

Mudende: Trauma and Massacre in a Refugee Camp

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The narratives in this article frame Congolese refugees' violent experiences of the recent past in relation to a protracted forced migration: the Gihembe refugee camp in Rwanda and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees' (UNHCR) efforts to resettle these refugees in Western nations. Through ethnographic fieldwork, I elaborate on the style of narration used by refugees within UNHCR interviews to demonstrate how refugees narrate trauma and violence in everyday life in the form of expressive idioms rather than more literal, detailed, and technical descriptions of massacres as prompted by the UNHCR. Within these interviews, the subject of Mudende is never far from the surface. A former refugee camp where many occupants of Gihembe lived until 1996 when it became the site of brutal massacres, narratives related to Mudende invoke refugees' understandings of the political climate in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) surrounding the 1996 civil war. Yet when narrated to the UNHCR, memories of the Mudende massacres are key for assessing the narrator's need for resettlement. As such, narratives of Mudende vary drastically according to the audience. This article shows how refugees narrate massacres to the UN humanitarian apparatus in a distinct style in comparison to when speaking among themselves. Of particular importance, personal narratives related to shared experience of violence reveal the profound ways that Gihembe camp inhabitants cope with and endure the spectacular violence of the past within the slow brutality and discrete violence of their present camp conditions.

Having dwelled in the camp now for sixteen years close to the town of Byumba, Gihembe camp refugees live in a constant state of general, normalized emergency. One of three refugee camps in Rwanda, Gihembe is home to over twenty thousand people, the majority of whom are ethnic Tutsi Congolese civilians displaced by civil war in north Kivu, DRC. It is a place where there is never enough of anything—food, water, clothing, housing, blankets, medicine, soap, or education. Despite the strategies put in place by the UNHCR to enhance the lives of Gihembe's occupants, the camp is a place where most are malnourished, HIV spreads, hopelessness abounds, and refugees are immobile and largely dependent on the materials made available to them by humanitarian programs.

Looming large in the lives of many Gihembe occupants, Mudende names both a physical location in western Rwanda near the border of DRC and a series

of massacres that occurred in 1996.¹ The UNHCR created the refugee camp in 1996 near a small village housing an Adventist college called Mudende, in a tentative post-genocide Rwanda.² The majority of Gihembe's occupants were originally hosted by the UNHCR in Mudende camp, where they were first registered as refugees. Opinions vary, but refugees estimate that at least three thousand inhabitants were killed in multiple attacks on this camp between August and December 1996 by *Interahamwe*, the group responsible for the Rwandan genocide.³

While refugees rarely discuss these events on a day-to-day basis, they are prompted to speak in detail about the Mudende massacres and their initial flight from DRC during official resettlement interviews conducted by the UNHCR. At the same time, the shared experience of violence and terror haunts nearly every aspect of ordinary camp life in Gihembe, nearly two decades later. The massacres refugees survived are part of a larger historical and political narrative of conflict and an important reason why they currently cannot return home to north Kivu. They have been forced to live in protracted statelessness since 1996.

How is it possible that these staggering events of atrocity and slaughter in the Mudende camp and the perpetrators of this violence are so rarely discussed in the camp today? How can these events remain mostly unmentioned, despite their explicit connection to why refugees are trapped and have what they refer to as “the bad life” in the camp? In this article, I explore how refugees understand these connections between past atrocities and current suffering. Further, I examine how these connections complicate conventional understandings of how those who suffer violence narrate their memories of past violence. I focus on how refugees describe the Mudende massacres, asking how the events changed them, how they explain these events in relation to the present context of the Gihembe camp, and how they manage to live with these experiences.

Attempting to understand the impacts of trauma demands a rethinking of violent experience and the ways that victims communicate these experiences.⁴ Collective renditions of violence in Mudende can be literal and are also fraught with disagreements and discrepancies over how the violence was experienced and is now managed, lived, and survived. The possession of these experiences recasts how Gihembe camp refugees inhabit violence from the past and cope with trauma in the contemporary camp context where the means to remake their worlds go

¹ Refugees state the massacres happened in 1996, although the limited references on the subject, including those by the UNHCR, state the massacres in Mudende were in 1997.

² The Mudende College has since moved to Kigali City.

³ Official statistics from the UNHCR and Human Rights Watch are not available.

⁴ Cathy Caruth, “Trauma and Experience, an Introduction,” in *Trauma: Explorations of Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 3-13.

largely unfulfilled.⁵ This article engages with and reflects on how violence is endured and communicated, with an overarching acknowledgement of how narrative forms of violence elide and refuse to be fully conveyed and captured. Tragedy and massacre are painful to listen to, even more difficult to try to empathetically imagine.⁶

The narratives in this article vary in many respects, yet taken together in a mixture of telling, silence, refusal, and poetics, refugees elliptically communicate how violation feels through layers of implied understanding that compose an impression of collective experience.⁷ First, I frame how the UNHCR staff interview refugees for the purpose of resettlement, and elaborate on this style of narration and its focus on testimonial and evidentiary forms of trauma. Next, I discuss three narrations of the Mudende massacres elicited using ethnographic and oral historical fieldwork. The first narration is one refugee's more literal, detailed, and technical description of the event. The second iteration distills conversations with a group of camp elders as they work together to create a common understanding of the massacres and the political climate at that time. The third narrative is one woman's poetic rendition in an expressive idiom of the legacy of the violence and her coping strategies, sentiments echoed by other refugees.

This article is based on sixteen months (2010-11) of ethnographic and oral historical fieldwork within the Gihembe camp, an "attempt to understand another life world using the self—as much of it as possible—as the instrument of knowing."⁸ Based on daily participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and life history data collection, I conducted approximately sixty in-depth interviews with refugees.⁹ After hiring my research assistant, a Gihembe-based refugee, I was introduced to his family and the families in their quarter of the

⁵ For an account of how everyday experience becomes burdened by past violence see Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

⁶ Veena Das and Arthur Kleinman, "Introduction," in *Remaking a World: Violence, Social Suffering, and Recovery*, ed. Veena Das et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 1-31.

⁷ Fiona Ross, "Speech and Silence: Women's Testimony in the First Five Weeks of Public Hearings of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission," in *Remaking a World: Violence, Social Suffering, and Recovery*, ed. Veena Das et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 250-281.

⁸ Sherry Ortner, *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power and the Acting Subject* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 42. For other examples of ethnographic research practices, see Michael Agar, *The Professional Stranger: An Informal Introduction to Ethnography* (Bingley: Emerald, 1996); Ann Gray, *Research Practice for Cultural Studies: Ethnographic Methods and Lived Cultures* (London: Sage, 2002); and Kathleen Stewart, *A Space on the Side of the Road: Cultural Poetics in an "Other" America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

⁹ I use pseudonyms to conceal my informants' identities.

camp. From there, I recruited participants in adjacent quarters, including prominent community leaders. I worked with my research assistant to conduct and interpret life history interviews in Kinyarwanda, and employed an additional interpreter, a native speaker, to transcribe the interviews and enhance my understanding of what was said.¹⁰ The vast majority of refugees I interviewed were present in Mudende during the 1996 massacres, having mostly fled from their place of origin within the Masisi province, north Kivu, DRC. I followed refugees in their everyday movements within the camp, visiting families and individuals, attending community meetings, making trips to the health and malnutrition centers, to the ration distribution tent, and to burial and church ceremonies.

Refugees' narrations of Mudende jump back in time to recall fonder memories from the past, with little explicit attention to the graphic violence that physically marks their bodies and deeply affects their psyches. The violence of Mudende, experiences during the initial war at home, and stories of fleeing are not the subject of common, uninvited conversation. This article seeks to understand how experiences of trauma and violence matter to refugees through their stories of life before conflict and life in the camp after the massacres. I highlight the ways their narrations are formed and prompted in divergent styles to the UNHCR interviews, to the ethnographer, and to one another.

Ethnography and oral history share a strong foundation in “deep listening” and research dedicated to a “view from below” that is inclusive of little-represented or acknowledged social and historical events—as Mudende is iterated by my informants.¹¹ To this end, I analyze the manner in which refugees narrate

¹⁰ Anthropologists generally assume that ethnographic research reproduces the partial, incomplete, and biased accounts of narrators, acknowledging the ambiguity and unfinished quality to narratives, especially those about spectacular violence, see James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men: Three Tenant Families* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001); Stewart, *A Space on the Side of the Road*; Marilyn Strathern, *Partial Connections*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2004). In addition, some anthropologists have stressed the impossibilities and dissatisfactions of ethnographic writing about violence, and the way such texts elide complete representation to reside in a space of at least partial unintelligibility, divided between those who experience violence and those who try to imagine it. See Das, *Life and Words*; Danny Hoffman, *The War Machines: Young Men and Violence in Sierra Leone and Liberia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford, 1985); and Slavoj Žizek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008).

¹¹ Erin Jessee, “The Limits of Oral History: Ethics and Methodology Amid Highly Politicized Research Settings,” *Oral History Review* 38, no. 2 (2011): 287-308; Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds., *The Oral History Reader*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2006); Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991); Fiona Ross, “Speech and Silence”; Paul Thompson, “The Voice of the Past: Oral History,” in *The Oral History Reader*, 2nd ed., edited by Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, New York: Routledge, 2006), 1-30.

their experience of violence in Mudende in frameworks driven by their own understandings and agendas.¹² I complicate conventional understandings of how victims remake and live in the everyday after violence by analyzing the diverse and textured ways my informants communicate their pasts, and their pasts in relation to their present lives.

Necropolitics and Forced Migration

The 1994 Rwandan genocide overshadows the present day conflict in eastern DRC where lives continue to be destroyed as a result of on-going regional conflict and violence. The Great Lakes regional refugee crisis from 1994 to 1996 is neither well understood nor commonly agreed upon in Rwandan politics, and overwhelmingly, the subject of forced migration is dominated by the controversial debate about the June 2013 cessation clause that revokes Rwandan refugees' status in DRC.¹³ Despite current estimates that nearly seventy thousand Congolese refugees have sought refuge in Rwanda, their presence is not widely known by the international public. The few conversations about exile that do take place center on Rwandans holding political and legal refugee status and the reasons they cite for continuing to claim this status.

Studies of the Great Lakes crises and post-genocidal violence report that *Interahamwe*, arriving in Zaire following the genocide in Rwanda, chose refugee camps as their new bases for rebel activity. From inside the camps in Congo, rebels recruited new members to form the *Armée Pour la Libération du Rwanda* (ALIR) and later the *Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération du Rwanda* (FLDR), while Rwandese Hutu civilians (who had fled and were not involved in committing acts of genocide) struggled to survive disease and starvation.¹⁴ During this period, the line between victims and perpetrators blurred, as many soldiers

¹² A month or two into fieldwork, I learned about the Mudende massacres by accident. It was mentioned in conversation with humanitarian workers in the process of doing resettlement interviews for the UNHCR. When asked about what happened at home, causing them to leave, Gihembe camp refugees often describe the ways they were “hunted” by “the killers” in their home province of North Kivu. They often summarize and gloss over these events, murmuring, “we were chased,” gazing far off, avoiding direct eye contact. Their withdrawnness conveys unspeakable memories of leaving their land and homes, how they were “taken by force,” and those families who were killed and left there, dead.

¹³ The cessation clause discontinues Rwandan refugees' status. This applies to refugees who fled their country between 1959-1998. The clause can be applied when the refugee's country of origin has undergone fundamental and durable changes and there is no longer a fear of persecution or a need for international UN protection, see UNHCR website. <http://www.unhcr.org/51cd7df06.html>

¹⁴ Jennie Burnet, *Genocide Lives in Us: Women, Memory and Silence in Rwanda* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2012); and Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

fighting in the war post-genocide were not necessarily or exclusively *Interahamwe*, but were rather new recruits drawn from inside the refugee camps.¹⁵

These complex paramilitary alliances are simply referenced in refugee narratives as “*Interahamwe*.” From the perspective of refugees, *Interahamwe* refers to the Rwandese Hutu forces that instigated with genocidal intent the mass killings in Rwanda, and then in DRC, where “they brought those bad ideas [about ethnicity].” The Mudende camp suffered multiple attacks from these forces in 1996.¹⁶ Since then, a host of militias in eastern DRC have been responsible for the intervening years of conflict, although they are no longer driven by the small remnants of what had been *Interahamwe*.¹⁷ Conflict and war in eastern DRC have resulted in millions of deaths, and millions more have been forcibly displaced both inside and outside DRC.

The people of eastern DRC are terribly familiar with the effects of necropolitics—the political decision-making processes over modes of sovereignty driven by the destruction of populations.¹⁸ Following the 1994 Rwandan genocide, *Interahamwe* mixed with civilian Congolese Hutu, Tutsi, Hunde, and other ethnic groups in the north and south Kivu provinces of DRC who cultivated, owned cattle, and were land owners significantly segmented by social class.¹⁹ Rwandese Tutsi and Hutu civilians also fled west toward South Kivu, north into Uganda, and east into Burundi. It was one of the largest mass migrations in east Africa and further emphasizes how ethnic groups have not fit neatly within the Great Lakes region’s national borders prior to the 1994 genocide, and less so in its aftermath.²⁰ *Interahamwe* acted alongside other organized militias, the Mai Mai and Combatta, the Magravi party, and more recently, the *Patriotes Résistants Congolais* (PARECO) and the Congolese government army who seek to promote

¹⁵ René Lemarchand, *The Dynamics of Violence in Central Africa* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*; Gerard Prunier, *Africa’s World War: Congo, the Rwandan Genocide, and the Making of a Continental Catastrophe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); and Filip Reyntjens, *The Great African War: Congo and Regional Geopolitics, 1996-2006* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹⁶ I remind the reader that “these forces” are incredibly complicated in composition and taken up in political science, transitional justice, and historical debates. See references in the previous footnote.

¹⁷ Current events involve *Congrès National pour la Défense du Peuple* (CNDP), *Mouvement du 23-Mars* (M23), and the governments of Rwanda, Uganda, and DRC. Jason Stearns and the Rift Valley Institute provide on-going complicated analyses on regional dynamics, which are outside the scope of this article: www.riftvalley.net.

¹⁸ Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11-40.

¹⁹ Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*.

²⁰ Lemarchand, *The Dynamics of Violence*; and Prunier, *Africa’s World War*.

their own tribes, land ownership, access to mineral rights and wealth, and political agendas.²¹

During the 1996 massacres, the Mudende camp was defended by the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), who were interested in protecting vulnerable Tutsi in the region, alongside their more profound interest: to eradicate *Interahamwe* and later, FDLR who were hiding in the forests and in camps in North Kivu with civilian Rwandese and Congolese Hutu. Distinguishing between combatant and civilian was difficult, and individuals could play both roles depending on contextual and environmental factors, such as food scarcity, illness, and injury.²² The incentives for new recruits to join the *Interahamwe* and FDLR was simply to survive—by agreeing to kill.

In this sense forced migration generated conditions that reproduced and reinscribed interethnic conflict. Congolese Tutsi, particularly in Masisi, North Kivu, are Kinyarwanda speakers who migrated to DRC surrounding the 1959 Tutsi exodus from Rwanda, when large numbers resettled to escape political instability and population strain.²³ North Kivu offered swathes of land and was met with little resistance from Mobutu until the 1960 referendum on Congolese national citizenship laws, which granted land only to those who had previously dwelled in North Kivu.²⁴ The Tutsi minority did manage to secure land at that time, but as Kinyarwanda speakers and new citizens of the state, other groups in the region contested their acceptance.²⁵ The refugees in Gihembe camp do not readily point this out. Coexistence with different ethnic groups before the wars is a fondly recounted trope in the camp, something refugees can imagine in the future. These hopes for the future must be understood in context; continuing persecution and violence keeps refugees from returning home, and obstructs their ability to ever live harmoniously in their original homes.²⁶

²¹ Prunier, *Africa's World War*.

²² This slippage between refugee and soldier is noted and discussed by one informant later on in his account of how *Interahamwe* entered the Mudende camp.

²³ Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*; and Prunier, *Africa's World War*.

²⁴ Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*.

²⁵ Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*; International Refugee Rights Initiative, "In the Shadows of Return: The Dilemmas of Congolese Refugees in Rwanda," in *Citizenship and Displacement in the Great Lakes Region, Working Paper 6* (International Refugee Rights Initiative, 2011).

²⁶ For more on how hopes and realities for reconciliation are irreducibly complex, see Kimberley Theidon, *Intimate Enemies: Violence and Reconciliation in Peru* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

Multiple Versions of Massacre

The Mudende massacres are profoundly formative and lingering traumatic experiences for Gihembe camp refugees. These experiences of violence overlap with many older and newer forms of violence since 1996, confounded by the inherent, everyday violence of camp life, regardless of the humanitarian perspective that views the camp as facilitating life.²⁷ Eastern DRC is a place where war, on-going death, and insecurity largely pass unnoticed by the broader global community while being familiar and everyday forms of violence for refugees in Gihembe.²⁸ Refugees' personal narrations offer another perspective to understand what violence in this context involves. They offer their views without the potential incentive of being granted UNHCR resettlement and, in the process, give insights into how they develop strategies for narrating this violent history on their own terms. Against the backdrop of trauma and violence, having endured compounding forms of acute violence, they also live in the conditions of the camp that further immobilize, demoralize, and often extend their experiences of brutality on a daily basis.

What follows is a collection of narrations about what happened in Mudende. First, I introduce how refugees are required to give evidence of their experiences of violence and survival during formal interviews conducted by the UNHCR. I then contrast this testimonial style of interviewing by the UNHCR apparatus with three narrations of the massacres from my ethnographic fieldwork. At times these narratives are limited to voices that speak silence, while at others, survivors attach words, however limited, to a larger narrative about the massacres. Often, in formal interviews with me, refugees felt shame, embarrassment, and horror when speaking about Mudende. Several interviewees refused to talk about Mudende, other than to say that they had been there at the time. In one interview, a woman simply noted, "I have no words left to tell." Narrating violence sometimes demands forms of silence, and shattering, amplified silence is often precisely the point, the very central feature narrators wish to relay.²⁹

In other refugees' experiences, the Mudende massacres bled into the other events of betrayal and killing in DRC and later in Rwanda. Still others began by

²⁷ Michel Agier, *Managing the Undesirables: Refugee Camps and Humanitarian Government* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011).

²⁸ Severine Autesserre, *The Trouble with Congo: Local Violence and the Failure of International Peacebuilding* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); James Smith, "Tantalus in the Digital Age: Coltan Ore, Temporal Dispossession, and 'Movement' in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo," *American Ethnologist* 38, no. 1 (2011): 17-35; and Jason Stearns, *Dancing in the Glory of Monsters: The Collapse of the Congo and the Great War of Africa* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011).

²⁹ Begonia Aretxaga, *Shattering Silence: Women, Nationalism, and Political Subjectivity in Northern Ireland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); and Burnet, *Genocide Lives in Us*.

narrating the Mudende massacres and then moved on to discuss the broader dynamics of DRC at the time of their departure. It is difficult to discern how one layer of violence and atrocity relates to another, and how a series of state, humanitarian, and local actors provided comfort and protection to some at the expense of others.

Testimonial and Evidentiary Format – the UNHCR Interview Process

Permanent solutions for refugees in protracted, endless forced migration are limited to the possibility of official and permanent resettlement by the UNHCR, often to a European or North American country. This potential to resettle refugees who have spent long periods of time in exile is commonly viewed by the UNHCR and humanitarian operations as an alluring, though highly limited, response. In certain contexts, such as for those displaced from Somalia and Sudan, and increasingly for Congolese, where there are few imminent promises for security from the country of origin, the “forces of compassion” at play generally assume that resettlement is one of the few options left to restore refugees’ humanity.³⁰ Similar to a humanitarian model of medical assistance, the camp in many ways assumes that sustaining biological life is an adequate response to trauma and violence. In many ways, the UNHCR takes “the terms of humanity at stake,” and reduces “it to a suffering body.”³¹ A feature of this process is to make legible human suffering and create awards around it—such as the promise of a new life in resettlement—and, in the process, shape these awards into primary forms of compensation for those who have suffered. Individuals and families have higher odds of being awarded resettlement the more they are able to present experiences of suffering and exceptional vulnerability in the camp in terms that the UNHCR can formally recognize.

The UNHCR constructs an overlap between past violence and present vulnerability using categories of victimhood, privileging the cases of individuals who are, for instance, “orphaned,” “disabled,” or “HIV positive.” This is a large part of how refugees in resettlement interviews are compelled to testify in great detail in the hopes of achieving a resettlement award. For example, if a refugee became disabled during the Mudende massacres, the odds of being awarded resettlement are higher than for an able-bodied refugee who has been in the camp for the same duration of time, with the same household size and similar everyday constraints. If the narration of a violent event such as the Mudende massacres

³⁰ Erica Bornstein and Peter Redfield, “An Introduction to the Anthropology of Humanitarianism,” in *Forces of Compassion: Humanitarianism Between Ethics and Politics*, eds. Erica Bornstein and Peter Redfield (Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press, 2010), 1-27.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 67.

connects to current lived vulnerabilities in the camp, the likelihood of the UNHCR building a case for resettlement becomes significantly higher.

In their everyday lives, refugees speak of violence in DRC and Mudende vaguely and with a mixture of spectacular care, ambivalence, and pain. The experiential realms of the Mudende atrocity are glossed over in the everyday lives of camp dwellers. Yet, in many other ways, the violence of Mudende represents to refugees another, similar violence that is visible in the ordinary objects and conditions in the camp. Their narration of violence contrasts with the aim of UN resettlement staff who prompt refugees to script full testimonies of the atrocities they endured in ways that are often unfamiliar to them. Conventional approaches to documenting traumatic experiences and violence privilege the format of testimony, wherein the speaker narrates ostensibly true events and provides moments for evidentiary claims to support the narration of these events, similar to the UNHCR format for resettlement interviews.³² In these kinds of official documents, there is little room for refugees to express themselves in ways more closely related to how they endure everyday forms of violence.

A large part of “the official” narration of refugees’ experiences of violence and trauma in the camp takes place as part of the intervention by the UNCHR and the broader humanitarian system in place. Because the UNHCR is unable to protect the basic needs of all refugees, the resulting interview process relies on categories of current vulnerabilities and discrimination in the camp setting—a sorting process that excludes past experiences of violence and suffering. The resettlement process operates within a paradox that prompts refugees to share narratives of trauma, only to assume those narratives are possibly fabricated. There are many steps to vetting the credibility of refugees’ experiences.

Neither refugees nor UNHCR staff find the resulting resettlement process transparent. To minimize what the UNHCR calls “fraudulent claims” of trauma, staff in charge of resettlement sift through the refugee in-take and registration database for those refugees who were initially categorized as extremely vulnerable—namely, “orphaned,” “HIV positive,” or “disabled” individuals. En route to establishing criteria and particular cases for UNHCR resettlement to the West, staff ask refugees to establish their histories of flight from their home countries and their experiences in Mudende. Refugees interviewed as potential candidates for resettlement are prompted to narrate the precise details of their social and life histories.

Refugees are asked a barrage of questions. Where exactly were their prior homes? How many people were in their household at that time? How did the war come to them? Who chased them? Were they involved in direct conflict? Who

³² Didier Fassin, “Inequality of Lives, Hierarchies of Humanity: Moral Commitments and Ethical Dilemmas of Humanitarianism,” in *In the Name of Humanity: The Government of Threat and Care*, eds. Ilana Feldman and Miriam Ticktin (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 238-256.

was killed in the process? How were they killed? Where did they run to next? Who did they meet along the way? Who discovered them, or protected them after reaching the border? What documents and possessions were they able to bring? The more consistent the detail offered, the more credible the refugee becomes. The rubric of evaluation privileges certain kinds of violence over others, just as the broader humanitarian apparatus promotes an idea that different kinds of harm and suffering can be isolated and objectively ranked. This reification and categorization of harm serves to delegitimize those kinds of suffering that fall short of whatever the threshold is for action or recognition.

Resettlement is supposed to award those most in need and provide reprieve from the on-going emergency of camp life, be it living with AIDS, physical disabilities, or peer-based discrimination. When asked to talk about violence and trauma in the highly formalized setting of resettlement interviews—a setting in which there are high stakes and potential rewards—refugees are accustomed and encouraged to share graphic details of their experiences, despite how little refugees in Gihembe understand about the larger criteria for resettlement qualifications.³³ The UNHCR method of narrating trauma first asks specific questions to the registered head of the household, and then later other members of the household also narrate these events. Afterwards, the officer approves and extends future interviews for resettlement or closes the case.

For refugees it is an uncomfortable process, retraumatizing at times, and it is highly difficult to remember and reorder violent events from past years. Refugees informally relayed their stories to me in a limited number of types—stories of “the chase,” of fleeing and running, of “the killers,” of watching family members die or of hearing the sounds of war rapidly approaching their homes—reflecting the ambiguity of their memories and the residual trauma over what happened. Everyone in the camp has stories of trauma so similar they almost form folkloric genres. The details of the massacre vary, but the overarching stories are the same.

Innocent: A Technical Narration of Mudende

Among my informants, Innocent was rare for his explicit and detailed narration of the Mudende massacres. At first, he echoed a formal rendition of the massacres, and then later reflected more broadly on what the acts of killing meant to him now. Wrinkled and fragile in appearance, a man around seventy years in age, he sits on a wooden bench while we talk. He is a widower since his wife died of old age in Gihembe camp, the accumulation of the wear and tear on her body from the hard life. Innocent lost her about four years after the camp moved from Mudende

³³ In humanitarian and UNHCR circles, it is well established that different camps and populations vary intensely in their working knowledge of acquiring awards from these systems.

to Gihembe, although he has been so long in the camp now, he is unsure of which year she passed. Her body is buried in the refugee graveyard on the periphery of the northern side of the camp quarters, just below the houses in that quadrant. They had a total of nine children, of whom six remain living, and although he does not state it explicitly, the three children must have died in Mudende, along the way from the DRC, or since being in the camp. He did not offer this information, and I did not ask.

The only time that Innocent has returned home to DRC was in 2002 for a brief visit through a “go and see” mission arranged by the UNHCR and a delegation of local leaders in north Kivu. Now, he feels largely resigned to spend his remaining days of life in the camp to be eventually buried next to his wife. The mounds of green grass in semi-organized rows outline the bodies of the dead, marking how long the camp has existed in Byumba and how many refugees made it to Gihembe camp only to become stuck in this liminal space, never to return to their original homes in the Kivus.

I tentatively asked Innocent if he minded telling me about the conditions in Masisi, north Kivu, leading up to his departure, and his family’s journey. Straight-faced and tight-lipped, he stated flatly, “I came because of the war in 1996, in April. First I went to Mudende. After being attacked by *Interahamwe*, the government of Rwanda brought us here. Even when I remember what happened there, now, I cannot sleep.” He paused for a long time, and shifted his body, resituating his coat and putting his hands into his overcoat pockets. “*Nta kundi*,” he said, “there is no other way,” followed by “*boh*.” These are stock phrases used by refugees to narrate difficult moments past and present, the translation being, “it is what it is,” or “anyway...” The repetition of these words in the camp relays an acknowledgement of something painful or difficult to discuss. His pause marked something relevant to the event.

“Mudende is in the forest,” he said, “there near the volcanoes.” He shifted his body now on the bench, adjusting his legs in the chilly house. He continued gingerly, “First,” explaining,

Those killers came before and started moving the big stones around the road...they were preventing the army from protecting us...the killers came in the evening, using traditional materials and started killing us all night in the camp, they were stopping and starting till morning with the traditional instruments...machetes...

He made eye contact, and said perhaps the story was still unclear. Uncomfortable with explicitly asking for more detail, I nodded, affirming his understanding. He gestured into the air at nothing, and shrugged.

They came to kill. It was the government of Rwanda that came to rescue us, they were calling [out to] the man inside the camp...he told them they were burning the houses of *Interahamwe*, fighting *Interahamwe*, but he was actually the intelligence man to *Interahamwe* and he lied...the Government of Rwanda's army came late because of that Hutu man [the informant]. It was the problem of that man--first--he was seeing that people could discriminate and he was Hutu. He saw something would happen. That was when they [the *Interahamwe*] were going inside the houses, burning tents, it was very bad. Around 2,000 refugees died...those killers came and after entering, they started killing outside, then inside the houses, then shooting, burning the tents, some people were running. It was night. I was running under the trees, then outside the camp. God is the one who helped us survive. Even in Congo, they killed us like that, the same as in Mudende.

Listening to Innocent, I wonder how the massacre could take place in what was supposed to be a safe haven, protected by the UNHCR and the Rwandan government. Innocent's account presents a complex and confusing description of these events and an explanation for who was involved in the killings. Innocent claims "the man" who was working as a Hutu civilian in the camp lied to the Government of Rwanda. Innocent believes he was working with *Interahamwe* and "tricked" the RPF soldiers. In Innocent's mind, the Hutu man inside the camp was working and posing as an aid worker in Mudende, but really he was recruited by *Interahamwe* to facilitate a larger collaboration of "killing" between local Hutu and *Interahamwe*. Innocent understands "the killers," those local civilian Hutu working with UNHCR inside Mudende, to have joined with *Interahamwe*. In doing so, they colluded with those employed within the UNHCR and humanitarian operation personnel. This idea was conveyed by a few others in interviews, although largely dismissed at the UN level. Even though the humanitarian operation personnel were ostensibly vetted and were to be working on behalf of Tutsi refugees, Innocent is not convinced of their sincerity; otherwise, as he explained, the killers "would not have succeeded" in Mudende. In conflict zones, knowing who is who and working towards what ends is extremely complicated.³⁴

The starkness of Innocent's words makes clear how he has come to understand violence: "they came to kill" represents the *Interahamwe*'s singular mission. The lived reality of violence often lacks meaning to those who endure it when compared to those who try to study it. As with other narrations of Mudende

³⁴ Hoffman, *The War Machines*.

during interviews and research, I found it difficult to reconstruct a scene of events out of the fragmented memories of violence and chaos, especially after the violence that drove refugees from their homes and the similarity of the events, perpetrators, and nature of this violence. Innocent's memories are his truths of what he remembers now, years later, thrown together out of what he saw and heard as he questioned if he would survive, and from the days and subsequent years in the camp.

Innocent does not lay specific blame on those non-refugees inside the camp who were, in his account, easily convinced to let the killers inside. His words also reveal another sentiment of certainty about how people were killed during the massacres. As he says, "They killed us like that in Congo, the same," an expression of his sense of familiarity with repeated trauma. In speaking, he is matter-of-fact and straightforward about how the Mudende massacres came to be and who was responsible for the killing. He is also convinced that the RPF was the intervening force that protected the camp, even if their actions were too late to stop the ambush. Several days later, when I met with Innocent again, he relayed how he did not sleep that night after telling me, just as he knew he would not.

Piecing together a seamless, comprehensive, congruent account of violence and massacres such as these is an impossible task: the truth as it occurs for one person is different for another. What other refugees believe to have happened in Mudende, the reasons or causes for the violence, and their memories of what took place there are often different in nature, description, and substance. Spectacular violence has this quality; it erases memories at times, and fills in the gaps with voids, silences, blankness, disbelief, or a refusal to remember.³⁵ This perspective on trauma takes it to be a space of belatedness and an event that is so overwhelming that the victim cannot fully experience it. The creation and production of the truth of trauma take place after the event in the telling, in memory, and in the often-reverberating aftermath of terror. Innocent's and others' modes of narrativizing Mudende oppose the manner in which the UNHCR seeks to structure and order violence in neat and precise categories.

In several interviews, some similar to my interview with Innocent, refugees rehearse the events of Mudende. Although few speak about the massacres in such detail, many will casually, if asked, commit to having been in Mudende, or to perhaps having lost family members there before arriving in Gihembe camp. This is in sharp contrast to the ways in which refugees narrate these events to the UNHCR, whose actions and resettlement intentions necessarily force a certain structure onto the events. Yet this leads to an over-determined

³⁵ Caruth, "Trauma and Experience"; Das, *Life and Words*; Alan Feldman, "Memory Theatres, Virtual Witnessing, and the Trauma-Aesthetic," *Biography* 27, no. 1 (2004): 163-202; and Carolyn Nordstrom, *A Different Kind of War Story* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997).

figure of the refugee, a subject who should be interested in apprehending the maximum services available and a subject who can make the experience of violence intelligible to another person.³⁶ This figure of the refugee, a creation of the UNHCR interview and resettlement process who speaks in elaborate detail about past experiences of violence, becomes clear when contrasted with the individual men and women who do not and cannot speak about this violence. It is the difference between a refugee who narrates excruciating spectacular violence, potentially hour by hour, minute by minute, and another refugee who nods about having been present in the place at the time when the camp was collectively hurt but shows ambivalence at being questioned about these events. Refugees are made more eligible or entitled to resettlement from the humanitarian apparatus the more they are able to narrate these events in great detail, but on an everyday basis they do not speak of Mudende or of the initial killings that caused them to leave their homes.

Ildephonse: A Contextual Narrative of Mudende

Another man, Ildephonse, who was also an elder, cogently relayed the years and months leading up to the Mudende massacres. We sat in his camp home constructed of a mud and sand mixture with a few other elders, the walls cold and the rain softly pattering on the plastic sheeting the UNHCR assigns for roofing in the camp. He started quietly, “*Boh...*” and trailed off. “The genocide happened here [in Rwanda] and *Interahamwe* shifted place to Congo and they were living in a camp. Then, war happened there [Congo] too, and the army from Rwanda went and started fighting them and the fighting spread to the population around the Congo.” The window carefully placed in the construction of the house was slightly open. The material used to open and close the window had been crafted from a metal USAID oil can, a material slightly stronger than plastic often reused in the camp for patching together and creating doors or windows. He closed the window entirely and darkness dominated the room.

He paused again, hesitating, and continued, “Before in the Kivus, we all lived together, got married, and were safe.” This was the era of Mobutu Sese Seko. He grinned, and repeated, “It was a time when we were all safe.” Others in the camp adamantly agree about the positive aspects of Mobutu’s era of rule, despite the contradictory characterizations of his nepotism and extravagant indulgences. Refugees claim it was a time when “We were all Congolese and we all had rights.” One of the elders chimed in, “We had the right to be where we wanted, to cultivate, to have cows, to develop ourselves. But the problem is

³⁶ Elsewhere I discuss how unique Gihembe camp is for its general disinterest in UNHCR resettlement schemes, as the majority of refugees here yearn to return home more than they wish to move to North America or Europe.

Mobutu did not develop his country, in terms of infrastructure, roads, education. So what he did was give freedom to the population, but not develop his country enough to give the good life, forever, to us.”

Days later, a larger circle of elder men sitting under the house’s plastic roof wondered how things might have been different if Mobutu’s reign had lasted longer. This was an extension of the conversation initiated about the Mudende massacres. One man interrupted another, who paused after getting the group’s attention. “Even when refugees came to Congo from other places, Mobutu gave them land! And protected them too!” The man speaking before him tipped his hat towards the dirt floor and re-crossed his legs. He spoke softly, bowed his head for emphasis, and relayed, “The government of Mobutu was good, there were no [ethnic] groups in his government, and no groups that could cause insecurity to the population. No groups were created at all. The problems came to the population after his government fell.” Again, as with many other conversations in the camp, refugees lapse into another mode to narrate their current lives and the violence they experienced in the past. “The problems” with the camp itself and the kind of life that is facilitated there are an easier way of talking about what has happened to them, past and present, than directly speaking of the massacres.

When prompted by me about Mudende, Ildephonse, like others, did speak, but carefully and generally. He said, “The war from here came there.” But when I pressed him for details, it was clear he preferred not to say more. Instead, he and the other men in the group wanted to discuss how their lives were before, to tell stories about how they had been living the “good life” and had had the ability to “cultivate themselves,” something that is impossible in the camp now. Ildephonse’s mode of narrating Mudende is characterized by lapsing back in time, with an implicit comparison to the life refugees now endure. His refusal to share details of Mudende is an act of agency. By lapsing back in time and offering his understanding of group dynamics in north Kivu before the war, he stresses the importance of ethnic dynamics that would not matter within the framework of a testimonial or evidentiary format. To Ildephonse, the violence of Mudende embodies the lingering and volatile politics of group identification in the region, and importantly, how their lives had been better in the past. He sees this violence as having stifled their ability to live collectively and to co-exist easily with other ethnic groups.

Yvette: An Expressive and Poetic Narration of Mudende

Yvette leaned over the hearth and stirred the pot placed over a fire. The food was rationed from the monthly World Food Program distribution. Wood smoke billowed around her, concealing her figure as she stirred, mediating and keeping pace with the heat and the boiling maize flour. It was lunchtime, and this family

gathered around the maize bread and beans served in a salty water mixture from a broad metal plate. Everyone circled the steaming food with spoons, sharing from the communal platter. A few of the youth asked about the interviews from earlier, what was I asking about, what did people tell me? The mama of this household also wanted to know and added, why am I asking about those things, that time, and the journey of fleeing?

She and I were well acquainted and later, in private, spoke briefly about Mudende. “Gisenyi, Mudende, we came through a transfer to here, through Mudende. Then, in 1997, or 1996, we came here...Five months I was there? Because at that time in Mudende, there was war, so I cannot remember the exact months...*Boh...*” She sighed. Eventually, she said shortly, “You see the lightning, but you feel the thunder. The thunder is stronger,” and she would not explain more on that particular day. Her silence was hauntingly critical and confusing.

Over the duration of my fieldwork, this saying came up repeatedly with Yvette and was a sentiment I heard from many others, although they did not use her exact words. The general expression makes sense to others in the camp, and was something I obsessively asked about after Yvette’s initial evocation of these words in our conversation. The thunder and lightning are metaphors for how the people in the camp live, feel, and experience violence and trauma, past and present. They illustrate what refugees more commonly feel and have to say about their trauma. The lightning refers to the things felt in the camp now over the course of nearly two decades of sequestration to life as a refugee. The lightning is the violence they are exposed to on a daily basis. Instead of talking explicitly about the events of Mudende, or of the “chase” from home to the camp, they talk about the horror of living in the camp for so long. The “bad life” and “this refugee life” are ways of describing how hard the daily tasks of surviving in the camp actually are for those who are forced to reside there. The lightning comes to mean the often rotten and inadequate food rations distributed by the World Food Program. The lightning is the terror of knowing that the health center will not transfer even the sickest refugees to the local hospital, and it is very possible for people to die in the center because of the lack of care and treatment given there. The lightning is the inability to find work and cultivate food for yourself and your family and it is in all the injustices and ordinary forms of violence that refugees live with on a daily basis. The camp is filled with lightning: witnessed in nearly every aspect of the decaying homes, malnourished children, and lack of education past the primary school years. These are the reminders that the refugees have been hurt deeply, and their physical presence in the camp is a tragic indicator and a constant reminder of what they used to have at home, before war, before Mudende.

Yvette said, “You see the lightning, but you feel the thunder.” The roar and rumble of thunder are what is felt, and the thunder is stronger and more potent

than the lightning. Thunder refers to the events narrated in formal terms, in testimonial style about what has come before, at home in Congo and in Mudende. Thunder, and the feelings associated with it, are more volatile than the everyday torment of living in the camp. One younger refugee notes, “The way we suffered then cannot be compared...we suffered even more before.” The trauma and violence of the past is strongly related to that of the present context, but it comes from the past, it resides in the skies, and in the earth, as the thing that is felt. This is one reason Ildephonse deflects a direct rendition of Mudende and instead discusses how life was before the genocide spilled over into DRC.

The thunder is the undercurrent to everything else that has put in motion the violence that initially displaced these refugees, and it is what keeps them in the camps now. It is more felt than expressed. The bright flash of lightning quells the sounds of thunder, yet not the feeling of it, suggesting that the lightning may also blind aspects of past emotional trauma. The peculiar thing about the metaphors of thunder and lightning are that they are always recognized as happening together, and embody a simultaneous effort and strategy. They come from the same source or point of origin—the violence that stretches from the past and engulfs the present. However, in Gihembe, they are two manifestations of the same effect, although the two are separately felt and perceived. The memory of violence is sometimes blurred, ignored, or deleted, becoming something that might be relayed to an ethnographer or oral historian, but most likely not the UNHCR representative. The testimonial format of humanitarian intervention demands a more linear narrative. Nevertheless, for Gihembe camp residents, their lived experiences are not as straightforward. What does this mean for how violence over a protracted period is understood, felt, and lived? The thunder in the camp is especially volatile and is the thing that takes over during the formal telling of violence, or in the month of commemoration when survivors speak of details about Mudende.³⁷

Given this inability to narrate how deeply felt experiences of atrocity and violence can be, other camp informants also relayed, “Silence is the best cure for a disturbed mind.” The expression alludes to the thunder and the lightning, saying that any attempt to narrate the past and its pain and difficulty is in vain, yet silence is not possible if there is thunder. “We have to keep quiet,” another refugee said, “because when we think of our lives, those events and massacres...what is the destination?” What might their narration of these

³⁷ See Burnet, *Genocide Lives in Us*, for an ethnographic account of the national commemoration month in Rwanda, an official time of remembering victims of the genocide. Commemoration is largely marked as a week of mourning when restaurants and bars close, and the government holds formal events in Kigali and in provinces that allow survivors of genocide to formally remember and retell their stories of the genocide with other survivors.

massacres change or open up? In what way is it possible for the humanitarian apparatus to take action, or to correct or remedy their suffering?

These questions are irresolvable to Gihembe camp residents and to the UNHCR and its implementing partners alike. Everyone knows the point of the camp is for people to be provided for in some capacity, however inadequate and no matter how this inflicts more suffering and violence. Silence is an easier strategy to take up. For refugees, silence relieves them of having to relive the thunder, and the disturbances that remembering brings up. Taken together, the sum of Gihembe refugees' lives are dramatically shaped in all aspects by survival in the present and by violence in the past, although in everyday life, these dynamics melt and merge into daily realities.³⁸

Seeing the lightning, but feeling thunder, is an example of a retelling that, although elusive and vague, relays a great deal about the camp sensibilities and complicates experiences of violence with an amorphous temporal dimension. By remembering the past, you are transported back to that moment and you feel the horror and upset of the event, which then has effects in the present. As Innocent says, "When I remember, I cannot sleep." Asking the people in the camp to give formal testimony about experiences in Mudende or their flight from DRC triggers and enhances the lightning of the present, making the daily experience of camp conditions more difficult.

However, there are other aspects of the metaphors of lightning and thunder that reveal additional interpretations of Yvette's sentiments. Lightning is instantaneous and is potentially part of the sensory hierarchy between things buried and things felt, whereas the thunder is the sensory thing heard. Within the idiom of a single event, blending and contradiction occur between time, space, feeling, and the visual. Lightning is blinding and can stand for spectacular violence, but it is also the everyday conditions of camp life, a chronic condition rather than an isolated event. The humanitarian apparatus depends on rigid definitions of trauma. The UNHCR rubric for suffering imposes a framework onto experience that does not necessarily make sense to those subjects nor their narration of experience. The ethnographer's role, on the other hand, is not to tell subjects what they mean or pinpoint what really happened, but instead to do the interpretative work of thinking about ambiguous social sensibilities that emerge out of collective experience.

Within the testimonial format of humanitarian aid, where victims are responsible for advocating for themselves and their experiences of brutality, present circumstances are generally inadmissible as grounds to resettle away from the camp, to be awarded more rations, or to obtain a voucher for school. The conventional way of narrating violence in the past provides a buffer for how and

³⁸ Nordstrom, *A Different Kind of War Story*.

what kinds of services or reparations refugees can be eligible for in the present, as the past is a privileged moment among many other moments of violence.

This dynamic of promoting certain kinds of narration of violence is what refugees in Gihembe are actually doing when they discuss hardships among themselves as “lightning and thunder.” In other instances, as with UNHCR interviews, refugees have far less choice in the way they can explain what violence means to them. Narrating past trauma in the camp context does not capture the meanings that a testimony format does. I contend that refugees complicate standard ideas about how violence is lived, discussed, and narrated long after the violence has passed and they have survived. Their stories are discrete, poetic, and not linear. Some note that they wished they had been killed so that they would not have to endure the endless cycle of living/dying as refugees in the camp. The idea that narrating their suffering of Mudende and that telling their experience in a particular way can bring them justice and reparations is little understood by UNHCR staff and refugees alike. The concepts of justice and retribution, like the ability to remake one’s self, are intangible and ambiguous in daily life and are separate from the humanitarian apparatus that services the camp.

One woman assured me, “God will bring those killers to justice,” a note that was tremendously striking as it signifies the belief in something invisible but immanent, similar to the power of thunder. Christina Zarowsky aptly describes similar strategies in a Somali refugee community as “expressive idioms” that are critical signifiers of narrating the history of the camp: thunder and lightning, forgetting and curing, god and justice.³⁹ These surely are not factors that go into conventional narratives and “proper” ways of narrating violence, as they do not lend themselves easily to quantification, measurement, or comparison, as one refugee saliently noted; “We suffered more before,” he said, and this should not be compared to the suffering of neighbors here now, or of other refugees in other camps. The violence of Mudende is specific to this camp, but refugees do not privilege their suffering over others, inside the camp or in the other refugee camps close by. There is far greater felt solidarity to how they see themselves as having survived in the past and in the present. These are the ways refugees themselves understand their experiences and make space—even if a meager one—for living with violence in their current lives.

Humans as Living Lightning Rods

Taking a more nuanced and ethnographic perspective on the Mudende massacres involves attending to the additional ways that refugees talk about violence, and to

³⁹ Christina Zarowsky, “Writing Trauma: Emotion, Ethnography, and the Politics of Suffering Among Somali Returnees in Ethiopia,” *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 28, no. 1 (2004): 189-209.

what these less explicit narrations, utterances, and metaphors of living lightning rods relay about how violence is embodied and lived in the camp. Additionally, in thinking more closely about narrations of violence, inherent questions are raised about who gets to decide which kinds of violence carry more weight, are awarded more notoriety, are more intelligible, and are broadly legitimized. Carolyn Nordstrom summarizes this point with survivors of war in Mozambique. She writes, “But in truth, violence and the creativity necessary to withstand it successfully are ultimately, and intensely, personal.”⁴⁰ Perhaps it is the personal dimension to surviving that refugees protect when they refuse to talk about the war or Mudende, even if there is “an entire sky of lightning” hovering above the camp that makes it impossible for refugees to “create” in Nordstrom’s sense, or, from another angle, that makes creation—even if it is just finding small bits of food to get by this day—take tremendous strength of character. In another man’s words, “Only we have the confidence to sleep here, hungry like this, for years...” The camp in this sense deflects the conventional ways of awarding narrations of violence by stating in other, deeply personal and felt ways what they know to be true now, not necessarily in the past.

Innocent’s account of Mudende is stated flatly, “I was there under the trees,” describing what happened to him after running and becoming a potential victim, escaping the collusion between humanitarian staff in the camp and *Interahamwe*. This is a wholly unsupported hypothesis by national, state, or UN versions of events. It was war, after all, and the Mudende massacres were notably gruesome, but they were just one relatively small instance of brutality during this period. Even though the RPF had attempted to secure the majority of the Western provinces by that time, war is unpredictable. “Till now, I am here under the trees,” he says to me more than fifteen years later, pointing with his hands to the air. His words indicate how there is a “coplesence in everyday life” of this trauma rather than the presence of absence.⁴¹ I understood him to mean he is still hiding in the camp from the killers, that he is overwhelmed with fear when he remembers Mudende. His words suggest that fear has become normalized and that remembering violence is a trigger, but that living in the camp—however assuredly safe it is now from violent assault—continues to signify how he is still hiding, living in secret, without the means to return and resume his previous life. He lives with these violent experiences and they have become part of him, embedded and always copresent in his everyday life. Hiding under the trees, despite the scarcity of shade trees in the camp, is another expressive idiom from the camp detailing how violence lives in us.⁴²

⁴⁰ Nordstrom, *A Different Kind of War Story*, 10.

⁴¹ Carol Kidron, “Toward an Ethnography of Silence,” *Current Anthropology* 50, no. 1 (2009): 15.

⁴² Burnet, *Genocide Lives in Us*.

The integration of trauma into the everyday world that refugees experience, and how this changes intergenerationally, is significant to how the younger refugees understand what it might mean to go home, and for the older generation, what the stakes are in doing so. For Innocent, as for Ildephonse, there are tremendous gains involved in “reaching home” and reclaiming “the good life.” According to Carol Kidron, there is a “normalization” of death-worlds that become “interwoven with everyday life-worlds” for survivors. Kidron argues against the assumption that death is always phobically bracketed off, ignored, or repressed, but is rather something that survivors are always talking about, often through silence, and sometimes without the literal translation and the words to “speak” or “tell” of these events at all.⁴³ Refugees also know that survivors pass down trauma intergenerationally to the younger people in the camp who have grown up there and do not remember their home or who the *Interahamwe* were, though they do know the fear and horror of what was done to them, their parents, and neighbors. Instead, they are taught to understand the significance of these events in the way that a grandmother reaches for the air, exclaiming with her arms outstretched how she used to own “mountains of cows” on her land, where the life was good and there was peace. Youth who have grown up in the camp also understand the difference between seeing the lightning and feeling the thunder, though the lightning is what they live and the thunder of the past is what they are told has happened. The trauma of violence is shared beyond the past and into the present. They can imagine in their living memories what the assault felt like.

Refugees often gloss over these events, summarizing them thus, “the killers came to kill us” and slaughter civilians to secure land, gain local power, deny the citizenship of those native to the region, and displace those who managed to survive and escape. They mutter, “Even now, there is no security,” and lawlessness abounds in eastern DRC. People pause, avert their eyes, and shake their heads. It is difficult to get refugees to talk about this period and the violence they endured, just as it is embarrassing to ask. They feel shame and sadness and are limited in what they can tell. The minor utterances about Mudende are rarely volunteered, and people are nervous about edging into political terms, a volatile topic. Yet they do still speak.

The difference between what is lived and felt is one very compelling way to think about the differences between testimonial formats of trauma and how these traumas manifest in practical everyday moments. In the larger group conversation with the elders, refugees articulated very clearly how ethnicity and group divisions are an enduring problem, instead of drawing out the details of the ambush in Mudende or what exact violence was inflicted. Talking about trauma in the past is critically linked to how this group speculates if the Mobutu era had

⁴³ Kidron, “Toward an Ethnography of Silence.”

lasted longer beyond the 1997 coup by Laurent Kabila—would DRC be stronger now? They often believe this to be the case. Yet their sentiments confuse common assumptions and dominant narratives, as it was Mobutu who was allied with the Hutu extremists in Rwanda, and it was he who invited or allowed the genocide and volatility into DRC, out of spite and hatred of the RPF. The period of time around the Mudende massacres marked the start of the first Congo War, a time that remains unresolved.

In another interview, when I asked who chased them, my informant laughed. She exclaimed, “*Interahamwe!*” in a nearly jovial tone, feigned but convincing. Her laughter reflects how obvious this information is to those in the camp, that it is a stock story, a well-worn narrative that should have been self-evident and apparent to me. It is the narrative that has been crafted by refugees to make sense of senseless violence, and frees up space from the complicated political context that too often overrides refugees’ own understandings. This same woman later said, “We were okay before those *Interahamwe* put the poison in the minds of those [Congolese] local Hutu. If they come back to Rwanda, we can return home and live in security and with peace.” Her narration of the chase, and of home, is rather simple. Those “killers came with a grenade inside the house of Mudende, my mother died.” Her children and other family members who were not in the house survived. On the surface, there are elements of “the chase” that are narrated as obvious moments of history but imply so much more.

In accounts of these attacks, refugees defy expected modes of narration by saying little or refusing to speak and, in the process, in fact say something entirely less obvious. Approaches to understanding violence, witnessing, and testimony are complicated by the ways Gihembe residents talk about their histories by pointing to the dreams and desires they have for their future. They imagine returning home to north Kivu and having the “good life” again, despite not having the logistical, monetary, or secure means to do so.

Conclusion

Modes of narrating Mudende can be explicit, discrete, and sometimes silent. The numerous massacres that Gihembe camp refugees have lived through are part of what keeps them stranded now, in the confines of the camp. More often than not they do not wish to narrate this topic, or lack the language to do so. Instead, they discuss in detail the circumstances and contexts of their lives prior to 1996 before the Mudende massacres happened, and their co-habitation with multiple ethnic groups in north Kivu before the wars. In the process, they create critical openings for new ways of understanding how camp residents see their present context and futures, as well as their shared history. In a Durkheimian framework, the narration of collective violence, however much one attempts to forget it, is necessary to

group formation and to maintaining a shared identity. The memories of violence, however quelled and silenced and only partly erased, are critical signifiers of the group's present identity. Forgetting is an active, deliberate, and some would suggest impossible choice, reflected in the silence and refusal to speak of the massacres, and even the occasional laughter at obvious questions about the perpetrators of violence—"Interahamwe! Of course!" Laughter, silence and other forms of emotional coping strategies emerge as distancing devices that mediate the helplessness of violence and create a space where one might "live with evil."⁴⁴

This article also shows how camp elders narrate the Mudende massacres by directly relating these experiences to ideas about their past home and their current desires to return to their previous lives. The slight turns of phrase surrounding Mudende, their silences, and their discrete nods and tears are all part of their contradictory and complicated versions of events that are incorporated into stories about atrocity in the camp now, the past camps, and long ago at home, in the months of "the chase." These atrocities, massacres, and other forms of violence are not distinct events to Gihembe camp refugees. They are a conglomeration, an assemblage of events that bleed into one another, overwhelm, and disrupt conventional standards about how victims of trauma should be able to easily narrate between the past and present moments, relegating one instance of violence to an isolated event. The Mudende massacres suggest another understanding of violence that brings together the past attacks and the present moments of camp life.

These reverberations of violence have been taken up by many scholars trying to understand this subject, its intergenerational transference within communities, its effect on memory, and its capacity to cause harm to survivors across time and space, among other enduring qualities of violence.⁴⁵ By attending to how testimonies and narratives of massacre are told, we gain traction on how experience endures through time. In other words, the way these experiences are relayed has huge bearing on what we hear. Veena Das argues that failure to recognize an affirmation of pain ("I am in pain") is to perpetuate and participate in violence, and that this failure is not a failure of intellect but of spirit.⁴⁶ Silence is a particular mark of knowing and it too functions as a way of legitimizing violence and terror. Silence and poetics are valid means to communicate experience, and if one listens deeply and closely, the easily submerged narratives

⁴⁴ Bruno Bettelheim, *Surviving and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980); and Deepak Mehta and Roma Chatterji, "Boundaries, Names, Alterities," in *Remaking a World: Violence, Social Suffering and Recovery*, ed. Veena Das et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 201-250.

⁴⁵ See for example Das and Kleinman, "Introduction"; Hoffman, *The War Machines*; Nordstrom, *A Different Kind of War Story*; and Simon Turner, *Politics of Innocence: Hutu Identity, Conflict and Camp Life* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012).

⁴⁶ Das, *Life and Words*, 40.

rise to the surface and complicate what was obvious or more readily intelligible from other accounts.

Testimony takes various forms and bonds depending on how the refugee subject is speaking. Remembering, as Primo Levi claims, requires the teller to eradicate their own memories as a “suspect source,” and the attempted evacuation of one’s memories is primarily an investment in self-protection.⁴⁷ Collective memories and individual memories highlight the disjunction between public culture, official memories, and the sensory memory of individuals; the official memory and the official inattention create a vacuum in which “discordant experiences” are excluded.⁴⁸

Thinking concretely about the formal testimonial style of violence and trauma, we leave out critical components concerning what is not allowed to be said in order to determine who can be left out. Labeling victims and rehearsing trauma through the UNHCR testimonial format necessarily means that the majority of understandings of Mudende are obscured, as testimonials rely on certain kinds of signification and certain frameworks to identify acceptable victims. In the UNHCR’s attempt to assign reparations for suffering and trauma, this reliance on categories of trauma and suffering “obliterates” additional competing forms of traumatic experiences by undermining the “diversity and complexity of experiences.”⁴⁹ Because humanitarian assistance and compensation are founded on the idea that there are objectively ranked strata of sufferers, a ranking of deservedness is produced as one refugee who has been injured more than another is resettled to compensate for their emotional and physical injuries and strain. An ethnographic approach to the Mudende massacres complicates the basis of such ranking by engaging the subtleties of suffering, by stressing the performative side of the testimonial format, and by attuning to how violent events are not discrete moments, but stretch across time. Only by opening up space to listen critically and attentively to the signs of the storm, the lightning and the thunder, are we able to more thoroughly account for how trauma and violence are lived through, embodied, ignored, and co-presented by survivors themselves. The stories they tell are themselves the painful links that connect the present to the past.

The narrative experiences expressed throughout this article are powerful demonstrations of how people live in the aftermath of violence through an entanglement of imaginative acts of lived memory. Traumatic moments are not clearly relegated to the past or present, but rather bend across temporalities to shape a subjectivity elided by conventional trauma perspectives and standards.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Das and Kleinman, “Introduction,” 14.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁹ Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 280-81.

More accurately, experiential truths, memory, and the articulation of this massacre exist as evolving, fluid, and variable exercises, dependent on the incentive, reparation, or personal nature of the victim and the listener or witness.⁵⁰

In this article I have tried to emphasize the ways that the imagination and poetics of Mudende are often superseded by testimonial forms in formal reparations and resettlement camp processes that obscure and ignore other social modes of discussing, remembering, making do with, and surviving massacre and violence. Embodiment and the inhabitation of violence are inescapable in that they rework individual and collective understandings of trauma and, at the same time, also generate sedentary meanings and versions of experience that are much more divergent than an official or singular narrative would suggest. The world of violence and the lived realities and memories it produces are not orderly, tangible, or conforming to an internal logic that fits neatly into a context, group of survivors, or a form of victimhood.⁵¹ Rather, the lived memory, and the truth and sense-making that Gihembe refugees create out of their flight from home, the Mudende massacres, and protracted exile, have never made sense to them in the way that the humanitarian and medicalized approaches to trauma would warrant. The tangled and re-tangled memories of massacre evolve over time, become deflected by the happier memories of home in the decades before war and genocide, and draw from peripheral factx⁵² not easily, neatly, or comfortably captured by refugees. As ethnographers and oral historians working in the field of violence, we must find new ways of listening to and thinking about experiential realms, and we must consider how survival in the everyday can constitute a traumatic event and normalized crisis in itself.

⁵⁰ Alexander Laban Hinton and Kevin Lewis O'Neill, "Genocide: Truth, Memory, and Representation, An Introduction," in *Genocide: Truth Memory and Representation*, eds. Alexander Laban Hinton and Kevin Lewis O'Neill (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 20.

⁵¹ Victoria Sanford, "What is an Anthropology of Genocide? Reflections on Field Research with Maya Survivors in Guatemala," in *Genocide: Truth, Memory, and Representation*, eds. Alexander Laban Hinton and Kevin Lewis O'Neill (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 46.

⁵² Here I follow Carolyn Nordstrom who writes, "I have written 'factx' instead of 'facts' to underscore the observation that, at least in the context of war, something is always wrong with the facts one is given. The facts of war emerge as 'essentially contested' figures and representations everyone agrees are important, and no one agrees on". See Nordstrom, *A Different Kind of War Story*, 43.