

# Umubano mu Bantu: Love Among People

By: Ornella Uwase Baganizi

A thesis submitted to the  
faculty of Columbia University  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Degree of Masters of Arts in Oral History

To my parents, and theirs, our ancestors,  
and our descendants,

Love.

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## I. Introduction

Rwanda has existed in my imagination for many years. I have written poems of this land; my parent's land; *my land*? I have regarded Rwanda with distanced longing before embrace. In a way this thesis is an exploration of self, of home, of a place I carry with me despite myself. I think for many years I was disappointed with the history of my people. We killed each other, after all. What kind of people are those? *My people*.

As far and disconnected as I have been, I have never been able to escape Rwanda. I wear her on my face. I have had countless encounters, in the oddest of places, of Rwandans and others approaching me with excitement, asking, although certain, if I was Rwandan. Well, yes. My parents are from Rwanda. But I was not born in Rwanda, in fact I have only been twice, and no, I do not speak the language, Kinyarwanda. But still there is something about my being that is so identifiably Rwanda.

I wonder,

How can I see an entire history in someone's face?

How do some of us wear our nation on our face?

How do I represent Rwanda? A place I have known so little about, but it seems like she knows so much about me. The place my parents are from, and their parents, and theirs. A place my parents love and grieve. A place my father always talks about, but never returned to. A place once called home.

## II. Background

This project flourished out of gratitude. After graduating from undergraduate, I remember being filled with a sense of gratitude for all I accomplished. I am the second person in my family to receive a college degree, after my father. I felt as though I was ensuring a tradition of higher education for our descendants. My grandfather came to the U.S. for the time to attend my graduation. He heard me deliver a speech to my classmates, the University President, Vice Chancellor, and others in a language he doesn't understand, English. My speech was about my journey of learning Swahili in college and what that has meant for me, an African, Rwandan woman. He shared with me afterwards how amazed he was that such a small girl could captivate a room full of people.



Photo description: I am standing at a podium giving a speech, smiling while my mother and grandfather sit on a table nearest to me, and look upon proud.

I began to reflect deeply on how all this had been possible for me. The answer was clear, it was due to my parents. All the support, care, encouragement, and love they gave me over the years led me to where I am. I graduated feeling very proud of the person I was and am still becoming. I started to understand how much of who I am is a reflection of who my parents raised me to be. My father is a generous man, and my mother is a loving woman. I knew I wanted to do something for them in the future. To tell them thank you. This project is for them.

This project is also for our descendants and me. I wanted to better understand my Rwandan ancestry. I was curious about the Rwanda my parents grew up in and their journeys of leaving their homeland. Why did they leave? What did they leave behind? And why haven't they returned? I was curious for myself, but also for future generations. The goal of this project is to archive my family's story in order to create and preserve inter-generational knowledge for future generations to come. Myself, and many others in my family who were born outside of Rwanda, grew up disconnected from the country and our history. This project exists as an experience in remembering our past selves, and a way to honor our ancestors.

**a. The 1994 Rwandan Genocide:**

The 1994 Rwandan genocide is a central and inescapable part of Rwandan history. During a period of 100 days, between April 7 and July 15 1994, over 800,000 people were killed.<sup>1</sup> Members of the Tutsi minority were targeted, although Hutu moderates and Twa

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<sup>1</sup> History.com Editors. (2009, October 14). *Rwandan genocide*. HISTORY. Retrieved December 21, 2022, from <https://www.history.com/topics/africa/rwandan-genocide>

people were also killed. During the colonial period, Belgians favored the minority Tutsi over the Hutus, which created a legacy of tension.<sup>2</sup> Belgian colonial practices in Rwanda reshaped and mythologized the ethnic identities of Hutu and Tutsi. They began issuing identity cards in Rwanda in 1983, and pursued measures to reinforce Tutsi minority rule. These actions provided the foundation for anti-Tutsi propaganda and the animosity that grew between the two ethnic groups, culminating in a civil war in 1990 and the Rwandan genocide in 1994. This history is important to understand Rwandan people.

It is important to understand too the scale and brutality of the genocide; people were slaughtered and decapitated with machetes. Neighbors killed neighbors. Sexual violence against women was widespread. Churches aided in massacres. What kind of people are these? *My people*.

But also, how does such a history transform its' survivors?

Even though my parents speak of Rwanda with grief and mistrust, they speak of it with love. The Rwanda they love is the Rwanda I was interested in remembering. Still, I could not avoid talking about the genocide because it is part of our history. However, I wanted to present a different narrative of genocide. I wanted to portray it the way it has lived in my life, at the periphery of everything.

I refused to highlight the horror of the genocide because that is already the dominant narrative. I wanted my work to be beautiful, to be healing, and to bring forth a different message. I want to talk about love. What would it mean to insert love into a conversation

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<sup>2</sup> History.com Editors. (2009, October 14). *Rwandan genocide*. HISTORY. Retrieved December 21, 2022, from <https://www.history.com/topics/africa/rwandan-genocide>

about hate? To make an academic work that centers love? What would that look like? How would people respond?

My mother's mother, brother, and sister were killed during the genocide. My father's mother and father and many of his siblings also died as a result of it. I never met any of them, but I know they are a part of the people my parents are. As I understand myself as a reflection of my parents, I understand that they might also be a reflection of their parents. In my life, I have met my grandparents, aunts, and uncles through my parents' stories. Through this project I have sought them and archived their stories for our descendants to meet.

*How do I grieve lives of people I have never met, yet have such a profound impact on the person I am?*

*What is the cost of genocide?*

*I learned so much of love from*

*Living amongst the dead.*

### **III. Methodology**

During one of our interviews, I asked my father what his favorite song was. He answered, Umubano mu Bantu by Francois Nkurunziza. The song inspired this work. "Umubano mu Bantu: Love among People" is a multimedia collection of nine short stories from oral history life interviews I conducted with my parents combined into a continuous documentary. They portray a glimpse into the lives they lived in Rwanda and their loved



ones. My goal is to generate (internal) dialogue as to what love among people means against the backdrop of so much hatred in the world. The song, Umubano mu Bantu, is the soundtrack of the documentary, and the short stories highlight the family my parents lost during the 1994 Rwandan genocide.

For this project, I conducted separate oral history life interviews with my parents. The interviews with each spanned several sessions and resulted in five to seven hours of interview recordings. For my father's interview, I approached it chronologically, starting with him telling me about his earliest childhood memory in Rwanda. Naturally, the conversation progressed in and out of chronological order, but linear time remained the arc of the interview. For my mother's interview, I utilized family photographs. My mother has built an extensive archive of family albums from her parents' life, her own and my father, and my brother and I. I asked her to narrate the photographs, and they served as the basis and entry point to narrate her life. Throughout the interview I followed up with questions related to the stories that emerged from the photographs.

I conducted all interviews in person in our home in Maryland. I spoke to each of my parents separately because I wanted to get their individual perspectives. My mother's interview was conducted in French since that is the language she is most comfortable in.

Months later I re-listened to the interviews in order to get a sense of the general themes that arose. Originally, I wanted to summarize the entirety of their interviews, but realized that would be too long and decided to put a timeframe on my project. I focused mostly on the part of my parents' lives spent in Rwanda, before the genocide. Although the short stories flow cohesively they are edited from several different points of the

interviews. I merged some of their interviews together to be in conversation with each other. I edited the audio stories first through Hindenburg, and then created the film on iMovie. I added sound effects to complement the stories being told. The nine short stories are:

#### PART ONE: BEGINNINGS

- i. I was Born by a Beautiful Lake
- ii. Lessons From My Father
- iii. The Color Red
- iv. I Had the Most Beautiful Brother
- v. My Mother's Heart
- vi. Identity Cards

#### PART TWO: MEETING

- vii. Love Among People
- viii. Coming to America
- ix. Leaving Rwanda

The stories "I was Born by a Beautiful Lake," and "The Color Red" serve as my father and mother's introduction, respectively, where they tell the audience who they are and where they were born. In "The Color Red" I also introduce my mother's mother and her sister. In "Lessons From My Father," my father speaks of the man his father was. "I Had the Most Beautiful Brother" is meant to highlight the relationship my mother had with her younger brother, and "My Mother's Heart" is about my father's mother. The story "Identity Cards" speaks on how Rwanda required people to carry identity cards reflecting their ethnic identity, and how that manifested into my parents' lives. It is meant to highlight the seeds of the genocide. In part two of the documentary I focus on my parents' life together. "Love Among People" is my parents' love story. "Coming to America" talks about both of their

first time coming to the United States. The final story “Leaving Rwanda” speaks more directly to the Rwandan genocide and the reason for my parents leaving their homeland.

I did not include much imagery in the documentary because I wanted to emphasize listening. My father’s short stories are coupled with a black screen, where at times I highlight some of the words he says that I found important with full screen subtitles. I translated my mother’s short stories by generating English subtitles. I also included photographs relevant to her stories, which are the same photographs we utilized during her interview.

Each of these stories is woven together by the song “Umubano mu Bantu,” which serves as the soundtrack to the film. When the song is playing, I include both the Kinyarwanda lyrics and English translation. My father and Google translate helped me generate a poetic translation of the song. I felt it was important for the words to be seen in their original language, but I also wanted the audience to understand the lyrics because they are central to the message of the project.

### a. Umubano mu Bantu lyrics

Ni umurage rusange wa ba sogokuruza  
Ari data ari na so bose barawusanze  
Ubasonzoranyiriza mu nzu y'amahoro  
Impumeko y'urukundo irakunda iraramba, bambe  
Umubano mu bantu (x2)

Ni wo uhuje amahanga ni wo ubumbye imilyango  
Ni cyo kiza turusha ibindi biremwa byose,  
Abantu tugasangira urupfu no kuramba  
Subiza agatima i mpembero wibaze nawe, bambe  
Ku mubano mu bantu (x2)

Ni wo utsinda amahane tukava inda imwe twese  
Mu mulyango uzira ubulyalya utagira inabi  
Abantu tugasangira urupfu no kuramba  
Subiza agatima i mpembero wibaze nawe, bambe  
Ku mubano mu bantu

Kandi wuje urukundo kandi wuje umurava  
Ukagira amahoro ho umunywanyari wa hafi,  
Ni wo ubyara gutabarana no gufatanya  
Ni wo soko y'ubumwe bubonereye abantu, bambe  
Umubano mu bantu

Ni iki cyaruta ubuntu n'imbabazi mu bantu, bambe? Umubano mu bantu  
Nta cyaruta umushyikirano no kuva inda imwe? Mu mubano mu bantu  
Ni iki cyaruta gufatanya hakora ukuli? Mu mubano w'abantu  
Nta cyaruta umutima ukeye utagira ishyali. Mu mubano w'abantu

Umubano mu bantu

**b. Umubano mu Bantu (Love among People) English translation**

It is the common legacy of our ancestors  
Whether it is my father or yours they all found it there  
It gathers them in the house of peace  
Where the breath of love is long lasting,  
Love among people (x2)

It is that which brings nations together and gathers families  
It is the great thing we have over all other creatures  
Humans share death and longevity  
Restore your mind and ask yourself  
What is your relationship with people? (x2)

It is that which overcomes quarrels so that we are all one  
In a family with no hypocrisy and no evil  
Humans share death and longevity  
Restore your mind and ask yourself  
What is your relationship with people?

It is full of force and sincerity  
It has peace as a close friend  
It is that which gives birth to help and cooperation  
It is the source of human unity,  
Love among people

What would be greater than grace and mercy among men? Love among people  
There is nothing greater than friendship and brotherhood. In relationships among people  
What could be greater than working together in truth? Love among people  
Nothing is better than a pure heart without jealousy. In relationships among people

Love among people

#### IV. Poems

Over the years, I have written a lot of poems about Rwanda. The poems I included below describe my evolving relationship with *my country*.

I wrote “Never Again” in high school. I revisited this poem due to this project and was surprised to see the intensity with which I spoke of Rwanda. It highlights the initial relationship I had with the country and some of the anger I carried. Now, I am tempted to edit this poem, but keep it as an archive of my journey. Even though I wrote this poem years ago, it feels foretelling of the work I have chosen to do now, specifically where I urge, “Wherever people have lost their way/ Consumed with hate, help them find God/Find love.”

I wrote, “How we crossed oceans” around the beginning of college. I was inspired by the words of Nayyirah Waheed, who in just a few sentences describes perfectly the sentiment I held being from an immigrant family: “You broke the ocean in half to be here/ Only to meet nothing that wants you.” In this poem, I touch on what it feels like to be both of a place, and not. To be American, but also immigrant. To be Rwandan, but also diaspora. Simultaneously, this was during a time where I started to understand the weight of my blackness in America. I felt as though the voyage of the enslaved Africans and of the African immigrant trying to escape war held similarities.

“Welcome Home” portrays a shift in my relationship with my ancestors’ land. It was the beginning of my genuine embrace. I wrote this poem when I was living and working in Tanzania after receiving my undergraduate degree. Although I was not in Rwanda, it felt

destined that I would be back in East Africa, closer to home, foreshadowing an eventual return.

“Untitled (Love)” is the poem which opens the documentary. It feels self-explanatory.

I wrote “Sacred Roots,” months after completing this project. It is the poem that closes the documentary. It feels as though I am finally ready to go back to Rwanda. I will be travelling to Rwanda in January 2023, which will mark my third time going. But my first time as an adult; my first time as *this* self. Reminiscent of my father’s interview where he speaks poetically of the hills, the lake he was born by, and all the times my parents talked about how sweet the fruits are, I am ready to experience the beauty and complexities of the land and the people.

**a. Never Again**

I know men who have died bloodier deaths than Jesus, but nobody wept.  
Everybody closed their eyes,  
Fed lies.

How loud must my people cry, in order to be heard. How many more children must starve, in order to be fed. I know, I know, we don’t look the same. Different colors, but when that knife slices our skin don’t we all bleed red. At what point do you decide someone’s not worth this life?

When judgment day comes I hope for your sake that His mercy pours on your hands.  
Hands that have held guns. Guns aren’t deadly, people are.

When you’re asked to answer why you’ve shot my mother’s mom,  
Tell Him it’s because she was a Tutsi.  
Her face was long and her nose was thin. Same for her brother, sister, and father  
Twenty years have past but the wound is just as vast. How many times will you close  
your eyes and plug your ears  
Listen to the cries and see the tears

Death.  
800,000 deaths in a 100 days

This isn't a piety feast, I don't need you to be sad, 800,000 families already are. I'm asking you to never again close your eyes, don't believe their lies. Never again let my people be tamed. While you sit on your lazy boy watching the Sunday night game  
Never again let the innocent die.

Wherever people have lost their way,  
Consumed with hate, help them find God  
Find love  
So when judgment does come  
We can say,  
We never did let that happen again.

#### **b. How we crossed oceans**

The immigrant,  
"You broke the ocean in half to be here.  
Only to meet nothing that wants you." – Nayyirah Waheed.

You mended the ocean to find your way back.  
Only to meet nothing that recognizes you.

"You have skin like us"  
Skin that looks like it comes from a mother of this land  
Skin that looks like water and sand  
Skin that looks like  
compromise  
between pride and disguise

*I guess there are some things you can't escape*

"You look like us, but you speak like them"  
Speak like you inherited the tongue of our oppressor  
Speak like you grew up outside  
Like you aren't our successor  
Like somehow you've been modified

*I guess there are some things you can't escape*

I'm still trying to understand why everyone feels entitled to my identity,  
but me.  
Why I have to choose between African and American  
Why the distance between us feel much greater than a hyphen  
I know you didn't choose to come  
Fleeing was the only way I could still be



We crossed oceans in similar ways  
Had to shed in other to float,  
to survive.  
Our roots;  
Our roots not suitable to grow on this western soil  
We tried to hang onto branches  
We got hung from branches

We didn't swim far enough  
Genocide greeted us at the door  
I know what she looks like  
I've seen her in my home once before  
Back home?  
back home I have no home

*I guess there are some things you can't escape*

We are Daughters of Mothers who've inherited hands of God  
Hands they've used to replant our family tree  
(The blood from bodies hung from branches nourishes the soil beneath)  
This is how we grow

What am I fighting for anyways  
What's in a name but a whole lot of restraint anyways  
Maybe that's why mothers from the motherland give their sons and daughters such long  
and elaborate names  
Names long enough to trace our fathers' legacy  
Long enough to face our destiny  
No, you can't address me  
by anything other than my name.

And when you get to thinking  
Why our names are so different  
Remember  
We had to find a way to carry countries across oceans without sinking.

### **c. Welcome Home**

Did you know,  
You were always meant to come home  
That was I whispering you home  
Your brothers and sisters are here  
Welcome in. Eat.  
You were always meant to be this irony of lost and found, beautiful, Black and proud  
A menace in disguise  
You are home now  
Hear the horns  
Calling you back,  
back to where  
Your ancestors first  
Beat the drums and watered the soil  
Back to where you got all that soul, pride, and name from.  
Home.

### **d. Untitled (Love)**

Sometimes i think about the union of my parents. A union made in love, amidst a country torn in hate. And it adds perspective; a perspective that hate does not rule. My parents' story, i know, isn't unique in Rwanda. i know there are thousands of similar families created from the best parts of us. i am reminded of love. There was love amongst all the killings. And all of us descendants; we are love.

### **e. Sacred Roots**

[...]  
The world to me, it seems, is shrinking,  
But I still haven't found my way home  
Back to Rwanda, back to Kibuye  
Back to the hills my father told me about  
Back to the lake he never swam in.  
I will wash my feet in the lake  
And plant them firmly in the soil  
So my roots may finally take hold  
You will find me amongst the hills  
Search for me amongst the hills

The world to me, it seems, is shrinking,  
Take me back to the land that bears all fruits  
The world to me, it seems, is sinking  
Take me back to my mother's land

## V. On Love

Admittedly, as I was writing this section of my thesis reflection, I had no idea what I wanted, or even could, say on the topic of love. I filtered through many scholarly articles on love: epistemology of love, pedagogy of love, the healing power of love, and the list goes on. Nothing I encountered or read felt like what I wanted to talk about in regards to love. I wondered, what even is, if there is one at all, my scholarly question. I returned to two of the questions I posed in the background section for direction:

*What does it mean to insert love in a conversation about hate?*

*How do I grieve lives of people I have never met, yet have such a profound impact on the person I am?*

### a. Love and Grief

bell hooks offers me an answer to the second question in her book *All About Love*, in which she explores the question, What is love? In chapter eleven, “Loss: Loving into Life and Death,” she writes:

“Love invites us to grieve for the dead as ritual of mourning and as celebration. As we speak our hearts in mourning we share our intimate knowledge of the dead, of who they were and how they lived. We honor their presence by naming the legacies

they leave us. We need not contain grief when we use it as a means to intensify our love for the dead and dying, for those who remain alive.”<sup>3</sup>

This quotation helps me understand my work as an act of grief. I grieve for them through love. I am grieving for the family members who have died, but also of the lives and people my parents had and were prior to the genocide. I understand this most profoundly when bell hooks says, “As we speak our heart in mourning we share our intimate knowledge of the dead, of who they were and how they lived.” I learned in one of the interviews with my mother that her sister, Ann, had a phobia of cows. She shares with me a story of them walking to school one day and Ann being startled by a herd of cows they encountered. Because she was too frightened to advance, they returned home and did not go to school. I included this story in the documentary.

As I reflect on the story through hooks’ words, I understand it was meaningful to me because it provided me with an intimate knowledge of my mother’s sister and who she was. Each of the stories in the documentary reveal subtle and intimate characteristics of my parents’ loved ones who have passed. I also find it important to note that my mother shared this story joyfully, which is counter to our societal ideas of mourning, but speaks to what hooks is saying, “Love invites us to grieve for the dead as ritual of mourning and as celebration.”

I am also touched by the following sentence, “We honor their presence by naming the legacies they leave us.” This project is a way of documenting and preserving the

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<sup>3</sup> hooks, bell. (2018). Loss: Loving Into Life and Death. In *All about love: New visions*. essay, William Morrow, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers.

legacies of my parents and their family, and in that way honoring our dead and their presence in our lives. bell hooks opens the chapter with a quote from Henri Nouwen, which concludes by saying: “Those you have loved deeply and who have died live on in you, not just as memories but as real presences.”<sup>4</sup> I have not doubted that my parents carried the presence of their dead with them, but I have only recently wondered about their presence in me. I have questioned their presence in me because I felt disconnected and distanced from them for many years. I didn't even have the memories to recall because I had never met them. However, this is my intention when I say, “this project exists as an experience of remembering...” By listening to their stories; remembering them, I can carry them with me and honor the presence of my ancestors in my life. And the biggest legacy they have left me is the lesson of love.

The final sentence of bell hooks' quote states, “We need not contain grief when we use it as a means to intensify our love for the dead and dying, for those who remain alive.” I found myself reflecting over and over again on her last insertion, “for those who remain alive,” and who they might be. In the context of this project, I understand them to be my parents. But I am also grieving the lives my parents had in Rwanda and the people they were before the genocide happened. The genocide is a point of rupture in their lives. There is a clear distinction between life lived before and the living after the genocide, which is evident in how they speak. But what does it mean to grieve their lives, while they remain alive?

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<sup>4</sup> hooks, bell. (2018). *Loss: Loving Into Life and Death*. In *All about love: New visions*. essay, William Morrow, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers.

In an article entitled “An Unaccountable Love: Healing and Sacrifice in Post-Genocide Rwanda,” author Nofit Itzhak explores the experience of grieving and healing in the aftermath of the genocide among members of a Catholic Charismatic community in Rwanda. He argues that “the healing process involves acts of sacrifice and gifting, taking place between the mourner, God, and social others, and that the central sacrificial gesture constituting this process is the sacrifice of the self as lived prior to loss.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, a central part of healing after loss is a willing acceptance of the death of the person one may have been (sacrifice) before the loss, because loss of a loved one inevitably changes a person. In the religious context in which this article is written, the self is sacrificed to God. Itzhak writes, “it was the sacrifice of the self, or that of *a self*—the self that was, and the possible selves (Parish 2008), which never will be.”<sup>6</sup>

My parents have often alluded to what life would have been like without the genocide; we would still be living in Rwanda near our family. I therefore understand my parents’ lives in Rwanda as their past selves: “the self that was,” that had to die for healing. In my father’s interview he mentions how it was never intended for him to remain in the United States after completing his PhD, but after the genocide it was clear that returning home was no longer an option. Here, I hear my father mention “the possible selves” that Itzhak refers to, one where he would have returned to Rwanda to start his career, but a recognition that that self could not exist due to the genocide, which has made it difficult for him to return home.

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<sup>5</sup> Itzhak, N. (2022). An Unaccountable Love: Healing and Sacrifice in Post-Genocide Rwanda. *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology*, 40(1), 34-50

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

Later on, Itzhak also makes an argument for the power of love in healing. He writes about an experience of attending a special themed programme, (*weekend communautaire*) to commemorate the twenty-year anniversary of the genocide. On the third weekend, a husband and wife shared their testimony. Itzhak explains feeling perplexed at the simultaneous collective outburst and soft cry of nearly every woman and man around in response to their testimony. The reactions were not like any other he had experienced, which signified that something significant had occurred. He later explains this response by saying, “In the case of the *weekend communautaire*, the gift offered back to the couple sharing their story by those who were present was not simply one of recognition but one of love. At its most visceral, that gift found expression in the form of tears.”<sup>7</sup> I find it meaningful that Itzhak names what he experienced in this collective grieving and healing as love. It brings me back to bell hooks’ *All About Love*. In the third chapter, “Honesty: Be True to Love,” she concludes by saying, “To be loving we willingly hear each other’s truth and, most important, we affirm the value of truth telling.” This is what Itzhak described occurring that day, an act of love through listening.

Furthermore he writes, “The road to healing for Xavier, Alice, and many others passed through the sacrifice of the self, a welcoming, in a sense, of a form of death. If we consider healing as fundamentally rhetorical in nature, meaning that to put it simply, one must ultimately be persuaded to heal, then love appeared in the event of the *weekend communautaire* as something that has the potential to persuade one to die.”<sup>8</sup> He returns to

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<sup>7</sup> Itzhak, N. (2022). An Unaccountable Love: Healing and Sacrifice in Post-Genocide Rwanda. *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology*, 40(1), 34-50

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

his argument that in order to heal one must sacrifice his or her self. He argues that love is what gives one the ability to do so. This, to me, represents the most poignant aspect of his argument, that it is love that enables one to perform the necessary sacrifice, of lost life, to ensure healing.

I have intentionally written *healing* in its present participle form throughout to emphasize that the healing process is continuous, and I do not argue for an ultimate end to healing, but rather a constant journey.

Lastly, to return to bell hooks' words, she writes, "That is why knowing how to love each other is also a way of knowing how to die."<sup>9</sup> bell hooks and Nofit Itzhak help me to understand my work as a meditation and practice of love, grief, and healing.

### **b. Love is Wake Work**

To return to the first question:

*What does it mean to insert love in a conversation about hate?*

I did not consciously attempt to make a work of grief, but following an ethos of love, which was a conscious decision, guided my work. To me, this is an example of how centering love in our practice has a fundamental effect on the work. To answer this question I turn to Christina Sharpe's book, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. In the book, Sharpe presents an extensive image of the long afterlife of the transatlantic slave trade as a wake in which we are still living. She plays on the word's multiple definitions to talk about the persistence of history into the present day, "a past that is not yet past, in the present,"<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> hooks, bell. (2018). Loss: Loving Into Life and Death. In *All about love: New visions*. essay, William Morrow, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers.

<sup>10</sup> Sharpe, C. (2016). *In the Wake: on Blackness and Being*. Duke University Press.



and which laid the foundation for the anti-blackness we experience worldwide. To respond to the conditions of living in the wake, Sharpe articulates the idea of wake work. For me to insert love in a conversation about hate is a practice of wake work.

In introducing the concept of wake work Sharpe writes, “In the midst of so much death and the fact of Black life as proximate to death, how do we attend to physical, social, and figurative death and also to the largeness that is Black life, Black life insisted from death? I want to suggest that that might look something like wake work.”<sup>11</sup> Even though Sharpe’s works deals specifically with the transatlantic slave trade, I find resonance with my work dealing with the Rwandan genocide as we are both talking about black death. A fundamental aspect of wake work as articulated by Sharpe is care. To perform wake work a person must care, for black people, and be *care*-full in their work and representation of black histories. She calls specifically on black academics to be careful not to reproduce violent and/or destructive epistemologies of blackness, which western epistemologies tend to force us to do. She writes, “Despite knowing otherwise, we are often disciplined into thinking through and along lines that reinscribe our own annihilation, reinforcing and reproducing what Sylvia Wynter (1994, 70) had called our ‘narratively condemned status.’ We must become undisciplined. The work we do requires new modes and methods of research and teaching...”<sup>12</sup>

My choice not to replay the violence of the genocide, and instead highlight love is wake work. I was careful not to seek out my parents’ trauma in our interviews because

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<sup>11</sup> Sharpe, C. (2016). *In the Wake: on Blackness and Being*. Duke University Press.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

what good would that do? To them or to the audience? Sharpe continues by saying, “Just as wake work troubles mourning, so too do the wake and wake work trouble the ways most museums and memorials take up trauma and memory.”<sup>13</sup> I was conscious too of how traumas from the Rwandan genocide have been articulated, and I did not want to reproduce the same stories I grew up hearing in the media. Inserting love in the conversation is my way of disturbing the narrative around the genocide, death, and trauma, in an attempt to bring forth a different message. Because I care, about these stories and Rwandan people, *my people*. I want, and hope, that my work inspires people to ask themselves what does love among people look like? Maybe then, we could move forward differently, better.

### **c. Love and Contemporary Rwandan Studies**

I also now see my desire to insert love into this conversation as following new theoretical approaches in Rwandan Studies. Even though my work speaks specifically on Rwandan stories, I had not interpreted it as being part of a larger field of Rwandan Studies. That is until I read an article called “Framing “Rwandanness”: Studying Rwanda in the Twenty-First Century” by Julie MacArthur and Alison MacAulay. The article reviews four recent books on Rwanda. In it the authors write:

“[...] Yet in these four studies the genocide, often previously (and still by some) seen as a moment of profound historical rupture, is decentered. These studies all reflect emphatically contemporary perspectives, interested in continuities and the permutations of the “before” while firmly rooted in the “after.” This focus allows for rich interdisciplinary work from a new generation of scholars and perhaps

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<sup>13</sup> Sharpe, C. (2016). *In the Wake: on Blackness and Being*. Duke University Press.

suggests that we are far enough away in time from the genocide to frame a more defined and creative field of Rwandan studies.”<sup>14</sup>

This article helped me place my work within a larger study of contemporary Rwanda. I have also attempted to decenter the genocide in my work, by focusing on my parents’ lives lived in Rwanda and the loving relationships they had with their family members rather than recounting stories of the violence of the genocide. I tried to highlight the ways in which the genocide unfolded in my parents’ lives without centering it. Although my work still follows a frame of rupture between before/after the genocide, I am writing about the loss of a version of the self, while the body lives on. This can be a way of unsettling the dichotomy between a before/after structures and being part of a scholarship that seeks continuities. I was skeptical of their statement that we may be far enough away in time from the genocide to be able to decenter it in scholarship on Rwanda. However, I recognize that my position, two generations removed from the genocide, largely contributes to my ability both emotionally and in practice to conduct this research.

## **VI. Reflections; Becoming an Oral Historian**

### **a. My Mother; the Archivist**

My mother has a large collection of albums and photographs that span from her mother’s, my grandmother’s, life up until our lives now. Perhaps my mom recognizes it, or at this point it has just become natural for her, but the archival work she has done (and continues to do) is monumental. For me, the fact that I can encounter my mom as a child,

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<sup>14</sup> MacArthur, J., & MacAulay, A. (2017). FRAMING "RWANDANNESS": STUDYING RWANDA IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY. *African Studies Review*, 60(3), 221-229.

with her siblings, in their house in Rwanda, on “important” days and “regular” days, with her favorite childhood dress, and her favorite doll is magical; it’s time travel. I feel transported to a past life that isn’t mine, but *is* mine. In these photographs, I meet my mother’s sister as a little girl. I feel invited into an intimate part of her life. I feel I am able to know her perhaps better than I would have been able to.



In the first set of photographs, there are a number of pictures of my mother and her sister dressed in red. The pictures are taken by my grandmother. Both my mom and her sister are wearing matching red dresses. During the oral history interview with my mom, I learned that my grandmother, Josée, used to love dressing them up and taking photographs of them. Usually, red was my mother's color and blue was her sister's color. This story helped me understand why red is my mother's favorite color. My mom tells me her mother used to love posing them and conducting photo-shoots. As I've recently taken up photography, and I am particularly attracted to analog photography, I wonder what kind of camera my grandmother was using—could we be using the same camera? I wonder if her desire to photograph was simply routine or if it derived from a passion. I wonder if my grandmother would have wanted to be a photographer. And I wonder what she thinks of me now, photographing.

I have found a genuine interest in taking pictures of my life, the people around me, the spaces I am in, the good days, the bad days, and all the days in between. I love that I have somehow dedicated myself to archiving my life. Mostly, I love that I have been able to recognize that this life is worth remembering. I want to make a distinction that I am not documenting myself in this manner because I want "to live forever," but something about this work feels necessary. Maybe it is for my great-great grandchildren to meet me many years down the road. Specifically as I think of my life, how photographs have been one of the ways I have met some of my family members, I cherish pictures dearly. In my oral history study, I gained a greater acknowledgement of the importance of archives. What is present and/or absent from archives are used to build historical knowledge and an

understanding of a person's life. This insight motivates me to document all aspects of my life in order to hopefully leave an accurate record of my life, from my perspective. Furthermore, oral history has helped me understand how our everyday lives interact with history, so I am not only archiving my life, but also the history I am part of.





The following sets of photographs are again of my mother and her sister. I find these pictures so beautiful, the environment in which they live, Rwanda! I am encountering a Rwanda I have never seen before. My favorite picture is the smallest of the second set, where you can see what appears to be my grandmother standing between my mom and her sister. It looks so beautiful. The scenery behind is breathtaking; it almost feels unreal to me. This is *my country*? This is where I am from. I love hearing when people talk about where they are from as “my country.” I have often longed for that relationship with Rwanda. When I look at these pictures, I want to call this place mine.



In this last set of photographs, I am encountering more of my grandmother and the house that my mom grew up in. I am particularly attracted to the picture of my grandmother standing against the house, looking into the distance, pensive. Who took this picture? She's usually the one behind the camera. What is she thinking about? What kind of woman was my grandmother? In all the photographs I've seen of her, she seems calm. I know she was a calm woman; she did not speak much.

I don't know much about my grandmother, but I do know she was taken from her family in Rwanda. Under colonial rule in Rwanda the Belgian government separated mixed-race children from their mothers and placed them in specialized institutions. Belgium feared mixed-race children would disrupt white colonial power structures. "On the eve of independence about 300 of these children were 'evacuated' to Belgium."<sup>15</sup> One of those children was my grandmother. She was raised as an orphan in Belgium with a white family, when in fact her mother was still alive in Rwanda. I don't know much of her life in Belgium.

I have heard that her foster family mistreated her. I know that she has a sister who was also forcefully displaced to Belgium. She is still alive and living in Belgium, and has returned to Rwanda once. She tells me that their father was Greek, and that she tried looking for him once. And at last, I know that my grandmother eventually returned to Rwanda, after marrying a Rwandan man she met in Belgium, my grandfather, and reconnected with

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<sup>15</sup> Heynssens, S. (2016). Practices of Displacement: Forced Migration of Mixed-Race Children from Colonial Ruanda-Urundi to Belgium, *Journal of Migration History*, 2(1), 1-31

her mother and family. Again, my mother's photographs attempt to fill the gap of a history, my grandmother's history, which I know little about.

I know that my project is almost like opening Pandora's book, but I am deeply curious and long to breathe air into the many silences that are in my family. In many ways, I have been taught to be silent. To endure the hardships in life with humility (\*silence), but I am too agitated, too loud to do that. I want to know, and I have almost come to a point in my life where I am demanding to know. I want to know the woman my grandmother was. In other words, I am saying, I want to know who I am.



The woman who reappears in the pictures, often dressed in white, is my grandmother. The last picture, at the bottom right corner, is my grandmother and her sister, Christine, in Belgium.



Photographs from my grandparents' wedding in Belgium.

My mother has made albums for almost every big event in her life. She has her wedding day album, her moving to America (Baltimore, Maryland) album, my brother's birth, and mine. There is even an album that my father has, which is a collection of all the photographs my mother used to send him while he was studying in the U.S., and she was still in Rwanda. When my mom talked about that album during our oral history interview she said, "Look! Do you see how beautiful I was?!" I get my beauty from my mother, and my confidence too. She said, "I used to send him all my best pictures, and I guess he put them in an album." This gives me an insight into my parents' love story.

Another album that is really dear to me is the album my mother made after the genocide during which her mother, sister, and brother were killed. This album carries so much emotion. She has pictures of them and she is writing to them in it. She writes, "how could they have killed such a beautiful person," "If only they knew," "I miss you..." I think about the pain that must have brought her to make that album. I also think about how healing it must have been to make. To materialize her pain, to release it in a way, to give it a home outside of her body. I recognize this album as an artifact of her grief. I know my mother still grieves. There are specific images that I associate with my mothers' family; I would say their commemoration pictures. She tells me "these are the last pictures that I received from them... and I remember thinking when they sent it to me, You guys are sending me pictures like you are about to die." Wow. Then I think of the prophetic aspects of our lives and our actions. Did my grandmother know that this would be the only way I would encounter them?

For my 24<sup>th</sup> birthday my mom gifted me a beautiful album she made, from birth until then. My mom is an archivist and she doesn't even know it.

**b. My Father; The Storyteller/Poet**

When I played an audio excerpt of my father's interview to our class, my classmates commented that my father sounded like a poet, and that he has a great storytelling voice. I had a classmate ask me if I was coaching him through the interviews, which I was not. I found these comments amusing because I had never thought about it. This is how he has always spoken. My father is a poet and a storyteller, and I am just now realizing it.

I remember writing poetry since I remember writing. I wrote my first poems in French about my mother. I wished I had kept those. Poetry has been a natural medium for me to express myself. I never knew what it stemmed from. To hear my classmates say that my father sounds like a poet was eye opening to me. Maybe he is how it started.

I inherited my love for stories from my father. I remember as a child he would recite famous French fables, *Fable de la Fontaine* [The Fables of La Fontaine] to me, over and over again. When I read those stories now, I see they are a work of poetry. They have a rhythm to them and often rhyme. I find resonances in the writing styles of these fables and my own. It seems so obvious now, that my father nurtured me into the storyteller I am.

I love talking and spending time with my father. I carry the meaning of my middle name, Uwase, proudly: daddy's little girl. I knew that conducting an oral history interview with him would generate great stories, and I had always wanted to know his life history. My father's interviews span about seven hours in total. They were dynamic and fun, and I



could tell that he enjoyed recounting his life stories just as much as I enjoyed hearing about them. I believe the essence of our relationship translates in our interview recordings.

My father's life story is impressive, to say the least. He was one of eleven children, and grew up in a small village in Rwanda called Kibuye. He likes to tell the story of when he received his first pair of shoes at the age of thirteen, blue converses. My father is the first in his family to continue to higher education. He received a government-funded scholarship to attend the University of Rwanda, and later received a scholarship to attend John Hopkins University where he received his PhD. Throughout his career my father has traveled to over eighty countries, and counting. This is just a very (very) short synopsis of his life. What is most impressive to me is the tremendous leap in lifestyle my father witnessed in one lifetime. My life and his are completely different. It is very grounding to know my father's story. When I understand how far he comes from, it inspires me.



A place once called home. The house my father grew up in with his siblings in Kibuye, Rwanda (photo taken in 2023).

When I think of my mother as an archivist, and my father as a storyteller, it makes sense that I would become an oral historian. They have both given me these gifts. As I have said, I am a beautiful reflection of who my parents raised me to be.

## **VII. Conclusion**

I inherited Rwanda through stories. As a Rwandan born and raised abroad, my parents' stories were my most tangible connection to the country, and how I began to understand Rwanda's history. This thesis project has been a beautiful journey of discovery of my identity as a Rwandan. *In remembering Rwanda, I am remembering who I am.*

As I reflect on the evolution of my relationship with Rwanda, I notice my transformation. I once regarded Rwanda with a mixture of shame and longing, and Rwandans with misunderstanding. They killed each other, I thought. *What kind of people are those?*

They are loving people, and forgiving people. They are people, after all.

Over the years, and throughout the course of this project I have been able to embrace Rwanda as *my country*, and understand Rwandans as part of me; *my people*. I believe that my focus on love is what has generated this transformation of thought. Because as bell hooks says, "only love can heal the wounds of the past."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> hooks, bell. (2018). Loss: Loving Into Life and Death. In *All about love: New visions*. essay, William Morrow, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers.