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Shaping Collective Memory Through Memorialisation in Post-Conflict Societies

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Eden Matiyas Mulugeta is a trained lawyer and transitional justice practitioner with experience working with various international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and collaborating with civil society organisations (CSOs) and multilateral organisations, including the African Union (AU). Her work focuses on human rights, transitional justice, and memory. She is currently a PhD researcher at the University of Galway, where she examines how digital memorials shape collective memory and advance transitional justice processes in Ethiopia and Uganda.

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Introduction

In post-conflict societies, confronting past violence extends beyond legal accountability and institutional reform to include the ways in which violence is remembered, narrated, and recognised.¹ Over the last two decades, there has been growing scholarly recognition of what is often described as a “memory boom”² reflected in the expansion of memorial practices responding to mass violence and human rights abuses.³ Within transitional justice, this development forms part of a broader politics of memory through which societies engage with past violence while establishing new political and social orders. Memorialisation has increasingly become integrated into these processes alongside truth commissions, criminal prosecutions, reparations, and institutional reform.⁴ Beyond their symbolic function, memorial practices provide sites through which societies interpret past violence, recognise victims, and negotiate collective futures.⁵

This growing recognition is reflected in the 2019 African Union Transitional Justice Policy, which identifies memorialisation as a distinct pillar of transitional justice and supports initiatives such as the African Union Human Rights Memorial.⁶ Mr Fabián Salvioli, the former Special Rapporteur on the Promotion of Truth, Justice, Reparation and Guarantees of Non-Recurrence, further reinforced this work in 2020 by formally recognising memorialisation as the fifth pillar of transitional justice.⁷

Despite this growing recognition, memorialisation has often lagged behind other transitional justice interventions. While many post-conflict societies have established mechanisms to address past violence, efforts to create meaningful and inclusive commemorative practices have frequently remained limited. In countries such as Kenya, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Uganda, transitional justice initiatives have addressed aspects of past violence, yet memorialisation has largely been sidelined or insufficiently developed.⁸ As a result, where violations are inadequately acknowledged or memorialised, feelings of injustice and moral tension may persist beyond the formal conclusion of transitional processes.

¹ Ereshnee Naidu, ‘Memorialization in Post-Conflict Societies in Africa: Potentials and Challenges’ in Bix Gabriel (ed), *Strengthening Memory, Justice, and Human Rights in Brazil and the Southern Hemisphere* (Brazilian Ministry of Justice Amnesty Commission and International Coalition of Sites of Conscience 2015), 11.

² Jay Winter, ‘The Generation of Memory: Reflections on the “Memory Boom” in Contemporary Historical Studies’ (2001) 10(3) *Canadian Military History*, 59.

³ Mina Rauschenbach, Julia Viebach and Stephan Parmentier, ‘Introduction’ in Mina Rauschenbach, Julia Viebach and Stephan Parmentier (eds), *Localising Memory in Transitional Justice: The Dynamics and Informal Practices of Memorialisation after Mass Violence and Dictatorship* (Routledge 2024) 1, 2.

⁴ UN Human Rights Council, *Memorialization Processes in the Context of Serious Violations of Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law: The Fifth Pillar of Transitional Justice, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion of Truth, Justice, Reparation and Guarantees of Non-Recurrence* (45th sess, 14 September–2 October 2020, UN Doc A/HRC/45/45) 5 [21].

⁵ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (University of Chicago Press 1992) 38; Pierre Nora, ‘Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire’ (1989) 26 *Representations* 7, 12–13.

⁶ African Union, *African Union Transitional Justice Policy* (African Union 2019) 14–15.

⁷ UN Human Rights Council, *Memorialization Processes in the Context of Serious Violations of Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law: The Fifth Pillar of Transitional Justice, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion of Truth, Justice, Reparation and Guarantees of Non-Recurrence* (45th sess, 14 September–2 October 2020, UN Doc A/HRC/45/45) 5 [21].

⁸ Tim Murithi, ‘Celebrating the End of Apartheid’ in Guy Elcherroth and Neloufer de Mel (eds), *In the Shadow of Transitional Justice: Cross-National Perspectives on the Transformative Potential of Remembrance* (Routledge 2022) 21, 21.

These challenges raise broader questions about how post-conflict societies produce, negotiate, and contest memory. Understanding these dynamics requires examining collective memory as a social process through which societies construct and give meaning to interpretations of the past. Collective memory is not a neutral record of historical events but a socially constructed process shaped by contemporary contexts and ongoing struggles over meaning.⁹ This process materialises through memorial practices, including monuments, museums, commemorative rituals, archives, and digital platforms, which shape how past violence is interpreted, preserved, and transmitted over time.

This paper argues that memorialisation shapes collective memory through three interconnected processes: 1) selecting and framing narratives, 2) institutionalising remembrance, and 3) constant contestation of meaning by different actors. These processes are deeply political, shaping recognition, legitimacy, and power distribution within post-conflict societies.¹⁰ While memorialisation can support acknowledgement, dignity, and reconciliation, it may also exclude certain voices, entrench dominant narratives, and limit the transformative potential of justice.¹¹ Drawing on collective memory theory, transitional justice scholarship, and digital memory studies, this paper examines memorialisation as an active political process through which societies remember, interpret, and respond to past violence.

Memorialisation as a Mechanism of Collective Memory Construction

Memorialisation shapes collective memory by structuring how societies interpret, organise, and represent past violence in public life.¹² It operates through a range of commemorative forms, including rituals, monuments, official holidays, images, and symbolic practices that shape public understanding of the past.¹³ As Maurice Halbwachs argues, collective memory is not a simple retrieval of fixed facts but a reconstructive process shaped by social frameworks and present concerns.¹⁴ Building on this insight, Elizabeth Jelin conceptualises memorialisation as a selective process through which societies construct partial accounts of violence, emphasising certain narratives while marginalising or excluding others.¹⁵ This selectivity contributes to the formation of symbolic boundaries, shaping the collective understanding of belonging, responsibility, and moral recognition in the aftermath of violence.¹⁶

In transitional justice contexts, memorialisation intersects with institutional practices of documentation and preservation. Courts, truth commissions, reparations programmes, and

⁹ Halbwachs (n 5) 37-40.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Jelin, *State Repression and the Labors of Memory* (trans Marcial Godoy-Anativia and Judy Rein, University of Minnesota Press 2003); Martha Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness: Facing History after Genocide and Mass Violence* (Beacon Press 1998); Alexandra Barahona de Brito, Carmen González-Enríquez and Paloma Aguilar (eds), *The Politics of Memory: Transitional Justice in Democratizing Societies* (Oxford University Press 2001); Jeffrey K Olick, *The Politics of Regret: On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility* (Routledge 2007).

¹¹ Olwen Beazley and Christina Cameron, *Study on Sites Associated with Recent Conflicts and Other Negative and Divisive Memories* (UNESCO 2020) 11.

¹² Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (Cambridge University Press 2011) 34-40.

¹³ Lea David, *The Past Can't Heal Us: The Dangers of Mandating Memory in the Name of Human Rights* (Cambridge University Press 2020) 6.

¹⁴ Halbwachs (n5) 52-54.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Jelin, *State Repression and the Labors of Memory* (University of Minnesota Press 2003) 26,26-33.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Jelin, 'Public Memorialization in Perspective: Truth, Justice and Memory of Past Repression in the Southern Cone of South America' (2007) 1 *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 138, 141.

official archives record violations and recognise harm while also shaping authoritative narratives of the past.¹⁷ As Martha Minow observes, such mechanisms do more than establish factual records; they influence how societies interpret violence and understand its significance within broader historical narratives.¹⁸ Individual experiences are thereby documented and may become embedded in educational, legal, and archival institutions, reinforcing particular interpretations of history.¹⁹ However, documentation alone does not guarantee lasting social recognition or collective engagement. Without broader public engagement and recognition, records may remain overlooked or disconnected from wider social understandings of the past.²⁰ Memorialisation contributes to this process by providing public and symbolic forms through which documented histories become visible, acquire shared meaning, and remain present in collective memory.²¹

Memorialisation also mediates between private suffering and public acknowledgement. Through monuments, rituals, naming practices, museums, and commemorative events, experiences of violence are translated into publicly recognisable forms that can be shared, revisited, and debated.²² This process is not merely descriptive but constitutive, shaping how social groups organise and communicate memories.²³ However, translating lived experiences into public representations may simplify complex experiences of trauma or privilege particular interpretations over others.²⁴

The structuring role of memorialisation is further shaped by spatial organisation. The placement of monuments, commemorative sites, or renamed spaces creates a geography of remembrance that shapes how people encounter violence in everyday life.²⁵ Spatial arrangements shape which histories remain visible, how remembrance is incorporated into public environments, and how memory becomes associated with particular locations. Through their material presence, these sites provide enduring points of reference for public engagement with the past.²⁶

Jan Assmann's distinction between communicative and cultural memory helps explain the temporal dimension of memorialisation. Communicative memory is rooted in lived experience and everyday interaction, whereas cultural memory is sustained through durable forms, including texts, rituals, archives, and monuments.²⁷ Memorialisation contributes to the preservation of selected memories beyond the lifespans of direct witnesses, enabling later generations to engage with events they did not personally experience.²⁸ These processes can sustain the historical and moral significance of past violence across generations, although the

¹⁷ Martha Minow, *Breaking the Cycles of Hatred: Memory, Law, and Repair* (Princeton University Press 2002) 4-5.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Jeffrey K Olick, *The Politics of Regret: On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility* (Routledge 2007) 85.

²⁰ Aleida Assmann, 'Transformations between History and Memory' (2008) 75(1) *Social Research* 49,55-57.

²¹ Assmann (n12) 36-38.

²² Ibid 36-40.

²³ Ibid 33-38.

²⁴ James E Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (Yale University Press 1993) 5-13.

²⁵ Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford University Press 2003) 7.

²⁶ Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire' (1989) 26 *Representations* 7, 12-19.

²⁷ Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka, 'Collective Memory and Cultural Identity' (1995) 65 *New German Critique* 125, 125.

²⁸ Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (Columbia University Press 2012) 1-9.

meanings attached to commemorative representations remain subject to changing social and political contexts. Memorialisation should therefore be understood not as a fixed record of the past, but as an ongoing process through which selected memories are preserved, negotiated, reinterpreted, and transmitted across generations.²⁹

The Politics of Memorialisation and Narrative Contestation

Memorialisation is also a site of political struggle. Decisions about what to memorialise, how to represent the past, and whose experiences to prioritise are shaped by relations of power rather than neutral reflection.³⁰ The ability to occupy public space through memorial forms reflects unequal access to institutional recognition, cultural legitimacy and socio-political influence.³¹ As a result, memorialisation becomes a field in which competing actors seek to define the meaning of past violence and its relevance for the present.

Within transitional justice, memorials and commemorative initiatives have traditionally been understood as forms of symbolic reparation intended to preserve the memory of human rights abuses and contribute to reconciliation.³² While this reparative role remains significant, focusing solely on restorative outcomes risks overlooking their broader political function.³³ Rather than operating only as symbolic additions to justice processes, memorials may become arenas through which political meaning is negotiated, public legitimacy is established, and competing interpretations of the past are contested.³⁴ Memorialisation thus extends beyond remembrance to encompass wider struggles over accountability, historical interpretation, and the construction of public narratives.³⁵

The political character of memorialisation becomes particularly visible when different actors compete to shape public understandings of violence. Victims, state institutions, activists, civil society groups, and political elites may advance competing interpretations of responsibility, suffering, and legitimacy, reflecting the contested nature of memory.³⁶ As Barahona de Brito highlights, these “memory groups” play an important role in shaping how narratives of violence circulate, gain legitimacy, and become institutionalised within transitional justice processes. However, such actors do not participate from equal positions of influence. Access to

²⁹ Ereshnee Naidu, *From Memory to Action: A Toolkit for Memorialization in Post-Conflict Societies* (International Coalition of Sites of Conscience 2012) 33.

³⁰ Philip Chika Omenukwa, ‘Fallen and Forgotten? Memorialization Process and the African Union Human Rights Memorial’ (2024) 7(1) *Journal of African Studies and Sustainable Development* 1, 62–64.

³¹ Olick (n 21) 52 and Huyssen (n 27) 10.

³² UN General Assembly, *Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law and Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law* (adopted 16 December 2005, UNGA Res 60/147) annex, para 22.

³³ Anita Ferrara, ‘Bottom-Up and Thought-Provoking Sites of Memory’ in Mina Rauschenbach, Julia Viebach and Stephan Parmentier (eds), *Localising Memory in Transitional Justice: The Dynamics and Informal Practices of Memorialisation after Mass Violence and Dictatorship* (Routledge 2022) 112–113.

³⁴ Anita Ferrara, ‘Reconceptualising Transitional Justice as a Pluralistic Theory of Justice’ (2026) *Social & Legal Studies* 1, 10.

³⁵ Alexandra Barahona de Brito, ‘The Politics of Memory and Democratization’ in Alexandra Barahona de Brito, Carmen González-Enríquez and Paloma Aguilar (eds), *The Politics of Memory: Transitional Justice in Democratizing Societies* (OUP 2001) 6–15.

³⁶ Elizabeth Jelin, ‘The Human Rights Movement and the Construction of Democracy in Argentina’ (1994) 21(2) *Latin American Perspectives* 38, 50.

institutional authority and political resources often determines which interpretations dominate public memory.³⁷

These dynamics shape decisions about the design, placement, and dedication of memorial sites, which often emerge through political negotiation, particularly during periods of transition.³⁸ These commemorative forms may seek to stabilise contested histories by presenting coherent interpretations of past violence, while excluding alternative perspectives.³⁹ In some contexts, memorials function as instruments of nation-building through which states consolidate shared national narratives and link remembrance to broader political projects.

As Ereshnee Naidu argues, memorials can reshape the past into public narratives that support particular political agendas. By embedding selected interpretations of history in public space, memorialisation helps construct national identity and reinforce political legitimacy.⁴⁰ Rather than merely preserving memory, memorials may institutionalise a preferred moral framework through which future generations encounter the past. Accordingly, memorialisation not only reflects existing political orders but also helps reproduce them by linking contemporary legitimacy to particular interpretations of historical violence.⁴¹

Digital Memorialisation and the Changing Forms of Collective Memory

The rise of digital technologies has transformed memorialisation by shifting it into networked spaces.⁴² Rather than anchoring memory to fixed sites, it increasingly circulates across time and space through the movement of people, media, and narratives.⁴³ Digital platforms intensify this process by making memory persistently accessible, searchable, and capable of continual reactivation,⁴⁴ thereby reshaping how collective memory is constructed and sustained.⁴⁵ Unlike traditional memorial forms, which often stabilise memory in a specific location or narrative, digital memorialisation enables more fluid, interactive engagement with the past.⁴⁶

Digital memorialisation also reconfigures the boundaries between official and lived memory. Digital memorials combine institutional archiving with personal acts of remembrance, integrating text, images, video, audio, and hyperlinks into layered representations of the past.⁴⁷ As digital archives evolve through user engagement and technological processes, remembrance becomes an ongoing practice of interpretation rather than the preservation of a fixed historical record.⁴⁸

³⁷ Barahona de Brito, (n34)6-12.

³⁸ Judy Barsalou and Victoria Baxter, *The Urge to Remember: The Role of Memorials in Social Reconstruction and Transitional Justice* (United States Institute of Peace 2007) 10–18.

³⁹ Naidu (n 1) 27, 34.

⁴⁰ Naidu (n 29)32.

⁴¹ Olick (n 19)98.

⁴² Andrew Hoskins, 'Memory of the Multitude: The End of Collective Memory' in Andrew Hoskins (ed), *Digital Memory Studies: Media Pasts in Transition* (Routledge 2018) 86, 86.

⁴³ Astrid Erll, 'Travelling Memory' (2011) 17(4) *Parallax* 4,12.

⁴⁴ Andrew Hoskins, 'Media, Memory, Metaphor: Remembering and the Connective Turn' (2011) 17(4) *Parallax* 19, 20.

⁴⁵ Silvana Mandolessi, 'Memory in the Digital Age' (2024) 3 *Open Research Europe* 123, 1 <https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.16228.2> accessed 17 April 2026.

⁴⁶ Ekaterina Haskins, 'Between Archive and Participation: Public Memory in a Digital Age' (2007) 37(4) *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 401, 406.

⁴⁷ Ibid 405.

⁴⁸ Iavor Rangelov and Ruti G Teitel, 'The Justice Archive: Transitional Justice and Digital Memory' (2023) *London Review of International Law*, 22.

These developments expand opportunities for participation and alter the distribution of memorial authority. Digital memorials let survivors, diaspora communities, and wider publics contribute directly to producing and circulating memory.⁴⁹ In doing so, they challenge the dominance of elite-controlled narratives and create opportunities for individuals excluded from official commemorative processes to make their experiences publicly visible.⁵⁰ Authority over memory therefore becomes less concentrated within formal institutions and increasingly dispersed across networked publics, where competing interpretations can circulate beyond formal gatekeeping structures.

However, these possibilities do not necessarily produce more inclusive forms of remembrance. Access to digital technologies remains uneven and shaped by broader social inequalities.⁵¹ Moreover, the capacity to preserve large quantities of information does not automatically generate meaningful engagement with the past.⁵² Digital preservation can create an illusion of remembering, where the availability of archived material substitutes for critical reflection and interpretation.⁵³

At the same time, digital memorials may also contribute to fragmentation of collective memory. The coexistence of multiple, unverified, or competing narratives may weaken shared understandings of the past, producing more individualised and dispersed forms of remembrance.⁵⁴ While this plurality creates opportunities for previously marginalised voices to enter public memory, it may also intensify contestation and make collective interpretations less stable.⁵⁵

Digital memorials therefore do not replace earlier forms of remembrance but transform the conditions under which memory is produced, shared, and contested. They expand participation, facilitate the circulation of memory across social and geographic boundaries, and create new possibilities for recognition. At the same time, inequalities, competing narratives, and unequal forms of visibility still shape them. Digital memory should therefore be understood not as an inherently democratising development but as a contested socio-political process through which the past is continually negotiated.⁵⁶

Conclusion

In post-conflict societies, memorialisation plays a far greater role than simply preserving traces of the past. It shapes how societies interpret violence, whose experiences are publicly recognised, and how they negotiate the relationship between memory, justice, and political legitimacy. As this paper has shown, collective memory is not a neutral or fixed record of

⁴⁹ Sabine Marschall, 'The Virtual Memory Landscape: The Impact of Information Technology on Collective Memory and Commemoration in Southern Africa' (2013) 39(1) *Journal of Southern African Studies* 193, 203.

⁵⁰ Erik van Ommering and Reem el Soussi, 'Space of Hope for Lebanon's Missing: Promoting Transitional Justice through a Digital Memorial' (2017) 3 *Conflict and Society: Advances in Research* 168, 184.

⁵¹ Harper Ellington, 'The Future of Transitional Justice in the Digital Age' *IJCentral* <https://ijcentral.org/the-future-of-transitional-justice-in-the-digital-age/> accessed 12 February 2026.

⁵² Haskins (45) 407.

⁵³ Megan Corbin, 'Everything but the Smell: The Ethics of the "Connective Turn" in Argentinian Memory Activism' in Katherine Farrimond and Tanya Kant (eds), *The Memorial Museum in the Digital Age* (REFRAME Books 2022) 192, 211-213.

⁵⁵ Haskins (45) 418-419.

⁵⁶ Van Ommering and El Soussi (n49) 184.

historical events, but a social and political process produced through commemorative practices, institutional narratives, and ongoing struggles over meaning.

Memorialisation contributes to this process by selecting narratives, institutionalising remembrance, and negotiating competing interpretations of the past. In doing so, it shapes which histories become visible, which remain marginalised, and how societies understand responsibility, recognition, and belonging. While memorial practices may support acknowledgement, dignity, and reconciliation, they may also reinforce existing inequalities by privileging particular narratives and forms of authority.

Digital technologies have further transformed these dynamics by expanding the sites, participants, and modes of remembrance. Digital memorials blur boundaries between official and lived memory, creating new opportunities for participation while simultaneously generating new forms of inequality, fragmentation, and contestation. Rather than resolving struggles over memory, they relocate them within networked environments where competing interpretations can circulate across wider audiences.

Memorialisation should therefore be understood as an ongoing process through which societies construct, negotiate, and contest understandings of past violence. Whether embodied in physical memorials or digital spaces, remembrance remains closely connected to broader questions of recognition, authority, justice, and the political significance of the past.

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