, and the senses. The senses accompany all those who adventure with archive material. Accompany in both obvious and more subtle ways, which nonetheless can be profound. The stimulation of visual

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material is compelling, although sound, taste, touch, smell can equally weave, intertwine and manifest during archival encounters.

Like archives, the senses can disorientate, confuse, disrupt, empower, enlighten, and challenge an individual and groups experience of the material as well as their understanding of past events and the relations and connectivity to the present and future.

Prologue to a legal archive

– 1994, a tiny African country, a small landlocked country in central Africa, a former Belgian Colony // ... ethnic violence, an escalation in the conflict, the atrocities we now see taking place in Rww-aad-er ... , Row-ander ... , Rwanda // it is difficult to use any other words to describe what we have seen and heard taking place during the last 3 months other than genocide, standing on the streets of Kigali there is the unforgettable smell of rotting flesh – the taste of hatred is almost palatable, the international community ... , by establishing the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda here in Arusha Tanzania the Rwandan people know that they are no longer alone - - - - -
- - - - - , international justice has long arms and no perpetrator will be beyond the reach of accountability, swift and expedited justice, 19 years have passed since your indictment was issued and on today's judgment hearing // on its 21st year the curtain comes down on this tribunal, the victims - have come here – spoken and we have heard their testimony – heard their stories, for the tens of thousands of Rwandans who experienced - bared witness to these crimes, in this trial the prosecution has called a total of 38 witnesses, for those who have watched and listened to this tribunal they will have no doubt ... , we now have a archived record of what they experienced through testimonies**exhibits**photographs**vi-
deos** forensic reports**sketches**diaries**letters // record, recording, archival record, history, historical record, constructing the past, archive facility – access, accessing, accessibility, inaccessibility, ascending institutional structures.

HAT

***After law: the past archived***

- Rhythms, agitations, currents, odours, silences from the past, though never really of the past // wondering, obliged, confused, momentary, plural gusts between the past-present-future. Like a gust of wind that carries up autumn leaves with their diverse colours and shades – oranges, reds, greens, yellows, purples, browns – some crisp and fresh others damp with the smell of cool autumn rain, are blown, tossed together, dispersed, reunited, cluster, become isolated // strong, unexpected, subtle, pulsing, absent, comforting gusts - interactions of past-present-future are always a gust.

EARTH

***The material***

– Texture, shards of sound, renderings of light–dark and the bits in-between, fabric, words, smiles, fear, despair, tenderness, optics, gesture // pre-genocide, genocide, post-genocide – families, belonging, contradictions, foreigners, wondering, dispersed, borders, explanations, uncertainties.

ROOM



Epilogue to archival expression

Legal atrocity archives as justice, repair, recovery, hope, peace – peacefully, being at peace, piecing together, pieces of a jigsaw, missing pieces, piercing silence, perpetuating, power // dialogue, complexity, being with and hearing Others, poking purportedly autonomous bubbles of the past, connectivity // opening a trials 'black box' - maybe pandoras box ... no too dramatic // ethics, ethical, ethically, morals, risk, exploiting, consent // individual, community, society, societal, social, the subject, subjectivity, my subjectivity – my privileged subjectivity shaping, including, distorting, excluding, rigidifying, constructing, memories, stories, narratives, trauma, unexperienced trauma, trauma of Others // loved ones, near but distant trauma, intergenerational transmission of traumatic actions, shaping the memories of Others and the Self, complicating identities // communal sharing of past experiences, understanding, disapproving of actions but acknowledging experiences, active participation.

BUILDING



Endnote

- 1.. All of the images in this essay have been taken from the archive of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda via the United Nations Unified Court Records database. This visual performative essay is an attempt to research the archive through artistic expression and is based upon the author's

experience of more than 6 years of working with the ICTR archives for research. Further information about the author's research relating the atrocity archives and can be found here. <https://independent.academia.edu/BenjaminThorne1>

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).