The Grass that Grows on Top of Bodies: Women, Marriage and the Construction of Collective Narratives in Rural Rwanda

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The Grass that Grows on Top of Bodies: Women, Marriage and the Construction of Collective Narratives in Rural Rwanda

By Sara Yukimi Saltman
This study centers the voices, narratives and knowledge produced by Rwandan women. It draws upon ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2014 with a rural women’s collective in the Southern Province of Rwanda. The women’s collective comprises women survivors and wives of perpetrators who came together to form an economic cooperative in the aftermath of the genocide. The cooperative is now regarded as one of the first reconciliation initiatives in the country. In this study, I argue that women in the collective draw upon an idealized idiom of marriage in order to provide social continuity in the wake of extreme social upheaval. In doing so, women fulfill their responsibilities as female-heads of households in the physical absence and narrative presence of husbands.
Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without the generous support of so many people. To the women’s collective, thank you for sharing your stories and lives with me, and for what you have taught me about forgiveness. I hold your stories close to my chest. My deepest gratitude goes out to Laetitia for your wisdom and poise, Jessica, my sister, and Nadege, you touched my heart in more ways than I can describe. Celine and Issa, murakoze for caring for me like parents during my time in Rwanda. Claire, to goats and loaves and being shattered. My dearest host family, your love continues to humble me. To my friends and family, I appreciate your patience and the ways you listen. Professor Dianna Shandy, this would not have been possible without you. Thank you for challenging me to think and write and continue to question - for teaching me that there are always new ways of ‘snapping into’ the world. And to all those I met along the way, in busses and at markets, in neighboring countries, those who shared meals and words with me - you have forever changed the way I make sense of this beautiful, messy world.

I would like to dedicate this project to the women of Rwanda who chose peace.
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There is an urgency to relate the physical details, the spiritual labor, the ritual, the gathering, the making. Because in the unraveling, the threads become more apparent, each one with its distinct color and texture. And as I unravel, I also weave. I am the storyteller and the story.

— Beth Brant (Degonwadonti)
CHAPTER 1:
First Seeds

“What are the kinds of things you want to pass on to your children?” I ask Beatrice, as we sit across from each other on a warm, Rwandan afternoon. Beatrice is a beautiful woman whose contours on her face trace patterns around her striking cheekbones - they rise and fall as she speaks.

“Murakoze,” she says, as she does with each question that I ask. She smiles. “The first thing I want to pass on to my children is love, the second thing is that I want them to be heroes. To have heroism in them, and the third thing is to – ” And then the phone rings. Beatrice opens the small cell phone she is holding in her hands and begins to speak.

This project is about stories – particularly the stories told by Rwandan women about their lives before, during and after the 1994 genocide. Stories about marriage and family in post-genocide Rwanda. Survival stories, collective stories, stories of peace, stories by women.

Akuzuye umutima gasesekara ku munwa.¹ The stories live in their bodies. They wrap around Seraphine’s leg as she limps, fall from Clementine’s large, watery eyes and Beatrice must hold hers in her cheekbones. And they are spoken - to each other, to God, to their children, to themselves, and to me.

The women are from Rwanda, a country that has been marked by the legacy of genocide. However this project is not about the genocide – rather, it is about women who have lived

¹ A Rwandan proverb: You speak what is in your heart. You are what you speak. A child of a collective member explains - “Everything that you have in your heart, you end up saying it. So what is in you, through what you say, through what you discuss, is what you have in you. That’s you. Whatever you say, it shows you who you are. So this is how you can tell who a person is.” “When we have a problem in our heart, it’s solved due to words,” says one of the women in the collective.
through genocide, whose lives and life narratives have been affected by genocide, but whose legacies extend far beyond this period of 100 days.

As the dominant narratives goes, the original inhabitants of the region now known as Rwanda were believed to be Twa. Later Bantu-speaking people, Hutu and Tutsi, established themselves in the area. Rwanda was colonized by Germany and then Belgium, who occupied the country through indirect rule until Rwanda gained independence in 1962. While the categories ‘Hutu’ and ‘Tutsi’ were much like social classes prior to colonization, colonial powers transformed these terms into political identities (Mamdani 1999). The polarization between the Hutu and Tutsi culminated in April of 1994. In a period of approximately three months, over 800,000 Tutsi were brutally murdered in the Rwandan genocide (Des Forges 1999). Although many Rwandans participated in the genocide, most of those who killed and were killed were men. Thus, when the genocide ended in July of 1994, the gendered mortality effects of the genocide were drastic.

In 1996, more than a third of Rwandan families were headed by widows, unmarried women and wives of prisoners suspected of genocide (Gervais 2003). Because of the sheer number of men killed during the conflict, women not only faced horror in the aftermath of violence, but also the quotidian realities of economically supporting their families. To further understand the lived experiences of these women, this study strategically focuses on a women’s collective that has been instrumental in securing women and their families’ material needs. The women’s collective formed in 1995 and since then, has grown to a membership of 1,264. It is one of many women’s collectives that have organized throughout the country since the genocide. What is remarkable about the collective is that it is also composed of women survivors and wives of perpetrators as they are now referred to in Rwanda. Today, the collective is regarded as one of
the first reconciliation initiatives in the country. The collective can also be understood as the social location where women’s stories gather, unravel and weave.

In this study, I attempt to center Rwandan women and their own production of knowledge about the history of their country – as informed by their lived experiences, and as conveyed through narrative. How do we understand Rwanda through the voices of everyday Rwandan women? While I did not begin my research with the intention of studying marriage, this narrative thread became increasingly apparent in women’s stories throughout my fieldwork. Thus, this study further explores: How was the institution of marriage transformed through genocide? And how does the women’s collective supplant some of what is provided to women through marriage?

Women’s narratives warrant our attention because it is women who often endure through gendered, male-dominated violence. Women embody narrative histories that should be acknowledged, listened to and understood. This study chronicles the endurance of the institution of marriage through time. Before the genocide, women map themselves onto the peripheries of their families – instead emphasizing their husbands’ centrality. During the genocide, marriages shift. Women’s narratives of before, during and immediately after the genocide describe marriage, its ruptures, and the eventual formation of the women’s collective.3

The collective forms out of an absence of men and marriage; however simultaneously, the institution of marriage is embedded within the collective. Women fulfill their responsibilities

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2 I understand ‘history’ to be one of the many subjective depictions of past events.
3 Women’s narrations can be understood as a tragic rite of passage. Arnold van Gennep proposes three stages in the rite of passage – “rites of separation, transition rites, and rites of incorporation” (Gennep 1960:11). As an individual or group transitions from a state of stability, to a period of liminality and then re-emerges into society, these stages are marked by specific patterns (Gennep 1960:11). In the beginning of their life narratives, women describe themselves on the peripheries of their families – instead emphasizing their husband’s centrality within the home. The genocide is marked by shifts in men and marriages. After the genocide, women are left without strength and support. However women emerge at the end of the mythico-history not only as “reconciled,” but as women who collectively identify in new ways – as further elaborated upon in Chapter 4. Thus elements of van Gennep’s theory on rites of passage manifest in the ways women frame their own life histories.
as female-heads of households through collective activities - in the physical absence and narrative presence of their husbands. In post-genocide female-headed households however, women describe themselves as central to the success of their families – a narrative pivot that gestures to Rwanda’s gender composition resuming to what it was prior to the genocide.

In this study, I argue that women in the collective draw upon an idealized idiom of marriage\(^4\) in order to provide social continuity in the wake of extreme social upheaval. In doing so, women to fulfill their responsibilities as female-heads of households in the physical absence and narrative presence of husbands.

**Situating the Women’s Collective in Literature**

In order to understand the economic cooperative as a site where collective narratives about marriage are produced and enforced through daily practice, it is crucial to situate the women’s collective within the broader literature. In this section, I synthesize existing literature on women in post-conflict settings, reconciliation and restorative justice practices with an emphasis on African collectives, and literature on the meanings and uses of narrative. By understanding the context that women in particular are presented with in the aftermath of conflict – and upon which they continue to construct their narratives and lives, we are better positioned to appreciate the ways in which the collective’s characteristics are similar to and distinctive from other settings.

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\(^4\) I use the term “idiom” in a similar fashion to that of Enid Schildkrout as she describes the “idiom of kinship” in “Ethnicity, Kinship and Joking Among Urban Immigrants in Ghana.” Schildkrout suggests that kinship is “transposed” onto an urban context through the use of joking relationships by new urban migrants in Kumasi, Ghana (Schildkrout 1975:245). Schildkrout’s usage of the term “idiom” suggests adaptation, and both continuation of and disjuncture from traditional ideologies of social relationships.
Women in Post-Conflict Settings

Many scholars describe war and peace as gendered processes. Iveković and MacKinnon argue that the state is intrinsically masculine, which creates a setting for gender-based violence during periods of conflict (Iveković 2003, MacKinnon 1989). It is not only important to acknowledge the gendered experience of conflict, but also to center the perspectives and testimonies of those who live through periods of violence. Understanding lived events via narrative enables one to further comprehend the complexity of experience of people in post-conflict settings (Bruner 1986). However, often scholars fail to acknowledge the differentiated experiences of men and women during and after violence (Paris 2004). In this section, I seek to contextualize the experiences of women in post-genocide Rwanda by examining the literature on women in post-conflict societies more broadly.

Most academic literature that differentiates between gender during and after conflict characterizes men as warriors and women as peacekeepers (Cooke and Woollacott 1993, Jacobs et al. 2000, Turshen and Twagiramariya 1998). This trope of violent men and suffering women leaves little space for the various roles that men and women take on before, during and after conflict.

Some scholars claim that gender roles change after conflict. In post-conflict settings, men are often described as having brought about conflict. This attitude is explained by men’s dominance prior to conflict and their failure to maintain social order. As a result, in post-conflict settings women assume a larger role in society (de Walque 2006, Schindler 2010). Schindler (2010) validates this claim in the context of Rwanda by suggesting that women’s exposure to violence and male death during the genocide resulted in shifts in gender roles after 1994.
Others who study women in post-conflict settings elaborate on the reconfiguration of gender roles by suggesting that women’s rights become central to post-conflict nation states (Bauer and Britton 2006). Tripp (2009) suggests that in post-conflict settings, women take on more public roles, particularly in the government - Rwanda is a case in point. Currently, women hold 64% of the seats in Rwanda’s parliament, more than any other country in the world.

The new configuration of gender roles in post-conflict settings is a process that is often encouraged and financially aided by the West. Financial assistance often comes in the form of humanitarian aid, foreign aid and support from non-government organizations. After the 1994 genocide, Rwanda received a flood of humanitarian aid – particularly from the United Nations and various non-government organizations. This funding sought to reconstruct the economic, social and political fabrics of Rwandan life through humanitarian projects including food aid, infrastructure development, services to women and orphans and reconciliation initiatives (Gervais 2003).

One critique of the portrayal of women’s changed statuses in post-conflict settings is that often academics describe women’s empowerment as arising from conflict - a perspective that erases the political, social and economic power that women have prior to conflict (Disney 2012). Post-conflict settings are often depicted in academic literature as a window of opportunity to change pre-existing patriarchic structures (Merry 2006). With regards to marriage in particular, Kabeer (1998) suggests that gender analysts tend to equate marital union with male dominance, and separation or female independence with economic empowerment.

On the other hand, some academics challenge the claim that conflict creates opportunities for women to expand their political and social rights. Handrahan (2004) suggests that in post-conflict settings, “women’s security is marginalized politically” - often because of the national
agenda for identity reconstruction, particularly ethnic identity reconstruction after violence (431). Meintjes et al. (2001) observe that traditional gender roles resume post-conflict. Cockburn and Žarkov (2002) explain this phenomenon by suggesting men’s challenges, structures and identities become central to reconstructing post-conflict settings. Applying this counter-argument to the case study of Rwanda, scholars still contest how much the genocide has transformed women’s rights. Rombouts (2006) states that despite the increase in female representation in government, women in Rwanda still occupy a “weak structural position” in society (206). The continued prevalence of domestic violence as documented by the International Rescue Committee is one example of the manifestation of this marginality (UN Women n.d.).

In this study, I disrupt the assumption that pre-genocide patriarchal structures were intrinsically oppressive and that the aftermath of the genocide introduced women’s empowerment to Rwanda. First, this stance defines women’s empowerment from a very narrow Western, feminist perspective. Specifically with regards to women, the argument erases the ways in which women negotiate and exercise agency prior to conflict, and continue to do so in post-conflict settings. As a result, it risks overlooking the cultural specificity needed to understand any post-conflict setting. Thus returning to this study, which focuses on Rwanda as a post-conflict setting, I posit that the narratives women tell of marriage, genocide and post-conflict Rwanda clarify that genocide did not change all of women’s realities. Instead, the genocide was a period in Rwandan women’s lives when their social, economic and political realities maintained, shifted and were recreated. This point will be further examined in subsequent chapters.
Restorative Justice, Reconciliation and Collectivities

Another useful lens for understanding the women’s collective lies in the theoretical models of justice, restorative justice and reconciliation. First, I describe three models for justice and suggest that the Gacaca courts, the most widespread justice process in Rwanda, functioned structurally as a restorative justice practice. However, some literature suggests women played a peripheral role in the Gacaca courts. Gervais (2003) posits that there were more pointed reconciliation initiatives aimed at supporting women – one of the most prominent being cooperatives. Towards this end, I provide a literature review on reconciliation and cooperatives in Africa. I conclude by suggesting that the women’s collective can be understood as a grassroots restorative justice practice that supports personal, political, and socioemotional reconciliation for women in the collective.

There are three main categories of justice - retributive, deterrent and restorative (Clark 2010). First, retributive justice is a punishment-based form of justice where perpetrators receive retribution for their actions. Deterrent justice circumvents punishment to discourage criminals from committing additional crimes, or other society members from committing similar crimes. And lastly, restorative justice attempts to rebuild relationships between perpetrators and victims (Clark 2010). The restorative justice model centers around the four R’s - repair, restore, reconcile, and reintegrate into the community (Menkel-Meadow 2007). Lederach (2003) argues that in restorative justice, the acknowledgement of conflict must enter into the level of interpersonal relationships. This practice typically involves direct communication, apologies, different forms of restitution, forgiveness and commitments to new behaviors (Menkel-Meadow 2007). Restorative justice also reframes criminal acts as not only affecting perpetrators and victims, but also bystanders and the larger community (Zehr 2002).
After the genocide, the UN Security Council established the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) - which was tasked with prosecuting people responsible for violations against international humanitarian law. However, at the national level the government instituted the *Gacaca* system – a grassroots conflict resolution and restorative justice process. Given that *Gacaca* was the most prominent justice process in post-genocide Rwanda, it is important to understand the *Gacaca* system in relation particularly to women. Rombouts (2006) claims that women did not play a large role in the creation of post-genocide transitional justice mechanisms and that overall Rwanda’s transitional justice was not gender sensitive. For example, *Gacaca* was facilitated by elder “men of integrity” in the community (Rombouts 2006:198). However despite its structural shortcomings, women played an important role as truth tellers during the *Gacaca* tribunals (Rombouts 2006). Burnet’s discussion of silence in her study on Rwandan women complicates what *Gacaca* trials meant for women, as she frames silence not as muted voice, but as a strategic, powerful form of communication (Burnet 2012). Women’s voices were vital to the utility of the *Gacaca* courts; however women were not recognized as being structurally central in this justice system.

Gervais (2003) suggests that at the end of the genocide there were two main forms of reconciliation initiatives aimed directly at supporting women – the first was the formation of female advocacy groups and the second was the creation of production and solidarity cooperatives. These two reconciliation initiatives formed both spontaneously and through the support of NGOs and international donors. Thus in response to a mixture of local agencies and international funders, women’s cooperatives formed throughout the country post-1994.

While some may argue that the notion of a cooperative is as old as human society itself, contemporary understandings of the cooperative I describe in this study are rooted in Marxist
philosophy of the West - socialist ideology that was embraced by a handful of African intellectuals including Kwame Nkrumah, Amilcar Cabral and Frantz Fanon (Nursey-Bray 2002). The history of the cooperative in Africa is rooted in this era of post-colonial, critical theory. Scholars have typically divided the history of African cooperatives into two periods – the first beginning in the post-colonial era until the 1960’s and the second from the 1960’s to the 1990’s (Wanyama, unpublished data, n.d). During the first period, the cooperative was a highly regulated entity controlled by African governments. In the second period, states typically allowed cooperatives to operate autonomously (Wanyama, unpublished data, n.d.). However for as long as they have existed in Africa, cooperatives have been widely perceived as a mechanism to alleviate poverty and advance development. Some scholars have claimed that the cooperative movement in Africa has been unsuccessful in producing sustained economic and social development (Nursey-Bray 2002). Others believe that the success of the cooperative movement lies in low state regulation and intentional donor support (Wanyama, unpublished data, n.d.). In this thesis, I understand the cooperative not only as an economic structure that supports development, but also as a structure that works at other levels to undergird reconciliation in the context of post-genocide Rwanda.

Reconciliation is “the process of removing conflict-related […] barriers that block the way to ending intergroup conflict” (Nadler and Shnabel 2008:126-127). Reconciliation is rooted in the philosophy of the personal and political social spheres. Kant and Arendt distinguish these two spheres by their private and public nature – the personal being related to the individual and the political being a public matter affecting the community as a whole (Arendt 1958, Arendt and Beiner 1982). The public and private nature of reconciliation is important because of how these spheres have been gendered over time. Personal reconciliation is addressing conflict between
individuals and the repairing of wrongs committed between people, while political reconciliation is resolving larger, public social cleavages through common understanding (Kohen et al. 2011). These emotional barriers can either be at the private, interpersonal level or the broader more public political sphere. Likewise, the personal and the political can be applied to the concept of peacebuilding - the personal being “relationships or people-to-people peacebuilding” versus nation-state peacebuilding which is both public and political (Heathershaw 2008:10). The parallels between reconciliation and peacebuilding show the two to be processes that are scalable and intricately tied.

Mukashema and Mullet (2010) deepen the definition of reconciliation by distinguishing between instrumental reconciliation and socioemotional reconciliation. Instrumental reconciliation aims to establish a functional co-existence between two formerly conflicting parties. This form of reconciliation is conceptualized as the absence of physical strife and focuses on the practical logistics of living, interacting and compromising (Nadler and Liviatan 2006). In academic work on peace, this form of reconciliation can be understood as negative peace, or the absence of physical violence. On the other hand, socioemotional reconciliation is the process of creating common understanding between two groups that fosters unity and an identity of shared humanity. Socioemotional reconciliation has been described as a ‘thicker form’ of reconciliation and often occurs in settings where people must live and work together in an intimate and daily basis (Mukashema and Mullet 2010). Socioemotional reconciliation is the construction of positive peace, a process that “identif[ies] and support[s] structures which would tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid a relapse into conflict” (Boutros Boutros-Ghali 1992:n.p.).
Therefore, applying the lens of restorative justice practices and reconciliation to the women’s collective, I suggest that the women’s collective can be understood as an economic mechanism that compels both personal and political socioemotional reconciliation. Through economic activity, the cooperative supports the construction of positive peace among its members. This statement is embodied in the words of one of the collective members I interviewed: “We started working together and then we started loving each other,” she said. The collective is also a social and spatial location where women produce collective narratives.

**Representing Narrative Histories**

The relationship between event and narrative is complex. The task of understanding narratives involves making sense of *life as lived* or events that affect a person’s life, *life as experienced* or perceptions or interpretations of those events, and *life as told* (Bruner 1986). Eastmond proposes a fourth axis of interpretation: *life as text* (Eastmond 2007). Because narratives are stories informed by lived events, interpreted through experience and relayed via language, they compel close analysis (Eastmond 2007). In this study, I retell the stories that Rwandan women share about their experiences before, during and after the genocide. These narratives, or morally organized stories of past, present, and possible experiences, give insight into the ways history is remembered and reimagined through female voices (Guignon 1993, Heidegger 1962).

One of the original purposes of narrative ethnographies was to give voice to those who were under and mis-represented in Western literature (Myerhoff 1978, Freeman 1979, Shostak 1981). Much like Marjorie Shostak’s ethnography *Nisa: the life and words of a !Kung woman*, I have prioritized the detailed personal testimonies narrated by Rwandan women who spoke with me. David Zeitlyn (2008) proposes that narratives are silhouettes or outlines of a life that are
incomplete, but contain crucial elements. The shortcoming of this narrative choice is that it risks erasing the life narratives of women who do not fit into “dominant systems of social classification” (Burnet 2012:130). Collective narratives have the potential to homogenize depictions of groups of people.

Gender also informs narration. Skultans (1999) in her study on Latvian men and women noted that while men narrated their life histories in a representational and literal style, Latvian women tended to make sense of their own narratives through personal meaning and interpretation. In addition, Latvian men narrated themselves as individuals who took on heroic qualities, while women tended to describe themselves relationally to other people and their surroundings.

Bruner (1986) proposed the idea that narrative is a tool to make meaning and coherency out of lived experience. This is particularly relevant in places where violence is or has occurred. Caldeira (2000) in her ethnography on crime in São Paulo describes violence in opposition to narrative re-ordering. While violence creates incomprehensible chaos, narrative “reorder[s] and reorganize[s]” social landscapes (Caldeira 2000:20). Tap (1988) observes that the past can often be idealized in situations where there is a violent or disruptive political event or atrocity. Narrative not only reorders social landscapes, but also can serve to reorder the self. Mimica (1997) notes that Bosnian women refugees in Croatia describe storytelling as a way to relieve their suffering (Mimica 1997 as cited by Eastmond 2007). Violence can prompt expression as a mechanism for social and personal order (Eastmond 2007).

Personal narratives can also be a form of resistance (Gugelberger and Kearney 1991, Harlow 1987, Menchú 1984, Zimmerman 1996). Narratives can function as critiques to stereotypical and limiting tropes found in dominant narratives (Eastmond 2007). For example,
Eastmond (2005) found that refugees in Bosnia emphasize agency in narrations of their own lives. This collective self-depiction counters dominant narratives of refugees, who are often portrayed as suffering or traumatized.

As noted earlier personal narratives depict ‘partial selves’; however simultaneously, they also contain elements of collective reality (Proust 1956). Storytelling is the creation of meaning that negotiates the self and society (Behar 1990). Community stories locate the experiences of individuals and collectives within a larger landscape of social issues (Spector and Kitsuse 1987). In other words, collective social meaning is made through narratives (Myerhoff and Kaminsky 1992). Storytelling is a way in which communities create continuity and order from disconnected experiences and life events (Ochs and Capps 1996). Thus, narrative serves to illuminate the blending of the personal and collective, the past, present and future, the dominant and the marginalized. Given these intersections that manifest in stories, narratives prompt an examination of “what is taken to be the truth by different social groups, and why” (Malkki 1995:104).

As Eastmond (2007) proposes, narratives are not only “sites […] for negotiating what has happened and what it means, but also for seeking ways of going forward.” In the case of São Paulo, “talk of crime is not only expressive but productive,” as it creates new physical and social landscapes between people and spaces (Caldeira 2000:19). Narratives can compel action, or clarify future steps for individuals and communities. Narratives carry momentum for pedagogical social change (Freire 1983). Senehi (2002) suggests that storytelling can even be a form of constructive positive peace.

***
Given all of the complex layers I have outlined, how does an anthropologist write about personal narratives? The way I have approached writing about Rwandan women’s personal narratives is both a theoretical and political stance (Hall 1992). This narrative choice is informed by 1) the acknowledgement of the power I hold as I re-construct meaning based on my informants’ narratives, but more importantly, 2) the importance of understanding women’s narratives as strategic forms of knowledge production that should not be treated merely as objects of examination. This strategy defers to my informants as the intellectual experts on their experiences (Hall 1992). Lederach (1996) reiterates the importance of valuing indigenous forms of knowledge and cultural meaning. The way I have chosen to present my research respects the expertise that women have and always will have, of their own stories. Bauman (1986) describes this position as ‘narrator potency’ – a role I hope my informants continue to hold throughout this study.

The theoretical approach for this study involves a synthesis of three scholars whose research places second and third-wave feminist and symbolic anthropology in conversation with political economic anthropology (Roseberry 1989). While the through-line of this study is the narratives that women tell, which I analyze from a symbolic, feminist approach, I undergird my claims with a material anthropology perspective. I derive my theoretical framework from Marjorie Shostak’s *Nisa: the life and words of a !Kung woman*, Mahmood Mamdani’s *When Victims Become Killers* and Liisa Malkki’s *Purity and Exile*. When integrated, these scholars provide a lens for understanding women’s realities that is: centered in embodied, lived experiences, grounded in constructed, historical genealogies, and conveyed through narratives that work within and against current political, social and economic landscapes.
However, while my theoretical framework integrates the approaches used by Shostak, Mamdani and Malkki, first and foremost it is a theoretical approach produced by Rwandan women. I would like us to understand Rwandan women not only as the narrators of their own life histories, but as women who are engaging in the construction of collective knowledge via the ways they are choosing to frame, historicize and narrate their embodied personal experiences. The way Rwandan women convey their narratives is a theoretical approach itself.

First, this study is grounded in the everyday lived experiences of Rwandan women. I strive to center women’s day-to-day realities. While the details of Shostak’s depiction of Nisa hold immense specificity, using personal narratives to depict a larger social landscape is a theoretical tactic that can be applied to other ethnographic locations. In this study I center the embodied, lived experiences of Rwandan women as a way of understanding the transformations in greater, Rwandan society.

Centering the experiences of Rwandan women also involves an acknowledgement of the ways women’s current realities are grounded in history and have been constructed over time. In this approach, I reference Mahmood Mamdani’s work on the construction of what he terms the “political” categories of the Rwandan genocide (Mamdani 2001:138). Mamdani’s framework for understanding the genocide involves a larger temporal lens, through which he traces the colonial, political genealogy of Rwanda. Similarly, this study aims to analyze the realities of women in post-genocide Rwanda through an analysis of the multiple, intersecting historical genealogies that comprise Rwandan women today. I acknowledge both the constructedness of ethnic or political categories as well as the constructedness of gender and gender roles in Rwanda.

Lastly, I hope to center the experiences of Rwandan women through their own narrations and voices. This theoretical framework is inspired by Liisa Malkki, who approaches the
narratives that Hutu refugees tell not as literal truth, but as strategic mythico-history that works within and against their current existences as refugees from Burundi. Malkki’s emphasis on the production of a social reality actualized through narrative is an approach that I too, use in this study. Rwandan women’s narrations of their lives before, during and immediately after the genocide, as well as their narrations of everyday life in post-genocide Rwanda should be understood as the production of knowledge, a contribution to the creation of an alternate social reality realized by women. Narrative and voice are tools for this construction process.

Therefore, Rwandan women engage in their own form of knowledge production as they narrate their embodied experiences to convey a particular historical genealogy, which is used to explain their current realities. While my theoretical approach is derived from three scholarly frameworks, it is more importantly produced by Rwandan women themselves. I would like the theoretical framework for this study to be understood and attributed as such.

**Methodology**

The identities that I wear in the form of race, skin tone, nationality, educational background, gender, language, class, collective history, among others, have inevitably affected the nature of my interviews, my analysis and the ways in which I have structured this body of work. I am a mixed-race, mzungu, unmarried, female, English speaking, twenty-year old, upper-middle class American college student. The interactions between myself and my informants are social exchanges informed by the historical legacies, social identities, and power that shape the space of and between the two of us (Crapanzano 1980, Skultans 1999). Our identities, situated in relationship to power, have inevitably affected the nature of our exchanges and this study. This is a point I will circle back to in this section.
My research is situated in rural Rwanda, in a village where I made three field visits throughout my six months in the country. The field visits in total lasted anywhere from one afternoon to two weeks. All of the twenty-eight interviews for this project were recorded using a digital tape recorder. I interviewed female collective members, their grown children, and various government officials and non-government organizational leaders whose work centers around women’s empowerment and development in post-genocide Rwanda. Most of the women I interviewed were heads of their sub-groups – a role within the collective that I believe saturated the ways in which collective narratives became apparent to me throughout my fieldwork. I asked for verbal consent prior to interviews and ended by asking my informants if they had any questions for me. All of the recordings were later transcribed. Interviews ranged from twenty minutes to eighty minutes and I used pseudonyms for all of my informants in order to protect their privacy as members of a close-knit community.

The spoken language barrier was a challenge in conducting interviews for this project. My elementary Kinyarwanda could only get me through introductions and I often felt frustrated that I did not know more. Further, I was concerned with the interpretation process – after the first field visit I wondered if information was being altered as it went through Jacqueline, my interpreter. While our researcher and interpreter dynamic became more fluid as we adjusted to the format of interpreted interviews, maintaining the integrity of my informants’ words was of great importance to me. I decided to re-interpret sixteen of the recorded interviews with another interpreter, who re-interpreted my informant’s Kinyarwanda answers into English for a second time.

Rachel, a cheery young woman with strands of dark blue woven into her braids, assisted me in re-interpreting sixteen interviews. I found that as we translated the interviews together, I
was able to deepen my understanding of informants’ responses in a casual setting unconstrained by time. During the last field visit, I was accompanied by Nadine. Often after long days in the field, Nadine and I would discuss the content of interviews from that day. As relationships began to form between Jacqueline, Rachel, Nadine and myself, I realized that each one of them was coloring in the background of my research with her own personal history - as the daughter of a single parent, as a survivor, as a family member of a Rwandan Patriotic Front military commander. Through Jacqueline, Rachel and Nadine, I came to understand that while I was researching the collective as a specific group of women, their stories were tangled into a larger experience of genocide that touched most Rwandans. These were stories of women, stories that wove into the stories of younger women, stories of Rwanda. As an outsider, it was a privilege to get a glimpse of this.

How should I understand my privileges of time and resources to be reflecting on the lives of others? What does it mean to be producing a study about the lives of Rwandan women, in a language that is not their own? If we understand stories as power, do anthropologists continue to perpetuate oppression as we gather the stories of the ‘Other’ if only to expose them to largely Western audiences? These are questions anthropologists have been asking themselves for some time - they are unreconciled and sit, and will sit with me, for a time (Restrepo and Escobar 2005).

However, this project is compelled by my strong belief that the world needs more people who listen to others in a way that enables them to hear. Jackson (2002) suggests that listening to other people’s narratives is the acknowledgement of shared humanity and a practice that has the potential to overcome separateness. During my field research, I noticed the non-verbal language passed between my informants and myself. I leaned in, I watched my informants’ eyes, the
sounds we made to express empathy, hands. We began to understand each other not only through translated spoken words but also through our bodies – a method of communication that felt genuine and quiet. It was a language I grew to value because while I was still me and my informants were still themselves, while our spoken language barrier reflected differences in lived-experience, privilege, class and skin tone, we had found common ground.

In conclusion, the narratives that are contained within this study are intentionally produced by my informants and informed by the ways in which we, together, interact. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty suggests in Feminism Without Borders, ‘Third-world women’ cannot be understood as a homogenous group of people with universalizable characteristics and experiences. Instead, Mohanty suggests that the experiences of women around the world must be situated in their culturally specific contexts. She proposes that this “pivot” in perspective creates space to understand the ways in which the realities of women in Rwanda are connected to the realities of women in the United States (Mohanty 2003:84). I hope that this study prompts contemplation about the distinctions and interconnectedness of social processes among women that occur in this globalized world - in Rwanda, in the United States, in our own backyards.

I will never fully understand the experience of genocide, nor what it means to be of Rwanda. This thesis is not my claim of understanding. However, I am deeply grateful for all that I have seen and experienced, for the voices of those that were willing to speak with me and for the knowledge Rwandans have lovingly shared with me. I am thankful for all that I have learned and humbled by all I still do not understand.

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In this study, each chapter develops the argument that the institution of marriage endures through genocide – despite drastic shifts in the content of marriage. I posit that the women’s
collective is an intermediary social unit that draws upon an idealized idiom of marriage, enabling women to fulfill their responsibilities as female-heads of households in the physical absence and narrative presence of husbands.

Chapter Two contextualizes this study within Rwanda’s historical social, economic, and political spheres. The sociological sections in this chapter situate women’s narratives in space and time. In Chapter Two I introduce content that suggests that the institution of marriage has sustained through time – despite the various iterations of marriage.

In Chapter Three I recount the collective, gendered narration of before, during and immediately after the genocide. The narratives that Hutu and Tutsi women tell are noticeably similar – and describe a shift in marriage. While I did not ask women about their experiences during the genocide, I found that throughout my field research women volunteered testimonies of the genocide. However, this chapter is concise because for ethical reasons, I refrained from asking women follow-up questions about their testimonies.

Chapter Four describes the ways in which the collective negotiates the physical absence of men. Simultaneously, the institution of marriage is embedded within the collective - as acknowledged in the mythico-history. The women’s collective draws upon an idealized idiom of marriage to address the economic burdens of female-heads of households. However men and marriage continue to hold a narrative presence within the collective.

In Chapter Five, I describe how the institution of marriage persists to today. As the gendered demographic composition of Rwanda returns to what is was prior to the genocide, the collective can be understood as an intermediary social unit through which the institution of marriage endures. The work rural Rwandan women have engaged in through shared labor and
through collective narrative, is quiet, daily, but forever vital to the endurance of the institution of marriage, and to the next-generation of Rwandan families.
CHAPTER 2:
Contextualizing Women’s Narratives

In this chapter, I lay the groundwork to understand women’s narratives - of Rwandan history and of their own lives. In order to appreciate the stories that women tell, it is imperative to situate them within Rwanda’s distinct culture and history. The Republic of Rwanda is a small, landlocked country - it is 26,338 square kilometers in size. With a population of 12,337,138 people, Rwanda is the most densely populated nation in Africa. Chapter Two serves as the soil beneath women’s narratives, which are elaborated upon in the subsequent chapters.

This chapter also traces the political shifts in Rwandan history that have affected women and their intimate, daily lives. First, I describe how the terms Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa were in fact social classes manipulated into political categories by German and Belgian colonists, and later by the First and Second Republic. Next, I chronicle land and labor laws and in doing so, describe the roles of women as mothers and wives. Lastly, I trace the iterations of marriage over time – with a particular attention to the ways that marriage is both potentially disempowering as well as a source of agency for women. In this chapter, I document how colonialism has contributed to the politicization of prior socioeconomic categories, the institution of marriage and property ownership. As they’ve shifted over time and through genocide, these political arenas have affected women’s everyday lives. Thus this chapter contributes to a larger observation in this study that is: that while social identities, roles and institutions change, expand, contract and iterate over time, they continue to sustain. The same can be said of marriage. The same can be said of women.
Political Identities Created by Colonialism

The contemporary identities of Rwandan women are intimately interwoven with Rwanda’s history of ethnicity and colonialism. In the 17th century, the terms ‘Hima,’ ‘Tutsi’ and ‘Twa’ existed in the region now known as Rwanda. These terms were used to describe the different livelihoods of people living in the area. For example, ‘Twa’ referred to foragers who lived in the forest, ‘Hima’ described the herders of the region and ‘Tutsi’ was a term for the elite herders among the Hima (Vansina 2004:36). Later, the term ‘Hutu’ was used to describe farmers. Thus prior to colonization, the terms Hutu, Tutsi and Twa were economic classes that communicated the various livelihoods of people living in the region (B. Rutikanga, personal communication, 2014). The semantics of these terms changed with colonial contact.

Figure 1: Map of Rwanda

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5 Rwanda, no. 3717, Rev.10 June 2008
Like nearly all African countries, Rwanda’s history is marked by colonization. Germany colonized the country between 1885 and 1919. The first colonial settlers, many of whom were Roman Catholic missionaries, introduced the Hamitic Hypothesis to Rwanda. This racist scientific classification of people, which was developed in Europe in the mid 19th century, forever altered the meanings of the terms ‘Hutu,’ ‘Tutsi’ and ‘Twa.’ The colonizers deemed Hutu ‘negroids’ because of their shorter stature, darker features and broader facial characteristics. Hutu were stereotyped as being less intelligent than Tutsi, who were described as ‘hamites’ because they resembled Caucasian races with their tall stature and angular bone structures. Colonists also hypothesized that while Hutu originated from the region, Tutsi were descendants of white people – either from an Adamatic lineage (descendants of Adam) or perhaps from Egypt or Asia. The Hamitic Hypothesis laid the seeds for conflict in the region as it concretized the differences between ‘Hutu’ and ‘Tutsi,’ and posited that Tutsi actually did not belong to Rwanda.

At the end of World War I, Belgium took control of Rwanda and on May 30, 1919 Ruanda-Urundi became a Belgian colony. During Belgian rule, the Hamitic Hypothesis was implemented via the systematic classification of Rwandans. In 1933, colonial powers distributed identity cards to all Rwandans. People with more than ten cows were labeled ‘Tutsi’ and those with fewer than ten were categorized as ‘Hutu.’ This system of classification created a smaller and more affluent Tutsi herder population that made up 15% of the total population, and a larger lower class population of farmers who comprised 85% of the total population. The 1% of the population who were Twa were marginalized in society, often employed as servants and laborers. The creation of these political categories was intentional on the part of Belgian colonists. By creating a large lower class and a small elite upper class, Belgians were able to implement indirect rule via the Tutsi population, who carried out and enforced colonial policy
over the Hutu. Therefore, Belgian colonists transformed the socioeconomic categories of Hutu, Tutsi and Twa into political categories that determined power and the distribution of resources (Mamdani 2001).

From 1945 to 1962, Ruanda-Urundi transitioned to a United Nations Trust Territory and eventually in 1962, Rwanda (along with the state of Burundi) gained independence from Belgium. However, the First Republic government led by Gregoire Kayibanda of the PARMEHUTU political party continued to further the political divisions between the Hutu, Tutsi and Twa. Gregoire Kayibanda, who ruled the country from 1962 to 1973 called for Hutu to rise and claim power. The Republic “claimed to be the republic of the entire nation, that is, the Hutu nation” (Mamdani 2001:134). Kayibanda’s government disseminated PARMEHUTU propaganda that described the Tutsi as aliens to the country and the “common racial enemy” of Hutu people (Hintjens 1999:242). The First Republic was also characterized by the political oppression of the Tutsi, and during the decade thousands of Tutsi fled to neighboring countries in East Africa. Thus, the Tutsi racial category became exiled from both the country as well as the political arena. Tutsi were “tolerated…as long as they remained outside of the political sphere” (Mamdani 2001:131). The legacy of the First Republic was that it materialized the idea that economic and political power was only guaranteed through racial representation in the post-independence government. During the First Republic, ‘Hutu’ and ‘Tutsi’ became political categories that could not share power, but instead had to compete for political domination or risk being oppressed by the other. Thus through divisionist ideology, the First Republic hardened the “vertical social cleavages” between Hutu and Tutsi (Hintjens 1999:242).

In 1973 President Juvenal Habyarimana rose to power, marking the start of the Second Republic. President Habyarimana championed a message of “unity, peace and equality” and was
committed to protecting “all of [his] children, Hutu as well as Tutsi” (Mamdani 2001:138). Habyarimana’s regime “reconstructed the Tutsi as an ‘ethnicity’ and, therefore, as a group indigenous to Rwanda” (Mamdani 2001:138). Thus while Tutsi continued to be ethnic minorities in the country, they were not described as intruders or outsiders – they were “indigenous” to Rwanda (Mamdani 2001:138). However, the Second Republic also publically discouraged Tutsi refugees from returning and failed to repatriate the Tutsi who had fled the country (Personal communication). Thus, the Second Republic’s rhetoric was ineffective in establishing a physical home for the Tutsi within the political borders of Rwanda (Mamdani 2001:156). And meanwhile, ethnic tensions between the Hutu and Tutsi simmered.

**The Killers and Those Who Were Killed**

In this sub-section, I describe the Rwandan genocide with a particular attention to women. There is a great deal of political and moral complexity in describing the genocide as a non-Rwandan, to a largely Western audience. I have chosen to tell a version of the genocide that is synthesized from pre-existing research and based on the dominant, national narrative. As a result, this version of the history of genocide depicts 1) Hutu men as killers and Tutsi men as those who were killed and 2) women as victims of gender-based violence. However, I want to acknowledge that as with any historical account, this is only a silhouette of the complexity that characterized the period of 100 days. This sub-section describes how political and gender identities intersected during the genocide, affecting Rwandan women in particularly violent and personal ways.

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Four years before the conflict, “genocide was already being rehearsed” (Kigali Genocide Memorial, 2014). Peace negotiations were occurring in Arusha, Tanzania between the Rwandan
Patriotic Front, a militia group comprised largely of Tutsi refugees from Uganda, and Habyarimana’s government. However meanwhile, Habyarimana and his cabinet were surreptitiously distributing hate propaganda in the form of radio commentary, political cartoons and newspaper articles (African Rights 1995). One of the most significant pieces of hate propaganda was the Hutu Ten Commandments. This militia publication, which the government justified publishing in the name of “freedom of the press,” called for Hutu power (Gourevitch 1998:88). It is striking how present women are in the manifesto - as four of the ten edicts reference Hutu or Tutsi women. In the Hutu Ten Commandments, while Hutu women are depicted as more “suitable and conscientious” choices as “wi[ves] and mother[s],” Tutsi women are portrayed as deviant females who lack wholesome, female virtues (Human Rights Watch/Africa 1996). In addition, the commandments forbid Hutu military men from marrying Tutsi women - those who have Tutsi female partners are described as “traitors” to the Hutu cause (Human Rights Watch/Africa 1996). The presence of women in the manifesto suggests that women, as wives and mothers, hold a great deal of power in society. Simultaneously, the document describes women as political objects. In other words, women are absorbed into Interahamwe political rhetoric, serving to either champion or subvert the political motivations of Hutu power. The objectification of women in political propaganda also manifested itself during the violence of the genocide.

On April 6th of 1994, President Habyarimana’s plane was shot down, marking the beginning of the Rwandan genocide. However by this time, roadblocks were up, killing lists were distributed and the genocide had already begun (Barker et al. 2004). The killing was initiated by Hutu Interahamwe\(^6\) and carried out primarily by Hutu men. The participants of the

\(^6\) Hutu extremist militia group that backed the former Rwandan government in organizing and executing the genocide. In Kinyarwanda, “those who stand, work, fight, attack together.”
genocide targeted Rwandans in a specific order – first intellectual or wealthy Tutsi men, then all Tutsi men, followed by intellectual or wealthy Tutsi women and all Tutsi women (Personal communication). No one was spared - children were brutally murdered, moderate Hutu were killed, Hutu caught hiding Tutsi were also killed. This period of 100 days was a physical manifestation of the irreconcilability of the political categories ‘Hutu’ and ‘Tutsi.’ The two identities physically could not exist together anymore, and thus genocide was an act that sought to “destroy” one - the Tutsi of Rwanda (Personal communication).

It is unclear how many people participated in the genocide. In 1994, Rwanda had a population of 7 million - some Rwandan government officials estimate around 3 million participated in the genocide (United Human Rights Council n.d., Gourevitch 1998:224). Others offer numbers that range from tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands (Mamdani 2002). However, participation in the genocide was widespread – thousands, perhaps millions, took part in the violence.

During the genocide, many women were victims of gender-based violence – or “any harmful act that is perpetuated against a person’s will” and based upon “socially ascribed gender differences” (UN Women n.d.). Gender-based violence is “not limited to, physical, sexual, psychological/emotional” violence, but also includes economic violence and exploitation by families, communities and even the state (True 2012:9). While it is unclear how many women experienced gender-based violence during the Rwandan genocide, Human Rights Watch estimates “thousands” of women were raped, held in sexual slavery or mutilated (Human Rights Watch/Africa 1996). It is important to note that men were also victims of gender-based violence - however, the majority of documented GBV cases involved women.
The violence inflicted against women was symbolic and gruesome - women were “individually raped, gang-raped, raped with objects such as sharpened sticks or gun barrels, held in sexual slavery (collectively or individually) or sexually mutilated” (Human Rights Watch/Africa 1996). These acts not only aimed to disfigure women, but were also a “form of systematic discrimination” used to destroy the Tutsi population (True 2012:9). Gender based violence held symbolic meaning – as violence against women is also violence against the producers and reproducers of society. However, not all women were victims of gender-based violence.

There were also women who actively participated in the genocide, although these cases were less prevalent and less documented. For example Pauline Nyiramasuhuko, the Minister of Family Affairs and Women's Development, was found guilty of ordering the rape and killing of Tutsi women. She is now serving a life sentence and is the only woman who has been found guilty for the crime of genocide by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. Agathe Kanziga, the widow of former President Habyarimana, is also suspected of having participated in the genocide. She is now living in France as an asylum seeker. Lastly, Euphrasie Kamatamu, the former Conseiller of the Muhima Sector was found guilty of category one genocide crimes (Hogg 2010). However in addition to female political leaders, there were also “ordinary women”

7 There are four categories of genocide crimes. Category 1 crimes involve a) a person whose criminal acts or whose acts of criminal participation place them among the planners, organizers, instigators, supervisors and leaders of the crime of genocide or of a crime against humanity, b) persons who acted in positions of authority at the national, prefectural, communal, sector or cell level, or in a political party, the or fostered such crimes, c) notorious murderers who by virtue of the zeal or excessive malice with which they committed atrocities, distinguished themselves in their areas of residence or where they passed and d) persons who committed acts sexual torture. Category 2 crimes are committed by “persons whose criminal acts or whose acts of criminal participation place them among perpetrators, conspirators of accomplices of intentional homicide or of serious assault against the person causing death.” Category 3 crimes involve persons whose criminal acts or whose acts of criminal participation make them guilty of other serious assaults against the person. Category 4 crimes are crimes committed against property (Organic Law No. 08/96)
who participated in the genocide. Many of these women did not lead the violence, but rather served as accomplices in carrying out category two or three genocide crimes (Hogg 2010:77).

During this period of intensified killing, the Rwandan Patriotic Front fought its way from Uganda into Kigali City. With little international assistance, the RPF led by military officer and current President Paul Kagame, captured the city. While the RPF continued to fight in the North, the RPF’s control over Kigali on July 4, 1994 marked the official end of the genocide. By this time, the country of Rwanda, its infrastructure and its people were completely destroyed. Death and loss were abundant.

Because it is extremely difficult to count the casualties in any conflict, it is still unclear how many people died during the genocide. Estimates vary and do not always include Hutu deaths - Hutu that were killed mistakenly by the *Interahamwe*, moderate Hutu who were killed because of their political stance, or Hutu killed by the RPF. However Hutu casualties were significant - Gersony’s human rights report estimates that the Rwandan Patriotic Front killed around 25,000 to 45,000 people – most of whom were Hutu (Des Forges 1999). However in tailoring the definition of casualties that occurred during the violence to ‘genocide against Tutsi,’ William Seltzer, a demographer who studies Rwanda, estimates that there were 657,000 Tutsi deaths during the genocide (Des Forges 1999). However, estimates of this number range from half a million to 800,000 people (Des Forges 1999).

Therefore, the political categories of ‘Hutu,’ ‘Tutsi’ and ‘Twa’ evolved over time and through genocide, affecting women in particularly violent ways. In the next two sections, I discuss land and labor laws, and marriage – two other political arenas where shifts in content affect women’s daily lives, but where institutions themselves sustain.
**Land, Labor and Law**

Women were the connecting roots between land and their husband’s lineages. Women would bury the placentas of their newborns under ficus trees. Grandmothers would bury their newborn grandchildren’s excretion outside of a housing enclosure (de Lame 2005:391). When families would move, mothers would have their children eat a piece of the soil from the location they were leaving. Women’s relationship to the land was a sacred and feminine bond that solidified male spheres of existence (de Lame 2005).

In the 17th century, the inhabitants of what is now known as Rwanda were farmers. They most likely cultivated sorghum, finger millet and legumes (Vansina 2004:18). While most of the people living in the region engaged in cultivation as their source of livelihood, there were also sedentary herders and nomadic foragers in the region (Vansina 2004: 23). During the 17th century, there were some tasks specifically designated for certain genders – men burned down the fields, and women planted, weeded and harvested (Vansina 2004: 25). With regards to cattle raising, the division of labor was much greater. For example, women were forbidden to milk cows and did not participate in cattle herding (Vansina 2004:25). However in general, the division of labor between men and women was fluid and complementary. Men and women collaborated on a variety of tasks including hoeing and harvesting, and labor was shared and distributed between husbands and wives.

As colonialism solidified ethnic divisions between social classes in Rwanda, it also cemented the division of labor between men and women. The roles of men and women during the period of colonization were a way for the colonial government to “consolidate colonial rule” (Hansen 1992:5). For example, Rwandan men were often absent from the home because of compulsory labor for the government or in hopes of monetary pursuit. This meant that Rwandan
women took more of the domestic labor, and the home sphere became designated specifically for women. Cooking, cleaning, and household labor became characteristically ‘women’s’ responsibilities. Women also took on more agricultural labor than men, often cultivating the food used to feed the family (Human Rights Watch/Africa 1996). This significant division of labor in Rwanda, a product of colonialism, transformed household activities ‘and sexuality into political matters’ (Hansen 1992:5). In some ways, the roles of women in Rwanda narrowed. However within the home sphere, women continued and still continue to hold considerable authority.

Women have two vital roles in Rwandan society – as wives and as mothers. The responsibilities of being a mother involve bearing and raising children. Women are expected to provide love, food, clothing, and education to their children as well as ‘good values’ – both through modeling and teaching good behavior. However, when essentialized, motherhood can be interpreted as a potentially limiting social responsibility. For example, women became mothers “for their lineage” and the strength of families was often measured in the number of sons (de Lame 2005:393). While this meant that women who were unable to produce children were looked down upon in society, mothers were respected in Rwanda. The same can be said today. In rural parts of the country, the vital role of mothers is conveyed in the ways they are verbally addressed. A mother of a child is often referred to as ‘Mama’ and then the name of her first-born child. For example, Jacqueline explains that if I were to visit her in her village, nobody would know who Jacqueline was. Yet if I asked for ‘Mama Ange,’ Ange being the name of her first daughter, other village members would know to whom I was referring. In Rwandan society, mothers are tasked not only with continuing their family lineages, but also with raising future generations – their roles were and are imperative for the success of Rwandan families and communities (Personal communication).
The second role that women held in Rwandan society was as wives. Again, sometimes wives were described as subordinate to their husbands. For example, women were expected to heed to their husband’s advice - being reserved and obedient were characteristics of the ‘ideal wife’ (Personal communication, de Lame 2005). However in practice, the delineation of husbands as decision makers and women as obedient wives was often much more complex. Women had considerable unspoken power within the home sphere. One example of this was in the financial decision making within homes. Women grew most of the food used to feed the family, and they were expected to give any extra earnings from cash crops to their husbands – who invested the money either in household goods or family expenses (de Lame 2005:236). While husbands could spend the money at their discretion, men often consulted their wives on how to spend money on behalf of the family. Therefore, while men were the ‘heads of households,’ women influenced decisions regarding the operation of the home (de Lame 2005:236). As they produced and provided for their families, in turn they were consulted about how to best maintain their families. This division of labor between men and women also showcases the different power women held in the private and public sphere.

While women held considerable authority as wives and mothers at home, they were still unable to independently access the formal economy. For example, the 1913 Commerce Law stated that women could not participate in paid labor or enter into a contract without the consent of their husbands or male relatives (Law 2/08/1913, Article 4). In 1998, this law was changed to allow women to open bank accounts without their husband’s consent. However, women were still legally unable to enter a contract agreement or work for pay outside the home without their husband’s permission. Because women legally could not participate in paid labor without male consent, many women relied on their husband’s or other male family members to generate cash.
incomes. As a result, while in the private sphere women had access to economic resources, they were limited in doing so themselves within the public sphere. One of the most significant of these limitations was women’s (in)ability to own property.

Before the genocide but after colonialism, women could not legally own land. After Rwanda gained independence, the government instituted ‘clan rights’ over land once more (Jefremovas 1991). However, land for the most part passed from father to son. Typically, a male head of a household would divide up his property to each of his male children, and they would inherit a portion of their father’s land. While the land laws in Rwanda prevented women from owning land, it was custom in Rwanda for men, namely husbands and fathers, to continuously care for women. Often, women would spend their early lives living on their father’s property, and once they were married, they would move to their husband’s land (Polavarapu 2014). Thus throughout their lifetimes, women occupied land owned by men – whether that be their husband’s, brother’s or father’s land.

While in the Northern parts of the country, some fathers presented their daughters with land during marriage or at the birth of their firstborn child, women did not own this land. In other words, women possessed property through their fathers or husbands. Their ability to access and manage land depended upon individual relationships with male family members (Jefremovas 1991). In addition, their ‘ownership’ of land was temporary and resumed with the next generation - it was customary that land given to women would pass on once more to sons in the family (Polavarapu 2014). Men’s ownership of property in Rwanda also has relevance to the genocide.

Land scarcity has been described as one of the root causes of genocide. As the population grew in Rwanda, the plot sizes that male children inherited from their father’s became smaller.
and smaller. This led to an over cultivation of land and an ensuing low crop yield (Polavarapu 2014). Given the shortage in land and cultivation yield, men began to contest their legal obligations to women – specifically non-married women. Women who were widowed, separated, divorced or unmarried were not ensured access to property, and thus lacked significant power or protection (Polavarapu 2014).

The genocide can be understood as violence that took place in a densely populated region where men felt compelled to fight over space and land. This economic interpretation of the Rwandan genocide is also reflected in the types of crimes that were committed. Hutu who participated in the genocide looted houses, burned crops, and stole cows and property (Des Forges 1999). When the genocide was over, many people who participated were charged with category four crimes related to property theft. These acts of violence were also gendered, seeing that men were the owners of land and property. Thus the gendered participation and economic incentives for killing were significant: Hutu Interahamwe and other Hutu men, who tended to be poorer, targeted Tutsi men and in particular their property during the killing.

When the genocide ended, the mortality effects of the violence resulted in a large population of women who had no legal access to land. This population included both Hutu and Tutsi women. For example, women who were heads of households were unable to claim or reclaim land that had been taken during the genocide. In addition, wives of perpetrators were stigmatized and had difficulty acquiring land on which to cultivate. Women in interracial marriages frequently were “rejected by their in-laws and denied access to their husbands’ properties” (Polavarapu 2014:113). As Polavarapu writes, “Many women were left destitute, landless and homeless” (Polavarapu 2014:113).
The inability for women to access land prompted a series of legislative changes giving women equal rights to property. In 1999, Rwanda passed the Inheritance Law which allowed children, both male and female, to inherit property. Soon afterwards, Rwanda recognized the equal property rights of men and women. Rwanda passed the national land policy in 2004 and the Organic Land Law in 2005, which mandated that women have equal rights with men to possess and utilize land. The Succession Law’s amendments designated that married women jointly own all marital property with their husbands. The Succession Law also stated that wives and daughters could inherit property. Thus after 1994, Rwandan women gained significantly greater legal access to property.

Despite these changes in land legislation, in practice the laws have not been entirely successful at providing women equal access to property (Polavarapu 2014). For example, many of the land reform laws only extend to legally married women, not women in polygamous marriages (particularly with an attention to junior wives in polygamous marriages), or women in common law marriages. Polavarapu cites three main “social obstacles” to gender equality as it relates to land ownership—social resistance to women inheriting land, assumptions that women are inferior to men and less capable of owning property, and the common practice of informal marriages where, because women are not legally married, they do not have access to the legal rights stated in land reform laws. Polavarapu posits that these obstacles are not merely social barriers, but also a product of continued land scarcity – providing women with greater access to land is, in a country that is already so densely populated, an “economic disincentive” (Polavarapu 2014:4). Despite these challenges, 26% of women have land registered in their names and 54% of all land is registered to both a husband and wife (Personal Communication). NGOs in Rwanda have also been working to ensure women benefit from these legal reforms.
(Polavarapu 2014). This is particularly important given women’s continued strong relationship with the land - in the Southern province of Rwanda, 83% of the population over 15 years old are employed as either wage or subsistence farmers (National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda 2008). For women, this number is probably higher – in 2006 in rural Rwanda, 93% of women were agricultural and fishery workers (National Institute of Statistics in Rwanda 2008).

Therefore, as the roles in Rwandan society became further differentiated between men and women in the public and private sphere, this division of labor also affected the experiences of women before and during the genocide. Given that men were the sole owners of property, the genocide can be understood as a gendered conflict where men were prompted to fight over land – leaving women without economic access to a private sphere where they could fulfill their responsibilities as wives and mothers.

**Iterations of Marriage**

Marriage has long been an important topic in the Anthropology of Africa, and this is true in Rwanda as well. Some scholarship suggests that marriage in patrilineal societies tends to disempower women and strip them of their agency (Cutrufelli 1983, Lindsay 1980, Minces 1982). Other academic literature focuses on women’s strategies within marriage that allow them more latitude to exercise agency (de Lame 2005, Mutongi 1999, Sudarkasa 1986). Cecile Jackson in her study of women farmers in Zimbabwe and Zambia encapsulates a fuller depiction of marriage by suggesting that marriage should be understood both as a series of “entitlements of value to women” and a relationship that could be potentially disempowering (Jackson 2007:116).

In a general sense, the alliance theory describes marriage as a union between families and lineages (Lévi-Strauss 1969). Theories of kinship specify that marriage is the survival of a husband’s patrilineage in particular – this is true of Rwandan marriages as well. In the 17th
Century, marriage in Rwanda was described by scholars as a social contract solidified through family consensus and a way to perpetuate lineage (Vansina 2004). The social unit in Rwanda was formed through localized, exogamic patrilineage (Vansina 2004:30). An individual traced his ancestry back to a single lineage, or umuryaango.\(^8\) When the lineage became too large, it would split. New umuryaango would worship new ancestors rather than the ancestors of their past lineage (Vansina 2004:31). Thus by merging with their husband’s umuryaango, marriage was one of the ways that women perpetuated their husband’s lineage. However, the social unit also offered women a source of protection – as an umuryaango took care of the rest of its lineage.

According to literature about Rwandan society after colonial contact but prior to the genocide, as described earlier, when a woman married she would move from her father’s house and into her husband or husband’s family’s home. Rwanda was traditionally a patrilocal society and marriage was an integral part of this pattern of social residence. For example, a rejected wife (indushyi) or a divorced wife would return to her father’s compound (Nyrop 1969:63). A widow would go to live with her dead husband’s brother and sometimes would marry him. Otherwise, she would also return to her father’s land (Nyrop 1969:64). Thus if a woman became detached from her husband due to death or divorce, she would return to live with her father or brother. The social movement of women from one male-headed sphere to another suggests that women were expected to exist in male-headed spaces. Women who became detached from males merged into another proximate male sphere. Women who were unattached to men generally lacked social power in society.

\(^8\) Family, lineage. The term translates directly as “the gate to the compound.”
While women’s existences were intimately bound to that of their husbands, fathers and brothers, these social relationships can also be understood as a source of power. With regards to marriage in particular, de Lame suggests that women in Rwandan society “derive[d] their wealth” from the male sphere (de Lame 2005:76). The social institution of marriage afforded women the economic entitlements and power that existed within the male sphere. As women merged into male spaces vis-à-vis the institution of marriage, often by age twenty-five they not only accessed property and material wealth, but also a source of livelihood (de Lame 2005). Therefore while marriage is one of the processes where women’s social identity was solidified through men, marriage can also be understood as a source of social and material wealth for women.

The interplay between power and agency that existed for women via marriage was altered by colonialism – particularly through colonialism’s condemnation of polygynous practices. Polygyny existed in Rwanda prior to colonial contact. However when Christian missionaries arrived in the country in the late 1880’s, they denounced the traditional marital practice. With the support of the Roman Catholic Church, in 1952 polygyny was banned in the country (National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda 2014). While many people still practiced it particularly in rural parts of Rwanda, the legacy of Christian missionaries had a lasting impact on the institution of marriage. While marriage was originally a social agreement, colonialism transformed marriage into a legal contract between husband and wife. This shift in the semantics of marriage also affected other customs typical to Rwandan marriages. In other words, customs too became legally mandated laws. For example, a husband became legally allowed to divorce his wife if she was unfaithful. A man could also divorce his wife if she did not contribute to the household or if she refused to have sexual intercourse with him. Therefore, not only did colonists incriminate
traditional marital practices, but simultaneously transformed cultural customs into laws. The legacy of colonialism was one of policing and politicizing definitions of marriage.

Marriage also shifted during and after the Rwandan genocide – a topic that has been of particular interest to those who study the conflict. This literature can be categorized into two areas – scholars who study what the literature refers to as “fictional marriage” or forced marriages that occurred during the genocide, and those who unpack marriage in the aftermath of genocide more generally across ethnic lines.

During the genocide, Interahamwe militia claimed Tutsi women as their ‘wives’ (Human Rights Watch/Africa 1996). These forced marriages were non-consensual and often occurred when Interahamwe decided to “marry” Tutsi women instead of killing them. Often, Hutu militia men would hide their wives in attics and other secret places and return to them in the evening. Ancille, who was married to a militia man during the genocide says, “he would come home and I would be his wife” (Human Rights Watch/Africa 1996). While forced marriages were non-consensual unions, ‘husbands’ that women acquired through forced marriages offered a source of protection and sometimes one of the few options for survival. The Rwandan Patriotic Front military also took Hutu and Tutsi women as their wives as they fought during the genocide (Human Rights Watch/Africa 1996). Thus during the genocide, fictional ‘marriage’ was a politicized, manipulated and high-stakes social institution. However, forced marriages also created stability for women through unstable, often interethnic unions.

Interethnic marriage, or marriage across ethnic identities, has also been written about in the academic literature. Gakusi and Mouzer (2003) suggest that interethnic marriages were increasing in Rwanda until 1990, when marital partners shifted to both being in the same ethnic group. For interethnic unions, the intersections between ethnic identity and gender identity had
significant implications during the violence. For example, in the Masaka sector in the Southwest of Rwanda, Tutsi women married to Hutu men were more likely to survive than Tutsi women married to Tutsi men (Chakravarty 2007). Chakravarty extrapolates that in interethnic marriages, Hutu men were able to protect their Tutsi wives through bribery and social relationships with Hutu militia. On the other hand, Hutu wives married to Tutsi men, given their status as women, were not able to be “negotiating partner[s]” with Hutu men (Chakravarty 2007:240). Therefore, even within the category of ‘interethnic marriages,’ some marriages, depending on the intersections between gender and ethnicity, were more likely to sustain through genocide.

When the genocide ended in July of 1994, some forced marriages disintegrated when Interahamwe husbands were killed or imprisoned (Human Rights Watch/Africa 1996). However, other Tutsi women remained with their Hutu husbands they were married to during the genocide. These findings support Heuveline and Poch’s theory on marital stability in post-genocide Cambodia, which explains that marital stability is affected more by the current environment than the initial conditions of marriage (Heuveline and Poch 2006). In addition, the ‘current environment’ of Rwanda is a deeply religious one – where 49.5% of the population is Roman Catholic, 39.4% is Protestant, 4.5% identifies with other sects of Christianity and 1.8% of the population is Muslim (Central Intelligence Agency 2013-14). This too, has contributed to the marital stability in post-genocide Rwanda.

Immediately following the genocide, there was a marriage boom in Rwanda (Staveteig 2011). This trend has been documented in other post-genocide contexts such as Cambodia, where marriage rates first fell, and then dramatically increased to 86% higher than the marriage rates pre-genocide (Heuveline and Poch 2006). Staveteig (2011) claims that the increase in marriage and births in post-genocide Rwanda was due to the mortality effects of the genocide.
Relevant census data scaffolds this argument. In the 1998 Census, the majority of survivors were women (169,304) compared to the 113,500 survivors who identified as men. Staveteig (2011) explains that because the genocide resulted in the mortality of young and middle aged men, this left a significant population of young and middle-aged economically disadvantaged widows with children – many of whom found it beneficial to remarry. However given the gendered mortality effects of genocide, Schindler (2010) clarifies that in Rwanda the post-genocide marriage boom may have disproportionally affected men.

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Since the end of the Rwandan genocide, Rwanda has experienced a period of rapid economic and social development. Much of the country’s success has been attributed to President Paul Kagame, the leader of the Republic of Rwanda. Kagame’s government has championed urbanization and growth. Almost 20% of the population currently resides in Kigali City, the capital of Rwanda. However, this number is growing with foreign investment and heightened migration to the city. The government too, has continued to invest in the development of its people. In 2011, 24% of the annual budget was invested in health and 17% went towards education. Infant mortality has dropped from 120 deaths per 1000 births in 1998, to 40 deaths per 1000 births in 2012. The population is young - four out of ten Rwandans are under the age of 15. (Central Intelligence Agency 2013-14). With rapid urban development and a growing population of young people ready to enter the work force, the future of Rwanda looks bright. However despite Rwanda’s astounding strides in the last two decades, around 60% of the population continues to live in poverty, or survive on less than $1.25 a day (Provost 2014). This fact alone suggests that even today, there are nested realities within the success stories of Rwanda.
Chapter Two situated this study within Rwanda’s historical social, economic, and political landscapes. First, I described the political construction of the categories ‘Hutu,’ ‘Tutsi’ and ‘Twa.’ Next, I analyzed women’s changing relationship to land and labor. And lastly, I traced shifts in the content of marriage through time – despite its continued endurance. These sections provide context for understanding women’s narratives, which are the premise of the upcoming chapter. However, this chapter also develops a larger thread of this study, which chronicles that while the institution of marriage has sustained through time, it has taken various iterations in Rwanda throughout its existence.
CHAPTER 3:  
Gender and Genocide 

*Ideas and opinions are not spontaneously “born” in each individual brain: they have had a centre of formation, of irradiation, of dissemination, of persuasion.*

— Gramsci, 1971

*Where do they come from, tell me, tell me, where do they come from, tales so brave, tales so strong, tell me, where do they come from, tales so brave tales so strong. Some are so funny, so crazy, unbelievable, some are so funny, crazy, unbelievable. They come from the bones of memory. Watch my eyes, hear my voice, I tell you true. These tales are from the bones of memory, of memory, of memory, of memory, from the bones of memory, from the bones of memory, from the bones of memory, from the bones of memory.*

— Gcina Mhlophe, HRVC women's hearings, 28 July 1997

Beatrice, a woman survivor, pauses for a moment and her cheekbones sink beneath her hollowed eyes. I ask her if there is anything else she would like to share with me. We are at the end of our interview and she gathers her crossed legs in towards her body.

“What I can tell you is more. I want to tell you about the strength that we’ve had,” she says.

Beatrice has spent her entire life in the small village in the former Gikongoro, which is now Huye District in the Southern Province of Rwanda - ninety percent of the population here are agriculturalists. The village can only be accessed via a long coffee colored dirt road. Along the way, older men stroll with walking sticks, some bicycling, others carrying bundles of firewood, women sell produce by the side of the road and children gather around small stands where vendors sell biscuits and lollipops. Occasionally, a large SUV filled with *muzungus* will drive through the area, stirring up dust that settles in the air. This land is also the site of the genocide that took place in 1994.
Later in the afternoon I speak with Clementine, who is wearing a marigold colored igitenge wrapped in a large knot around her head. Clementine has large eyes and speaks at a soft, patient pace. She is the wife of a perpetrator and also a member of the women’s collective.

Amida, a petite, frail woman is wearing a faded green wrapper around her waist. She repetitively motions with her mouth, opening and closing and swallowing, her words come out as high whispers – they are barely audible from where I am sitting only inches away from her. Amida is a woman survivor. “But I married with a Hutu perpetrator,” she says.

In this chapter, I renarrate the life histories of these three women – Beatrice, a Tutsi survivor who married a Tutsi man, Clementine, a Hutu wife of a perpetrator married to a Hutu man, and Amida, a Tutsi survivor who married a Hutu man. I have chosen to tell the stories of Beatrice, Clementine and Amida because the marriages of all three women represent some of the ethnic diversity one finds in marital unions in Rwanda. All three women are also founding members of the women’s collective. What is remarkable about their narratives is that while Beatrice, Clementine and Amida’s interviews were conducted separately, they include similar thematic emphases in their personal testimonies of genocide. All three women narrate the period of genocide as a time when their marriages changed from their idyllic forms prior to the genocide, leaving women in a state of isolation and loss.

This chapter is divided into three panels. In the first panel, women describe marriage not only as a symbolic bond between husband and wife, but also as an institution through which they accessed physical, tangible property. Second, while women acknowledge the ethnic tensions that existed between Hutu and Tutsi prior to 1994, in relative terms, in describing the genocide they emphasize the changes that took place in their relationships with men and land. In the last panel
women narrate that “after the genocide” they are not only lonely and isolated, but also face the realities of providing for their children and households by themselves.

Women narrate their experiences of genocide in unexpected ways. First, they do not situate themselves as heroes in their own lives before, during and immediately after the genocide. Rather, they emphasize their own passivity and in doing so, Hutu and Tutsi women create a collective, gendered narration of genocide. This narrative of before, during and immediately after the genocide reflects the ways in which women’s relationships with men shift through genocide – most notably manifesting as ruptures within marriages. In the aftermath of the violence, women are alone and without love. Ultimately, their vulnerability functions to accentuate the role of the women’s collective in their lives. Thus, women’s narratives of before, during and immediately after the genocide describe marriage, its ruptures and the eventual formation of the women’s collective – an idealized version, to be sure, but one that draws upon the idiom of marriage.

**Panel 1: My Husband’s Family**

Beatrice is leaning forward on a bench, her weathered hands folded around one another. She tells me that when she was a young woman, she married a man from the village and the two started a family. Beatrice recalls:

> So before the genocide, I was so strong, I had a lot of energy. […] My husband used to give me clothing, and get me food, and he loved me so much. He loved his children and gave us a lot of care. All my expectations were on him because he was the sole provider at home. In brief, we were living very nicely. We had a lot of cows. We drank milk. We were so strong and we never lacked anything.

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9 As established with the first two quotes of this chapter, women’s narratives work within and against current hegemonic paradigms. In other words, their collective narration of genocide is born out of a complex set of social forces, and nested within the dominant, national narrative of Rwandan history.
In Beatrice’s narration, ‘before the genocide’ is characterized by marriage and married life. Beatrice narrates marriage as a time of “strength” and “energy.” This idyllic snapshot of ‘before the genocide’ is echoed by many women in the collective. Clementine says, “Before the genocide, I had a very nice life. I was living very nicely because I had a family and I had a husband. So I was so happy.” In both Beatrice and Clementine’s narrations, ‘before the genocide’ is not merely a time of happiness, but a state of contentment attributed to their marriages and families. In other words, both Beatrice and Clementine describe their own happiness as a product of being a mother and a wife – in Clementine’s words that is, “having a family” and “having a husband.”

One of the most striking aspects of Beatrice’s narration is the centrality of her husband. Like many women’s stories of ‘before the genocide,’ Beatrice focuses on her husband’s contributions to the household. Her husband is the “sole provider of the home,” as she describes him providing “food,” “clothing,” “cows” and “milk” to her and their family. In addition, she describes their children as “his children.” In speaking extensively about her husband’s role in the household, Beatrice avoids naming her own contributions. As a result in her narration of before the genocide, her own role is relegated to the margins of the story – she is the recipient of her husband’s “care.” While other women that I spoke to reiterated their husband’s central role in the family, they simultaneously described their own responsibilities as women. “Before the genocide I used to live with my husband and he was the one caring for the whole family. So that’s how I thought family was,” Clementine says. However, Clementine goes on to name some of her own responsibilities ‘before the genocide.’ She explains:

Before the genocide, I had just gotten married and I had one child. We were living happily without any problems, me and my husband and that child. [pause]. I was ready to live in harmony with my neighbors and my husband and to bring up my child properly. That’s all.
Clementine provides a brief silhouette of the responsibilities of women in Rwandan society – as wives, as mothers and as neighbors. Many of the women I spoke to named the responsibilities of being wives and mothers as two defining characteristics of life ‘before the genocide.’ These roles, expanded upon in Chapter Two, invoke notions of morality - as Clementine describes “harmony” as one of the responsibilities she was ready to fulfill before the genocide. In Clementine’s narrative however, her “readiness” to be a wife, mother and neighbor, is interrupted by the genocide. Thus Clementine’s young married life is marked by her unfulfilled responsibilities as a woman.

Many women in their narrations of ‘before the genocide’ place themselves on the peripheries of their family units. Even in Clementine’s narrative as she describes her role as a wife and mother, she too reminds me that it was her husband that “car[ed] for the whole family.” For the most part, women in the collective describe men as the economic providers for their families. They describe themselves as wives, mothers and as the recipients of their husband’s care. This narrative, more specifically the way women narrate themselves, is notably different from scholars who have found that men tend to write themselves as heroes of their own life histories (Shandy 2007, Skultans 1999). Instead, women narrate themselves as dependents of their husbands during the time ‘before the genocide.’

Through their narrations, women collectively produce a definition for marriage that composites the social and economic realities of married life. First, women like Beatrice describe marriage as an affective bond between husband and wife. In the passage above, she describes her husband “lov[ing] [her] so much.” As elaborated upon in Chapter Two, marriage is a way to perpetuate lineage. However, it is also a way for women to access material realities such as “food,” “clothing,” “cows” and “milk.” Given the division of labor between men and women as
discussed in the previous chapter, marriage is a way in which women merge with the male sphere and access the economic entitlements afforded to married women. Thus, nested in women’s narratives of ‘before the genocide’ is a definition for marriage: marriage is both a continuation of umuryaango and an institution through which women access material realities. This economic component of marriage, which is further elaborated upon in Chapter Two, is central to women’s narrations of ‘before the genocide.’

**Panel 2: Transformations in Men and Marriage**

Beatrice was in grade five when she learned about the conflict between the Hutu and Tutsi. When taking roll, her teacher divided the class into Hutu, Tutsi and Twa – counting each group separately. Clementine echoes the same memory - “They would count us and then after we would sit together again,” she says. When I ask women about the first time they realized there was a conflict between Hutu, Tutsi and Twa, many describe memories of primary school. Beatrice remembers being bullied in school by Hutu students and sometimes having to spend the night at strangers’ home because it was unsafe to walk home. She says:

> Hutu students beat us so bad. They were told by the teachers [to do it.] Even Tutsi teachers who were teaching in the school couldn’t say anything. I know that so much, when I reached in Senior 6 and I succeeded, they wouldn’t allow me to continue to study, and they replaced me with another one who was Hutu. […] We lived in struggle.

Both Beatrice and Clementine describe the political tensions that existed between Hutu and Tutsi ‘before the genocide.’ In Beatrice’s narrative above, she explains that these conflicts were not merely hostile attitudes between primarily school peers. The harassment she received was a continuation of institutionalized forms of discrimination. She explains that the beatings from “Hutu students” were in fact instigated by “teachers,” who were part of an educational system that eventually ousted her after primary school.
While both Beatrice and Clementine include in their personal narratives the tensions that existed between Hutu and Tutsi ‘before the genocide,’ this is not what they emphasize when they describe the genocide itself. Rather, what becomes most apparent in Beatrice’s and Clementine’s narrations of the genocide is the gendered participation in the violence. Clementine says:

   Our husbands killed each other, and, when they killed each other, they escaped when the genocide ended.

While Clementine is referring to Hutu “husbands” who participated in the genocide and escaped to Gikongoro at the end of the conflict, her statement can be unpacked for its layered meanings. Clementine does not describe the political identities of men - as ‘Hutu’ or as ‘Interahamwe,’ but rather identifies them as “husbands.” Her language signals an emphasis on marriage, and the shifts in women’s relationships to men through genocide. Second, there are clear, gender demarcations in her description of the conflict. As Clementine suggests, it was men who took part in the “kill[ing,]” not women. Clementine’s statement is supported by demographic data described in Chapter Two– at the end of the genocide as men “escaped,” women were left to face the rubble of genocide. The way that Clementine narrates the genocide in so few words is further elaborated upon by other women in the collective. However these elements of the genocide: as a male-dominated period of violence that resulted in shifts in marriages and gendered mortality effects, were consistent in many of the stories women told me.

   Women remember that men transformed into unrecognizable figures during the genocide. Some say that they were like “dogs” or “children,” or had gone “mad” during that time.

Clementine’s husband was one of the participants in the genocide. She recalls:

   They [your husbands] could come late at night and go early in the morning, even if you were tempted to ask them, “Where are you going?” they could try to kill you even though you were the wife, they were like mad people during those times.
Unlike ‘before the genocide’ when Clementine describes her husband as “caring for the whole family,” during the genocide her husband comes and goes like a “mad” person. She even implies that addressing her husband’s whereabouts could have resulted in him “try[ing] to kill [her].” This shift in her relationship with her husband portrays larger changes in marriages that took place during the genocide. Beatrice’s husband was killed during the conflict. Amida and Clementine describe that at the end of the killing they, like other women, did not have any “love” left for their husbands. While these are drastically different transformations in marriage, both Hutu and Tutsi women describe changes in men in their testimonies of genocide. Men morph into unrecognizable forms, and husbands disappear from marriages – both physically and metaphorically. These transformations in men and marriage take place on land.

**Land as an In hospitable Space for Women**

During the genocide, Beatrice fled from her village to escape the *genocidaires*. She recalls:

> I got tired and I fell down, and the *genocidaires* all found me there – in the road. There were a big number of them [the *genocidaires*.] Because of being weak and being so hungry, and there after […], it was night around 7pm, they beat the child I was carrying - for death. But he didn’t actually die. After three days, he died. [Beatrice tears and wipes her eye] I carried the dead body for five days, because I couldn’t find anywhere to bury him. I had nowhere to bury the dead child. [Weakly]

In this series of tragic events, Beatrice describes the land as an inhospitable space for both herself and her child. First, the genocide prompts her to flee from her village. In Beatrice’s testimony of the genocide, she describes running from the land. As she is running, she is caught by the *genocidaires* who murder the child she is carrying. However, once her child is killed she cannot find a place to bury him. The motif of land as an inhospitable space for women during the genocide extends beyond Beatrice’s testimony. Many women, both Hutu and Tutsi, narrate
“running” and “fleeing” from their village. In doing so, in their testimonies, they identify land markers such as ‘roads’ and village names.

The interconnectedness between women’s changing relationship with men and women’s changing relationship with the land is significant. As described in Chapter Two, at the time of the genocide most property was owned by men. A young woman would move from her father’s property to her husband’s when she got married. Thus land was a marker for women’s shifting relationships with men, as well as her own changes in status – from daughter to wife. During the genocide as women’s relationships with their husbands transform, they simultaneously describe an inability to place themselves on land. Therefore, women’s stories about the period of 100 days of genocide not only reflect changes in social relationships between husbands and wives, but also the ways in which these marital shifts manifest in other aspects of women’s lives – such as their (in)ability to occupy land.

Women’s testimonies of the period of 100 days contain metaphorical themes undergirded by economic realities of the time. As elaborated upon in Chapter Two, the genocide can be understood as a period of violence where men fought other men over property, a vanishing resource in Rwanda in the period leading up to the conflict. However unlike pre-existing analyses of this explanation for the genocide, in women’s narrations they describe how the contestation over land was experienced by women.

**Panel 3: “Suffering Alone”**

Amida does not elaborate upon much. She explains her life as a series of steps – from one breath to another. However, when she tells me her genocide testimony and arrives at the period of ‘after the genocide,’ she speaks and speaks:
After the genocide, I felt bad, I had fear. I had many fears to see other people who were in my family. Because as you know, I married into the Hutu ethnic group – there were perpetrators in my family. My own family. And after genocide when I saw people in my family, I felt unhappy. I had sadness. I was afraid to look at them. I hadn’t any love in my heart. You see, after the Tutsi genocide, after the genocide of Tutsi in 1994, as you know, my husband was in the group of the perpetrators. I didn’t have any love for him. We lived together, but without loving him. I didn’t have love for any person, even my husband. And just, I changed. I changed in my heart.

Amida’s narrative of ‘after the genocide’ contains key elements of women’s experiences when the violence had technically subsided. Namely, that of fear, sadness, a lack of love and isolation. Shortly after the genocide, Amida’s husband died. Six of her children had fled the country and one of her daughters remained. But soon after the genocide was over, her daughter became pregnant out of wedlock – a source of shame for Amida. “I was living alone,” she says.

Isolation is one of the many realities that women narrate of life ‘after the genocide.’ At the end of the genocide, Beatrice returned to her village. She was hoping to find one of her children still alive. Beatrice says:

On my way back, I found that where I’ve been born and where I’ve got married, I’m the only one that survived. I started thinking, ‘what is the purpose of why I came back.’ I’ve been living, but being frustrated by what happened. I was thinking about everything that happened, and I didn’t even want to talk about it. […] I found out that I had been infected [with HIV/AIDS]. I was exhausted and I didn’t have any love for anyone else / any other person. […] After the genocide, I encountered a lot of problems. I had a lot of problems because I had no one to cry to or to tell them to. All my relatives, my husband, and my children were all gone. I was the only one left.

Beatrice, like many women survivors that I spoke to, describes losing “all” of her “relatives” at the end of the genocide. Many Tutsi women lost their children, their husbands and their families during the genocide. However, Hutu women too narrate a similar loss. “In my husband’s family, they all died while we were trying to leave the country for safety,” Clementine says. Some Hutu women like Amida explain that they do not know if their children who escaped from Rwanda are still alive. Both Hutu and Tutsi women’s testimonies of ‘after the genocide’ are marked by feelings of intense loneliness and isolation. Their stories center around loss – both of their own children and of their husband’s family as an extension of their own.
After the genocide, Beatrice realized she was pregnant from rape. In her testimony above, she not only describes the feelings associated with being “the only one left,” but also the many “problems” she encountered from the genocide. Beatrice was diagnosed with HIV/AIDS, adopted a child whose parents had been killed during the genocide, and gave birth to a newborn child - all while coming to terms with “the purpose of why [she] came back.” She remembers feeling sick and worried.

Clementine and her husband returned to their village in 1997 and then the police came. Clementine’s husband was arrested, taken away and charged with the crime of genocide. As her husband awaited trial in prison, she was left to raise her young child alone. When the Gacaca trials began, Clementine went to speak to her husband in prison to advise him to accept what he had done. She promised him that he was going to be forgiven because other people who were publically confessing were being freed. However when the Gacaca courts arrived in their village and her husband’s friends accused him of genocide crimes, Clementine’s husband denied his participation in the genocide. Clementine testified against her husband.

During the Gacaca courts, they asked me, they questioned me as the wife of that man. I stood up, I said how things were, I spoke the truth. I said, “This man was never home. He never even slept home during the nights.” But when he stood up to speak, he said he was always at home.

Clementine lives in the same village that she did with her husband prior to the genocide. She says she is still afraid that her husband will seek revenge when he is released from prison. To this day, she brings food to him in prison and tells him to reconcile and ask for forgiveness so they can share the “work” together. But he hasn’t yet agreed. In the meantime, they still speak.

I try to convince him always. I show him how hard it takes me, how hard I suffer bringing food for him everyday, and how I try to get little money to take my children to school. And that I’m suffering alone. I’m doing all the work. He should confess and come out to help me so that we can work together.
At the end of the genocide, women like Clementine, Beatrice and Amida “encountered a lot of problems” – many of these problems were a product of the genocide. Women in their narrations of ‘after the genocide’ describe a lack of “love,” “strength,” and “energy.” Some recall feeling “afraid” and “changed” and very much “alone.” However in addition to their emotional burdens, women also list the quotidian realities of reconfiguring daily life. Clementine in the passage above, describes being responsible for providing food for her husband and money to “take [her] children to school.” She is left “suffering alone.” Thus, ‘after the genocide’ is a time where women face both the emotional “work” of coming to terms with horrendous violence, and the daily “work” of providing for their newly composed families. Many women find themselves with children, and without their husbands and their husband’s family. As Beatrice explains:

Starting by myself, I thought that I couldn’t even raise my kids. Due to the problems I’ve faced during genocide. I’ve had so many problems, and at the extent that I’ve been raped, so many times. And I’ve been beaten so much. Above all, talking about this is so hard for me. […] There will be no one to look after you, only God.

As Clementine says, women are left “doing all the work” – and doing it alone.

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The gendered mortality effects of the genocide were drastic and particularly impacted the daily lives of Rwandan women. As one woman in the collective says:

We [women] faced all the horrible things that happened to Rwanda, like, poverty, like people being destroyed, like houses being destroyed. You may find that there is a young child sitting there alone. Not even studying not even having parents to guide him, to control him. You may even find you don’t have a wife, have a husband. These are the consequences of what happened.

Women not only faced the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide – the “poverty” and the destruction of “people” and “houses,” but also were tasked with responsibilities for maintaining households and raising children often in the absence of marital partners. The “consequences” of
the genocide fell largely upon the shoulders of women. In 1996, women were heads of 34% of all households in Rwanda, and out of those women 60% were widows (Polavarapu 2007). Many statistics on gender and household composition post-1994 tend to focus on women survivors, with very few statistics on the experiences of wives of perpetrators. However as the Gacaca trails began and Hutu men were incarcerated, many Hutu women faced similar day-to-day realities as women survivors. Both found themselves as female heads of households in post-genocide Rwanda.

Women narrate before, during and immediately after the genocide through a gendered lens. Despite the different ethnic compositions of their marriages, Beatrice, Clementine, and Amida’s narrations thematically converge at multiple points. First, women describe their married lives as a time of happiness and economic stability. Women convey the economic importance of marriage. Second, women describe shifts that took place during the genocide in their relationships to men and to land. Lastly social networks, namely marriages and families, are notably absent in the aftermath of the genocide. The period ‘after the genocide’ is characterized by loss and the multiple “problems” of women’s lives.

The shared experiences of Hutu wives of perpetrators and Tutsi survivors before, during and immediately after the genocide prompts the coming together of the women’s collective – a story told in the mythico-history in the following chapter. Rather than the collective forming out of necessity alone, the collective also configures out of women’s shared marginality before the genocide, and shared economic and social disadvantage after the genocide – as reflected in the women’s narratives. This interweaving of women’s narratives with the collective’s daily work is also a thematic thread of the upcoming chapter.
CHAPTER 4:

Gutizanya Umuriro

This land is the house we have
always lived in.
The women,
their bones are holding up the earth.
— Linda Hogan

“In Kinyarwanda, they say ‘sharing fire,’ ” says Andrew, an advisor in the Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion. We are sitting in a hotel in Nyamata, Rwanda drinking Fanta. Andrew is a kind, intelligent man. He is wearing his gold wedding band on a chain around his neck and frequently removes his glasses when he speaks.

“When somebody’s…fireplace has fire in it, and yours has no fire in it, sometimes you don’t use a match stick to light it – you go to another, another family to take firewood which is lit. And then you light yours,” he says.

Andrew explains that after the genocide, it was women who “shared fire.” “It would take long for men to speak to each other. But women will take the first step to speak to each other,” he says, almost as if he is speaking to himself. “I don’t know whether it’s the compassionate nature of women and so on and so on, but…their role was crucial in the reconciliation process.”

In this chapter, I describe the collective – both through narrative, what women say, and practice, or what women do. This intertwining of material life and metaphorical narrative is reflected first in the mythico-history of the collective’s formation. Mythico-history compels and informs the ways that women negotiate day-to-day life. In other words, elements of the mythico-history are enacted through collective activities. The women’s collective is a site that not only

10 A Rwandan proverb. Sharing fire
addresses women’s material needs, but simultaneously is a location where collective narratives gather, unravel and weave.

The women’s collective is a part of and apart from the institution of marriage. This manifests in the mythico-history and is embodied through daily practice. First through the act of burden sharing, the collective provides female heads of households with the economic stability and emotional support afforded to married women. Second, women describe themselves as “men” and as “widows” – two terms that suggest daily triumph over structural disadvantage and invoke reminders of women’s continual ties to men. Through the women’s collective, mothers pass down a narrativized and embodied form of reconciliation and family to their children. Thus the women’s collective draws upon an idealized idiom of marriage, enabling women to fulfill their responsibilities as female-heads of households in the physical absence and narrative presence of husbands.

“How do you say that in Kinyarwanda – ‘sharing fire’?” I ask Andrew, after he lists the responsibilities of women, single-women, and female-heads of households in post-genocide Rwanda.

Andrew smiles. “Gutizanya umuriro,” he says, pausing for a moment to write the phrase down in my notebook. “And that’s sharing fire.”

**Mythico-History: A part of and apart from Marriage**

Mythico-history blends the historical and the mythical, the personal and the collective, the past and the present - the women’s collective formation story is a mythico-history that lies at the intersections of these descriptors. Liisa Malkki in her ethnography on Hutu refugees in Tanzania coined the term ‘mythico-history.’ First, mythico-history is *neither myth nor history*. It
is not merely a record of historical events but a “subversive recasting and reinterpretation of it in fundamentally moral terms” (Malkki 1995:54).

The formation of the cooperative is a mythico-history that I heard time and time again during my fieldwork in Rwanda. Sometimes women would first introduce themselves to me and then tell me the mythico-history. Other times, they would answer one of my questions with the mythico-history. While the mythico-history varied in length and detail, all of the women I spoke to, both women survivors and wives of perpetrators told a remarkably similar narrative. In my own naïveté, I began avoiding questions that would prompt women to retell their formation story. However they continued to do so and I eventually learned to listen. This section is a compilation of the various versions of the mythico-history that were told to me. I have decided to use my own narrative voice to tell the mythico-history rather than one of the women’s, in order to acknowledge the variation and congruency in women survivors’ and wives of perpetrators’ versions of mythico-history.

As women’s personal testimonies “transform and standardize into” a singular “mythico-historical event,” personal narrative becomes iterations of the collective mythico-history (Malkki 1995:241). That is not to say that the mythico-history is not deeply personal for many women. Rather, personal narratives and the mythico-history narrative that women tell are in dialogue – the way women narrate themselves informs how they narrate the collective, and so forth.

Malkki explains that the focal point of mythico-history analysis should not be about the accuracy of the stories themselves, but rather the reasoning, the meaning behind the stories, the purpose they serve for the people who tell them. Mythico-history is a way in which experiences are “active[ly] seiz[ed] […] in order to ingest and subvert them and, finally, to build something
new” (Malkki 1995:242). Thus, mythico-history is also dialectic between the past and present – “collective histories flourish where they have a meaningful, signifying use in the present” (Malkki 1995:241). The mythico-history of the collective’s formation, which recounts events that occurred from July of 1994 to 1995, continues to inform the realities of women in the present day. Why did women feel compelled to tell me this mythico-history? And what was the importance of mythico-history for women in the collective?

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In 1995, a priest named Michael began a Bible study for Tutsi genocide widows who lost their husbands during the genocide. He brought together the genocide widows from the village to speak about their experiences. With the help of a nun, Father Michael facilitated discussions between women where they could speak about their problems. He also taught the women to pray. Father Michael encouraged the women to form cooperatives to provide financial support for themselves and their children. He allocated funding to help pay for school fees for survivors’ children, many of whom had dropped out of school.

The village was divided during this time – women survivors would pass this way and the wives of perpetrators would pass that way. Tutsi survivors who lived in the center of the village refused to allow Hutu women to pass through. A Hutu wife of a perpetrator could not seek shelter from the rain in a survivor’s home. But they were still living close together - as one woman survivor says, “We were living door to door with the ones who had killed ours.”

After the Gacaca trials were over, the wives of perpetrators began taking food to their husbands in jail. In order for wives of perpetrators to visit their husbands in prison, they had to pass by where the women survivors were living. The wives of perpetrators went in a large group because they were harassed along the way by women survivors and their children who hurled
cow dung and stones at them. The women survivors and their children would hassle and run after the wives of perpetrators – they would take the food they were bringing to prison and throw it into the road. The food would pour onto the ground, and the wives of perpetrators would return home without having made it to visit their husbands.

After one year, some of the wives of perpetrators decided to approach the nun who facilitated the women survivor’s Bible study to see if they could also learn the word of God – they wanted to learn to be strong.

“Do you really want to learn the Bible?” the nun asked the wives of perpetrators.

The women said they did and the group began to meet. The wives of perpetrators learned the word of God, how to love each other, and how to love their country. The women survivors and the wives of perpetrators never met together. This went on for one year.

After some time, the wives of perpetrators noticed that the women survivors had stopped throwing stones at them when they would bring food to the prison – they wondered what had changed and asked the nun if they could approach the women survivors to understand. The nun asked the women survivors if this was okay – if they would hear what the wives of perpetrators wanted to tell them.

They agreed.

On the first day, the wives of perpetrators attended the women survivors’ Bible study. Women survivors stood up to share their genocide testimonies. It was too difficult. Many women wept. One woman survivor remembers:

The first day when they came, sitting with them was so hard. [We] began remembering what they did to us and it was a big, big challenge. People started crying. We just left – the meeting was useless. And then the nun just told us, “Be calm and listen to them because you agreed for them to come and meet you.”
During the second meeting, the wives of perpetrators asked the women survivors to grant them forgiveness. “We are here to ask you for forgiveness. Our husbands and our children betrayed you,” the wives of perpetrators said. The women survivors refused. So the group continued to meet and study the Bible. After some time, the wives of perpetrators asked again.

One of the survivors explains, “When we met, those women [the wives of perpetrators] asked us for forgiveness. The wives of perpetrators had to ask us for forgiveness. And we asked them, ‘What do you want us to do for you?’ ”

“Forgive us,” the wives of perpetrators said. “We know that our husbands killed your family. Let’s forgive each other and study together, study the word of God together. Our husbands killed yours, but we didn’t do anything. We didn’t have the strength to help you. But, please forgive us. Don’t hate us for what our husbands did. Let’s just live in peace.”

The women survivors realized that they all had problems in common – and they forgave the wives of perpetrators.

And in the hilly land stenciled with rectangular plots of corn, beans and bananas, where there are twenty shades of green, where Rwandans work the land while small children help and play in the fields, the group of women came together – it was the first reconciliation initiative in the country.

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Women’s ties to their husbands thread their way throughout the mythico-history. The mythico-history begins with the bible study[^11] for women who “lost their husbands during the

[^11]: Father Michael, after beginning the Bible study and facilitating the formation of the women’s collective, eventually left the village. As of this publication, he is still alive but lives away from the village. The record of Father Michael is an important one, as it reflects larger trajectories of the women’s collective, and thus has informed my decisions in framing this chapter. In many ways, the women’s collective is facilitated through the Catholic Church, and the church’s framing of marriage and forgiveness. However in the absence of Father Michael, the collective has continued to develop material and narrative practices extending beyond its religious foundings.
genocide” and the collective comes into existence after wives of perpetrators apologize for what their “husbands did.” The pivotal moments in the mythico-history narrative are marked by mentions of husbands and shifts in marriage through genocide. However, these references to men and marriage are also imprinted on women themselves – even after their husbands are physically absent, women refer to themselves in the mythico-history as “women survivors” or “widows,” and “wives of perpetrators.” These terms suggest a continuation of the invisible and ever-present relationships women have with their husbands. Women’s linkages to men not only underlie the mythico-history, but also affect the ways in which women address one another – even once their husbands are physically gone.

The coming together of the cooperative is marked by the understanding that women survivors and wives of perpetrators, despite their ethnic differences, face shared “problems” in the aftermath of the genocide. “We understood that we all had struggles. And each one [of us] had to be understood,” explains one of the women in the collective. Many of these problems, as described in the previous chapter, generate from the disintegration of marriages during genocide. However the absence of men within the home does not signify the erasure of marriage as an institution. Rather, women survivors and wives of perpetrators face the economic and social realities of being female-heads of households in post-genocide Rwanda. When this is realized as a shared “burden,” the women’s collective actualizes into existence. Burden sharing is carried out in the collective’s activities.

Mythico-history is a form of cultural production – as women tell and retell the mythico-history, they circulate knowledge about what it means to a member of the collective. In this sense, the mythico-history conveys that the women’s collective forms out of an absence of men.
and marriage; however simultaneously, the institution of marriage is embedded within the mythico-history narrative. The same can be said of the collective itself. The women’s collective and marriage are not mutually exclusive institutions. Rather the women’s collective is a social unit that invokes marriage in its formation, but in many ways exists to address the absence of male-heads of households.

The mythico-history can be understood as a creation story that embodies the ways in which the women’s collective is a part of, and apart from the institution of marriage. Elements of the mythico-history play out in the daily lives of women. The embodiment of the mythico-history into daily life and through collective activities is further elaborated upon in the next three sections.

**The Women’s Collective: A Site of Burden Sharing**

For many of the women in the collective, the first thing they do when they wake up in the morning is pray. “Everything we’ve achieved is due to God,” says Seraphine, who wears a gold cross around her neck. Only the top of the pendant is visible on her chest.

Women’s days begin early. In the morning, some women wash themselves and brush their teeth. Others take jerricans to the water pump and bring water back to their homes. For women with children, fetching water can be a child’s responsibility. However for widows, sometimes this is a daily task. If women are feeling healthy, they will go into the fields and dig. If they do not feel well, women will stay home and cook porridge. The day’s work consists of cooking, eating, cleaning and cultivating. In a notable, post-genocide shift in the gender division of labor, for women who have cows, part of the day is spent caring for their animals. In the afternoons if they have time, women will visit each other in their homes. Then, they will return
home to cook supper. The women usually eat with their families, the orphans they have taken in, and sometimes other neighbors. The last thing they do is pray, and then they sleep.

The women’s collective comprises 1,264 members. While there are some men in the collective who are husbands of female collective members, the vast majority of the members are women. From the women I spoke to, it also seems like the majority of the women are widows or female heads of households whose husbands are incarcerated.

The members of the women’s collective are divided up into sixty-three sub-groups. Each sub-group is headed by one woman. Once a week, the heads of sub-groups meet in the schoolhouse room in the center of the village. Then, they return to their sub-groups and relay the information from their meeting to the other members. Sub-groups are organized by proximity – the women who are closest to each other are typically part of the same sub-group. Each sub-group participates in at least one economic activity - these include soap making, agricultural work, animal sharing and sorghum beer brewing.

Francisse, the wife of a perpetrator, is one of the cooperative members. Her sub-group is composed of forty-eight people. Last year, Francisse’s sub-group decided to cultivate Irish potatoes – one of the many crops women grow including cassava, beans, sweet potatoes and corn. Francisse’s sub-group worked together on cultivating and weeding the land. She recalls that when the crops became tall, they hired a man to watch over the potatoes at night – “Because we were women, we couldn’t stay overnight looking over the crop, so that’s why we had to hire the man,” she explains. After a few months, the women harvested the crop and two or three of them took the potatoes to the market to sell. “There are some times when it’s a bad harvest because of the sun or the rain. But when there is a good harvest, we can get some food for our own homes, and also go to the market so that we can sell,” Francisse says. Good harvests like
last year’s crop can earn the sub-group 100,000 (139.28 USD) francs in total. Francisse explains that usually, they can get 200-220 francs (.28-.31 USD) for one kilogram of potatoes at the market.

Women give a small portion of the profits earned from cooperative activities to the head of the cooperative, who spends the money on maintaining the small schoolhouse where the collective holds meetings. However, the remainder of the income generated from cultivation and other activities is divided evenly among all of the members. “You divide the money equally?” I ask again, after Francisse says that they “have to divide all the money among us.”

“Yes, yes of course. We all take an equal amount of money. We have to get the same, we are equal. That’s how it is,” Francisse says insistently.

By distributing the money equally among all of the members, everyone is provided for in the collective. This is one of the responsibilities of collective members - to ensure that all women are cared for in the collective. Women describe this as living in a “healthy way,” or in a way that helps them “develop themselves.” Thus in order to guarantee that all of the collective members are cared for and developing, the money earned from collective activities is divided uniformly.

While profits from collective activities are distributed equally among sub-groups members, the distribution of labor is not. Women who are able-bodied women take on a greater share of the labor and agricultural work. “We look for those ones who are disabled and we help them. And if there are some who have problems, we help them,” explains Seraphine, a member of the cooperative. Women who are assisted with their agricultural labor include widows, disabled women, very old women, and those who are poor. This process of “help[ing]” ensures that women who are less “able” are also cared for within the collective. Thus while the financial profits from sub-group activities are distributed equally among members, labor is not. This
pairing ensures that more “vulnerable” collective members can continue to provide for themselves and their families.

In order for able-bodied women assist those who are in need of help, they must first have an awareness of the problems other women in the collective face. This involves understanding the day-to-day experiences of other women – whether they be women survivors or wives of perpetrators. “We have to figure out, we have to know them day by day, we have to check on them, and to know their problems. And then if there’s someone who needs to cultivate, we cultivate for them,” explains one of the collective members. As women “know” each other, they also come to know each other’s problems. The process of burden sharing begins with building relationships that involve a mutual awareness of each other’s needs. Once women “figure out” the burdens that other collective members face, there is a sense of obligation to assist those women who need help.

Cultivating or helping a woman in need is not only a way of knowing a woman’s problems, but also a way of sharing her burdens. Many of these burdens manifest themselves in physical day-to-day labor. For example, Seraphine is an elder woman who walks with a limp – a disability she acquired during the genocide. Seraphine explains that on days when she is unable to cultivate the land, somebody will come and assist her. When she does not cultivate, instead she weeds - the day I spoke with her, Seraphine had been weeding cassava. Other women explain that their burdens are ameliorated through physical needs provided by the cooperative. For example, some cooperative members will give each another food, dishes, plates, cups, clothing, fabric, hoes and other agricultural equipment, and even health insurance. Therefore, the act of burden sharing in the literal sense provides women with their day-to-day needs. However
through this process, women come to know each other intimately and share in the daily struggles they collectively face.

Many women’s economic burdens are a product of the shifts in marriage that occurred during the genocide. These transitions resulted in women, both survivors and wives of perpetrators, assuming the role of heads of households – a position in families that for women carries significant economic burden. In 2012, the NIS found that at 65 years old, one out of two women in Rwanda are widows, and of women over 80, three out of four are widows (National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda 2014). The likelihood of widowhood increases with age (Schindler 2010). Much like other African settings, Rwandan widows who are heads of households are less likely to participate in market activities and more likely to be living in poverty (Schindler 2010, Kossoudji and Mueller 1983). The economic disadvantages of widowhood are significant.

While a large portion of statistics focus on ‘Rwandan widows’ who are most often presumed to be women survivors or Tutsi women, wives of perpetrators experience similar economic burdens as female heads of households. Initially after the genocide, many wives of perpetrators did not receive the economic assistance provided to women survivors - because of the stigma associated with being a perpetrator or a wife of a perpetrator. “The perpetrators side wasn’t being funded in any way. I was living in poverty and I had no one to approach and ask for help. But my responsibilities as a mother never changed,” explains one wife of an imprisoned perpetrator. However, they too were tasked with similar burdens as widows – given that they assumed the role as head of the household after their husbands were incarcerated. Thus while demographic data tends to focus on the experiences of Tutsi widows, the economic burdens that
widows face are similar to those of wives of perpetrators. This shared reality is acknowledged through the collective’s daily activities.

**Small God**

In many ways, burden sharing is an act of necessity. Beatrice explains that at the end of the genocide, as a widow, she was forced to rely on the assistance of those around her – namely her neighbors. “Because I remained alone after the genocide, I felt like the people who were around me were always [going to be my] neighbors, even though they had killed my people and done all bad things to me. I felt like we could live like neighbors again. And because you never rise the dead from the dead, I felt like it’s always good to make friendship with the people around you, because you’re not going to bring back the past,” she says. As a widow, Beatrice needed to rely on her neighbors for support – many of whom were not from her ethnic group.

However as Beatrice depended on those around her, she also began to build relationships with her neighbors – who she describes as “small gods.” Beatrice remembers that one night after the genocide was over, she became very sick and had to be taken to the hospital. At the time, her son Patrick was still very young. Her neighbor’s son not only stayed with her in the hospital, but her neighbor came to her house and took care of Patrick while she recovered. “That’s why I say that that neighbor of mine is a small god,” she says. I ask Beatrice what she means by a “small god.” She explains:

Sometimes I say that that person is a small god to me because maybe just suppose my house fell on me, it just fell down abruptly, I’m a widow! And I, I don’t have anyone around to help me. So my neighbor is the first person who’s going to come and help me to rebuild the house and pick up the stones and bricks. Or another example is when I’m sick, and maybe […] I don’t have the strength to go and dig in the farm, my neighbor is going to come and help me out. To go and dig for me when I’m sick. In fact, sometimes when you pray to God and ask him, “God help me to know, help to overcome this and this,” but that small god will be there for you, always [fades].
Beatrice explains that “small god[s]” are individuals who “help” during times of need. The examples that Beatrice provides – her house collapsing, her lack of strength, and her feeling sick all reference her personal testimony elaborated upon in Chapter Three. In other words, “small god[s]” are individuals that enable Beatrice to “overcome” the challenges she describes at the end of the genocide. This involves not only addressing the day-to-day obstacles in her life, but also overcoming the larger, structural challenges presented to her after the death of her husband and her family.

Burden sharing is a daily practice that acknowledges the structural similarities that many women survivors and wives of perpetrators face in the aftermath of the genocide – namely as female heads of households in the absence of husbands. Through burden sharing, relationships form among collective members - relationships that account for the lack of support in other aspects of women’s lives. As women lose their husbands, their family and their husband’s family, the relationships that form within the collective supplant some of this loss. However the act of burden sharing also takes on important emotional meaning for women who are heads of their recomposed families. Through the sharing of daily burdens, women survivors and wives of perpetrators come to know each other – and know of the shared problems they face. This process builds emotional relationships between collective members, in spite of ethnic differences. For Beatrice, burden sharing invokes notions of care, “close[ness.]” and “God.” Therefore, burden sharing encourages women to build emotional bonds across interethnic boundaries – thus becoming each other’s “small gods.”

“There’s only one God in heaven who is our father, but also my neighbor is always close to me,” Beatrice says. “When I scream, that person comes for rescue. When I want someone to talk to, that person is always near me. That’s why I say she’s a small God. When I’m not around
in the house, my neighbor sends someone over to come and sleep in the house with my children.”

**Absent and Ever-Present Husbands: As Widows and Men**

*I was the only one to take care of my child, I was the only one to bring food into the house and take my child to school. So things changed, they were not like before, I had more responsibilities.*

— Clementine

*But now I’m facing the future and I’m bringing up my kids. I’m the one buying for them clothes, food, and taking them to school. Patrick is in secondary six, in grade twelve, and the orphan child I brought in is in secondary one. After the genocide, the life I’ve been living has continued and I still have hope for tomorrow.*

— Beatrice

In the collective, both women survivors and wives of perpetrators identify themselves in opposition to married women. Namely, they describe themselves as “men” and as “widows,” two terms that elicit the simultaneous physical absence and narrative presence of male-heads of households in women’s lives.

Many women in the collective emphasize that they are all alone as they face day-to-day economic challenges; they are “widows.” Intentional usage of the term “widow” has been documented in anthropological research in other parts of Africa. For example Mutongi found that women in western-Kenya strategically narrated themselves as helpless and suffering widows because the social role of the widow held more social capital than that of a single, elder woman (Mutongi 1999). Mutongi’s findings elicit the interplay between structure and agency as women define themselves and their location within society. Women in Kenya choose to identify as widows, a term that suggests disadvantage, in order to access power and recognition in society. By playing into gendered societal tropes of vulnerability, widows thus benefit from them.
Among women in the collective, widowhood is a way to express the structural disadvantages women collectively face as female-heads of households in post-genocide Rwanda. After describing herself as a “widow,” one woman in the collective explains:

We women we have so many problems. There are some times that you don’t even have fabric or clothes to wear so you go and buy fabric. And you find out sometimes your kids are coming home for the holidays, and when they’re about to go to school you have to pay their school fees. And when you don’t even have anything to cook, you can’t even buy an onion.

Being a widow is an identity that conveys the “problems” that ensue for women in the absence of their husbands. Many of these problems are economic – ranging from not being able to “have fabric” to wear to not being able to buy food. Thus the identity of a “widow” is associated with the physical absence of male heads of households and the economic burdens that follow. “As you know, we don’t have that much money, we don’t have the ability to have that much money” Francisse explains to me.

Mutongi (1999) found that widowhood was a strategic identification that garnered sympathy for women in western-Kenya – particularly from men. By identifying as widows, women made apparent the disadvantage of being unattached to a male figure, and thus prompted compassion and economic support from men in the community. Similar to Mutongi’s findings, the identity of “widowhood” among cooperative members is intentional and collective. One afternoon, I am speaking to Francisse whose husband has been released from prison for genocide crimes. Francisse and her husband are now living together. However in the middle of explaining the difficulty of agricultural cultivation she exclaims, “As you know, we are widows!” The identity of “widowhood” among collective members is not used to solicit sympathy from men like Mutongi observes in western-Kenya. Rather, as women identify themselves as “widows,” they convey the disadvantages they collectively face as women – obstacles which they proceed

12 The verb used to describe this in Kinyarwanda is kutishobora or not being able to support oneself financially.
to overcome through the women’s cooperative. Therefore by describing themselves as widows, women position themselves to triumph over the challenges they face in their lives – through being like “men.”

“After the genocide, things changed,” said Clementine. “I was more of a man in the house than more of a wife.” Clementine and I are sitting together in another collective member’s living room. Clementine, whose husband is still incarcerated, lives with her son, Muvunyi. She, like many of the women in the collective describes herself as the “man” of her home. I ask her what she means by this and she responds, “I have to make sure what I get to put on, what to eat, what my child puts on and also what he eats.”

Sometimes, women describe themselves as “men” of their homes to convey the ways in which they have assumed responsibilities previously designated for men. For example, some women describe caring for cows, putting roofing on the house and protecting their homes as some of their responsibilities as “men” in post-genocide Rwanda. “Maybe I’ll give an example,” one woman says. “If it’s at night at seven pm, I close the gate and I make sure that there’s no one else going to come into the gate. If they come, I’ll have to defend myself.” As this woman explains, as the head of her household she is now tasked with “defending” herself and her home – a responsibility understood as being for “men.” Thus women describe their daily responsibilities as those designated for men, but performed by themselves as men in their female-headed families.

However more often, being the “man” of the house is used to express the success women have had in financially providing for their families – despite the structural challenges in doing so. As Clementine describes earlier, “being the man” is taking on sole responsibility for the finances. One component of this is handling the family budget. As Beatrice explains:
If I give an example of the home, with a man and a woman, they are married. Obviously the man is providing for the woman, the woman will always look towards the man for anything she wants. But in my case, I don’t have a husband, but I have children, and I have to take care of them. So in my budget, I always have to make sure that if I put on a cloth or a new cloth, I make sure I buy the same new clothes for my children so that they won’t be envious or start fighting me that, “Mom has bought clothes and not bought for us too.”

Being the “man” of the house means not only handling the finances, but distributing resources skillfully among family members. One collective members reiterates, “In my house, I’m the man. So, it’s standing up and being who you are. So if you put on your shoe, you have to make sure your kid also puts on that shoe, if you put on a cloth, you make sure you buy the same clothes for your children.” As these women explain, to be able to budget wisely is to be able to ensure peace within the family. As women narrate themselves as “men,” they describe themselves as the skillful financial providers for both themselves and their children.

The ways in which children describe their mothers is indicative of the particular social position women in the collective hold within society. This is narrated not only by women in the collective as they describes themselves as “men,” but also by their children. When describing their mothers, children acknowledge 1) their mother’s lack of a husband and 2) the responsibilities then that women take on as female-heads of households. Many children in the collective describe their mothers by way of the fact that they lost their husbands during the genocide, currently do not have husbands, are living alone, or did not re-marry. For example, Esperence, the daughter of a collective members says, “During 1994 after my dad died, my mom raised us - and she didn’t get married a second time.” Another child explains - “My mom is an adult woman – she is 65 years old. And she is involved in this cooperative. It’s been 20 years that she’s been in the cooperative. And she doesn’t have a husband. There is nothing else I can tell you about her.” This was a common occurrence in the collective, where children described their mothers in relationship (or lack thereof) to male partners, namely husbands.
When asked what they believed their mothers’ responsibilities were, many children reiterated that their mothers were in charge of providing for them financially. Jado, the son of a cooperative member, says that his mother’s responsibility is to “help us [her children] grow up in a good way.” When asked how his mother does this he explains, “When I go to school, my mom tries to pay my school fees.” Esperence says, “My mom has the responsibilities to grow us up well – her children. [She] helps us by buying clothes, shoes, mutual insurance…” In other words, the responsibilities that mothers describe as being the “man” are reiterated by children. Children understand their mother’s role to be to provide them with tangible resources – food, clothes, shoes, mutual insurance and education that enable them to “grow.”

There are a variety of expenses women pay to take care of the “daily needs” of their children. These include buying children food, health insurance, clothing and educational fees. In Rwanda, primary education is free. However, parents must provide the school materials for their children. These materials include rulers, notebooks, mathematics books, markers and pens, and school uniforms, book bags and food. In secondary school, parents have the responsibility to provide their children with school materials as well as a stipend for teachers to supplement their salaries. Vestine, a primary school teacher in the village, explains that many parents have trouble paying for educational costs, let alone feeding their children. “That’s also a problem,” she remarks quietly. The money that women earn from the collective is used to pay for the expenses of children.

The identities of “widow” and “man” are collective and intentional, and produce a narrative of women that is drastically different than that described in Chapter Three. Rather than positioning themselves onto the peripheries of their families, women are now central to the success of their homes. As one child of a cooperative member explains of her mother: “She’s the
leader of the family. She has to take care of everything so that it goes well – like either in agriculture, or other activities that can develop our home. She’s the one in charge as the leader of our family.” As women fulfill their responsibilities to their children, they are also seen as the “leader[s] of their famil[ies]” – a position acknowledged both by women and their children. Thus being “widows” and “men” are two of the ways in which women name the structural challenges and daily triumphs they have made in their lives. As female-heads of households, women have found ways to provide for themselves and their families in post-genocide Rwanda by means of the cooperative.

Simultaneously by identifying as “widows” and “men,” husbands have a continued narrative presence in the collective. Both terms invoke references to past marriages and the vital roles husbands held in women’s families ‘before the genocide.’ As women are “widows,” they carry on their ties to their late (and sometimes ever-present) husbands. As they are “men,” they uphold the role of the husband as the financial caretaker and provider of their family. Therefore, despite the ways in which the terms “widow” and “man” serve to explain the changes in families that are now run by women, these identities women use to describe themselves simultaneously uphold the institution of marriage. As women triumph over structural disadvantages as leaders of their homes, the ways in which this position is explained maintains the narrative integrity of the role of husbands and the institution of marriage in women’s lives.

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One day while sitting in Beatrice’s living room, I look up at the roof and notice the intricately weaved brown and tan thatching on her ceiling.

Beatrice says to me that earning the money to afford to put cement on her roof was one of the proudest moments in her life. “One thing that was so hard for me to imagine but that I wished
to achieve was building my house. Long ago it was made of mud, and some parts of it were falling down. I always wished I could get money for cement, that I could cement it. And luckily through the bank, I put money to buy the cement and I cemented it. That was one thing that I achieved and I was happy about it. [...] God has helped me through,” she says. Celine, the former head of the women’s cooperative, later explains to me that repairing the roof of a house is traditionally men’s work in Rwanda. Celine’s husband passed away before the genocide. However after his death, her husband’s family used to come and help her put “proper roofing” on the house – rather than having her do it alone.

**Raising Family**

When Beatrice first joined the cooperative, her children were furious. “My kids hated me,” she says. “They were like, ‘How can you be with those *Interahamwe*, the ones who killed?’ I taught them how to pray and I made them understand that we don’t have to stick with our pain. I was showing them and telling them – you children, you can see that all your family is gone, even mine. How will we manage this?”

“I told them that it’s good to come together with others,” she says. Women like Beatrice describe the cooperative as a “family” – a social unit that formed at the end of the genocide. “Now we are a family,” many women explain to me when I ask them about the cooperative. Both marriage and later the women’s collective are idealized social units that women refer to as “families.” While family is narrated through memories of marriage (in Chapter Three), it is put into daily practice in the women’s collective. “We will have to eat with them, because they are our family. What I know is that we shared the food. And we became family,” one woman remarks.
The recreation of family involves embarking on the process of reconciliation – both through idealized narratives of reconciliation and embodied daily practice. Women explain that one of the ways they pass on “living like family” to their children is by telling them stories about their own lives. “There’s a lot of ways that I teach my children how to live in harmony with other people. An example I can give is when I teach them how to love others. I always give them an example of how I lived before the genocide and after the genocide,” Beatrice says.

Celine, a genocide widow and I are sitting together one afternoon. She is the former head of the women’s cooperative, an older member of the cooperative with graying hair that is firmly slicked back. Her small build makes the chair she is sitting in look large. She begins to tell me about her neighbor – after the genocide, Celine could not look her neighbor in the eye for three weeks because Celine believed she had burned down and robbed her home. And then she forgave her. I ask her about the steps she took to forgive and she closes her eyes and says:

So, after I realized that God had granted me life after [the genocide], that I was not dead after all, I thought about myself, and I thought about the bad things that I was doing, the bad deeds I was having over the people that killed my people in my family, and I realized that there was no use in having bad intention towards them. But after forgiving, I felt relieved in my heart, I felt like there was no bad deed of anyone that I had with me. I felt so relieved and happy. Do you even know how hatred hurts? It’s so heavy. It’s so, so heavy to carry hatred with you.

I ask her if she can explain more about that.

So if you meet someone that you hate, the hate feels like it’s crushing. And your heart doesn’t pump well again. And even your thoughts, you don’t think so well. So, that’s all tiresome. [to me] Do you understand? So after, after…[crashing / crushing?] your heart and head, see you’re already tired.

Similarly, Beatrice remembers that at the end of the genocide a community member came to her and confessed to killing her mother. “After he told me that he killed my mother, I forgave him, and just let everything go,” she says. “Another example is of people who looted our house during the genocide, they robbed every property we had, and all animals that we had. But when they confessed that they had stolen things from our house, I forgave them and told them to never
reimburse me, or give those property back to me.” She continues - “Another person we living nicely with is the person who threw my mother’s body into the latrine. So after she showed me where the latrine was, we removed my mother’s corpse, and we went to bury her. But right now we are living in harmony and I forgave that person. […] After the imprisonment, I forgave her, and I used to give her food, supplies everyday.”

Many women like Celine and Beatrice narrate forgiveness as a clear series of steps. There were countless stories of forgiveness that women readily shared with me about the people and crimes they had forgiven. One woman explained to me that speaking these stories, like the personal testimonies, was a way to “forget […] pain.” “As we keep talking about our histories, we forget our igikomere,” says Jeanette, the head of the women’s cooperative.

However stories of forgiveness were coupled with urgings that through the collective, women were passing on to their children “peace” and “love.” “We have to tell them all the histories of Rwanda. And we have to tell them the truth about it. So that they will never ever do the same thing as what happened,” says one woman in the collective. There was a sense of urgency in the ways that women explained the necessity for children to adopt the attitudes that mothers voiced in their stories of forgiveness. “The message I can pass to the children is to live with others well in peace, and for all Rwandans. […] Because discrimination was the worst thing that happened to Rwanda. My children must see everyone as family,” says one woman. Women’s narratives of forgiveness were a way for them to pass on reconciliation and family to their children.

Transmitting narratives of forgiveness to children is understood by women in the collective as a form of umurage, or non-material inheritance. This inheritance is passed down

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13 Wound
through women. “I taught them to prevent themselves from discrimination. And I showed them [...] the way to making reconciliation,” one woman says. “There’s a lot of, there’s a lot of umurage that I can pass on to my children, but I’m going to tell you the main ones. The first thing is that they may be men and not be dogs, and the second thing is love. Because it makes me happy when I’m in a good relationship with people, so I want them to have the same friendship that I have had with people. And I also want them to have a nice life as they are growing old, as they are elders, and die without having any problem with anyone,” Beatrice says. As female heads of households raise children “in a good way,” they also pass down umurage.

“I have to take my Mom as a parent,” Jado says, in a moment of seriousness amidst his consistently mischievous smile. Jado is the eighteen year-old son of one of the members of the collective. He is currently home for the holidays. The role of a child in Rwandan society is to heed to the advice of one’s parent. In families like Jado’s, this means he must listen to his mother – the head of the family. Because the responsibility of a child is one of obedience to his or her parent, children like Jado must listen to their mother’s advice. “If my mom says, ‘You don’t do this,’ I have to avoid doing that thing that [my] mom forbid me to do. I have to respect everything that [she] says to me,” Jado explains.

Women also pass down to their children umurage through the collective’s activities. As children help their mothers in the home, they are also contributing to the work of the cooperative. Esperence, the daughter of one of the members of the collective, is a shy girl who plays with the frayed threads on her skirt as she speaks. Esperence explains that her responsibilities as a daughter are to help her mother with the different work they have in their home. “I have the responsibility to help my mom with all the activities she asks me to do…and to love my mom,” she adds. These household activities range – from gathering firewood, helping with cultivation,
watering plants, caring for farm animals and accompanying mothers to the market to help sell agricultural products. Thus, as children assist their mothers in household activities, they are also participating in the activities of the cooperative.

The children of collective members also take part in cooperative activities outside of the home – namely birthing ceremonies, marriage ceremonies and funerals. While these are not activities related directly to the economic activities of the collective, they are common occurrences among cooperative members. Further, one collective member explains that these activities bring “unity” among the women, and participation in life-event ceremonies is a way to express care and support for one other. For example, when a community member dies, the rest of the village convenes for *ikiriyo*, or a wake. While individuals go about their daily activities during the day, in the evening when the sun sets those who knew the deceased family member walk to the house of that person “to show that we are together with that family.” People sit outside of the house, gathering around a fire to speak of things that are light - in order to “help [them] become happy.” *Ikiriyo* goes on for one week.

The children of cooperative members are active participants in *ikiriyo* as well as other community gatherings. Often, children go to the home of the deceased as a representative for their family. They express “condolences” on behalf of the rest of their family and gather firewood in the forest to use for the evening fire. Claude, the son of Jeanette explains that during these periods of mourning, his mother and many of the adults “stay a few minutes in the evening” at the house of the deceased. However, it is mostly the young people who participate in the funeral ceremony that lasts the rest of the night. For gatherings like *ikiriyo*, the purpose of attendance is “to give the condolences” in order to “show that we are the same.” Claude explains,

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14 “*Naraye mu kiriyo,*” says one of the children in the collective.
“In our culture, in every family, if they have lost one person… we have to go to help that family to show that we are the same in that problem.” As children of cooperative members represent their family in the expression of condolences, they too become a part of the community of survivors and perpetrators and take part in the expression of reconciliation.

As collective activities become household responsibilities, the children of cooperative members take part in collective activities – thus acting as members of a community of survivors and wives of perpetrators. Through activities within the home, such as land cultivation, and activities outside of the home, such as ikiriyo, the children of the women’s participate in their mothers’ collective while fulfilling their obligations as children.

Therefore, umurage is passed down both through the narratives that women tell of their own lives and the moral advise derived from these narratives, as well as through the construction and enactment of family and day-to-day living in post-genocide Rwanda. Pacifique, one of the children of cooperative members explains that in all, the collective gives him good inheritance - “It gives me umurage ukomeye\textsuperscript{15} and everything I do, and every successful thing I’ve had, all this is from this cooperative,” says Pacifique. “My mom was an old woman who had almost 75 years old. But she died when she was 80. You understand that she was so old, but for me, she taught me so much things, so much important things. She taught me how to forgive, and how to ask for pardon,” Pacifique explains. Through everyday practices and collective narratives, women pass down umurage to their children. This umurage includes examples of forgiveness, practices of reconciliation and the creation of family.

“I have hope that even though I die, I’ll leave my children with something and make sure I’ve given them something,” says one woman in the collective. “In case I fail my responsibilities

\textsuperscript{15} Good inheritance
[as a mother], my kids will stay in the cooperative,” says another woman. “When they [my children] were still young, they didn’t understand why we must live in peace. But as time goes, they begin understanding it. And as in they have been living with others […] in the cooperative, they understand,” says Jeanette. Through the cooperative, through narrative and practice, women pass down family and the morals that accompany to their children.

Seraphine, a woman survivor, says that during the last school break, her child brought home a Hutu friend to stay with them in their house. The boy spent a few days at her home - “I took care of him like he was mine,” she says.

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The women’s collective is a social unit a part of and apart from marriage. Women in the collective are able to sustain themselves economically and through this process, emotional bonds begin to form between women survivors and wives of perpetrators. Unlike how women narrate themselves in Chapter Three, women describe themselves as “men” and as “widows” two terms that illuminate the ways that women triumph over the structural disadvantages of being female heads of households. These terms also suggest that women have continual ties to their husbands and the institution of marriage. Through the women’s collective, women also pass down a narrativized and embodied family – one that centers around reconciliation and values of forgiveness and peace.

Beatrice tells me that through the cooperative, she was able to find out where her family members, where her husband was killed. She remembers that one-day, she and her children went to the fields of green to see where their bodies lay. She says:

As much as they [the wives of perpetrators] had been a part of it [the genocide], due to the lesson they learned, they helped find the bodies. And the wives of perpetrators started asking their husbands in jail, “Can you please tell where are their [the women survivor’s] families, the neighbor’s families.” And they helped and said where the bodies were. They helped us and they
told us the ones they threw in the toilet, those ones they burned in the houses, and we started searching for those bodies.

“Umwunguti,” Beatrice says.

“The grass that grows on top of bodies.”

The collective is a social location where daily life is narrativized in ways that transform daily living into acts of duty, morality and reconciliation. During this process, women draw upon the idiom of marriage in order to provide semblances of congruence in the aftermath of widespread rupture that occurred through genocide. As a result, women find ways to provide for their families as female-heads of households – men and marriage remain an integral presence throughout women’s lives, despite their physical absence. In the following chapter, I trace the institution of marriage through to the current historical moment in Rwanda. What does the women’s collective signify for the future of marriages and families of Rwanda more broadly?
CHAPTER 5:
Weaving Threads

This July 2014, Rwanda commemorated the 20th anniversary of the end of the genocide. At memorials held throughout the country, politicians repeated the message: Kwibuka20 – Remember, Unite, Renew. Foreign representatives and their fast black cars swarmed Kigali city for a week, giving speeches at various events and attending the large memorial services at the stadium. The newspapers, the television stations and the radios ran stories about the genocide for weeks and weeks. The roads in Kigali city were blocked off, rural villages held gatherings to commemorate those who were lost in the genocide. The country was consumed. And then the week ended, the foreign ambassadors went home, and life returned to its pace – small shop owners selling chapati and amandazi, small children holding onto their mother’s skirts with their tiny fists. But the memories linger in the air, you can hear them in the songs people sing at church on weekends. They sing from the morning until dark.

The women’s collective is almost twenty years old now – some of the original members have since passed and all of them are aging. However, the women continue to grow food and meet together and speak about their lives. “It’s one of the things that helps when we say what is inside of us, all the things that are stuck within our hearts,” says one cooperative member.

In this study, I suggest that women’s life narratives are vital to understanding the historical and current landscapes of Rwanda. As women craft their narratives of before, during and after the genocide, they are producing a particular historical genealogy of Rwanda that merits our attention as scholars of Rwanda, of gender, and of genocide and reconciliation.
In Chapter Two, I describe the historical landscapes necessary to understanding the narratives women tell. Political shifts in Rwanda, particularly colonialism, independence and the period of genocide, have resulted in different iterations of the content of marriage. However throughout Rwanda’s history, the institution of marriage has endured through time.

Chapter Three details women’s narratives of before, during and immediately after the genocide. In their narratives, women voice that the strength and contentment in their married life ‘before the genocide’ is ruptured and absent at the end of the violence. Women narrate themselves on the peripheries of their families – instead emphasizing their husbands’ roles as caretakers and providers.

In Chapter Four, I describe the women’s collective as an idealized social unit that draws upon the idiom of marriage. Through the women’s collective, women provide for themselves and their recomposed families. They pass down to their children morals and values that support reconciliation. This in turn alters the way women narrate themselves within Rwandan society. Instead, they describe themselves as “widows” and “men” – two terms that suggest daily triumph over the structural adversity female-heads of households face in post-genocide Rwanda.

Women in the collective draw upon an idealized idiom of marriage in order to provide social congruency in the wake of extreme violence. In this chapter, as I document the return to demographics that parallel those prior to 1994, I reiterate that the work women have done has had a profound impact on post-genocide Rwanda. Their voices and daily triumphs must be acknowledged as such. “And as my conclusion,” Beatrice says, “it’s a challenge that I’ve been fighting. But we’ve been heroes,” she says.
The Wife of Sebwgugu

The narrative arc of women’s stories in this study have allegorical parallels to the Rwandan folktale that tells the story of Sebwgugu and his wife. As the story goes - long ago, Sebwgugu married a beautiful woman. The day after the two were married, a terrible drought struck the land. Sebwgugu’s wife decided to look for firewood. While she was walking, she stumbled across a pumpkin clearing. She gathered as many pumpkins as she could carry and returned home. That evening, the couple ate pumpkin for dinner.

A few days later, Sebwgugu’s wife realized they had eaten through almost all of the pumpkins. So she ventured back to the pumpkin patch to gather more. Sebwgugu, curious about the pumpkins, followed his wife to the forest. When he saw the clearing, Sebwgugu told his wife they should weed the patch so the pumpkins would grow. But his wife disagreed.

So Sebwgugu returned to the patch and secretly weeded the land himself. And the pumpkins did not grow.

When Sebwgugu’s wife saw there were no pumpkins left, she returned home and said nothing to her husband. On the morning that the last of the pumpkin was eaten, Sebwgugu’s wife told her husband she was leaving to look for water. But instead, she decided to run away. As she was running, she found a beautiful house. She knocked and there was no answer. She tried the door and it was unlocked – so she walked inside. Inside the house she found food, so she cooked herself dinner and went to sleep.

The next morning, Sebwgugu went searching for his wife and found her in the beautiful house. Sebwgugu’s wife lied to her husband and told him she had gotten lost and decided to spend the night in the home. The two sat down to a meal. While they were eating, a ferocious animal arrived at the house. Sebwgugu’s wife told the animal to go away and locked the doors.
She told Sebwgugu not to answer the door if the animal returned. But later that night when the animal knocked on the door once more, Sebwgugu ignored his wife’s words and let the animal inside. The animal devoured Sebwgugu. “I have eaten a man and will now look for a woman and do the same!” roared the animal. Sebwgugu’s wife jumped from her bed, grabbed an ax and when the animal tried to enter the house, she killed it.

Sebwgugu’s wife found a drum and beat it joyously and the forest listened to her celebration. The king of the forest also heard Sebwgugu’s wife’s drumming and appeared at the house. He was a handsome man and the owner of the beautiful home. Sebwgugu’s wife recounted the story of the animal for the king. The king was so struck by her beauty and bravery, he asked for her hand in marriage. She agreed and the two lived happily ever after (World Vision n.d.).

In the story of Sebwgugu and his wife, Sebwgugu’s wife is never named. She is a woman of many talents – she discoverers sustenance for her family during a time of difficulty and possesses almost magical qualities. She has an intimate relationship with the Earth and symbolizes production and reproduction. Her instincts with nature are wise – she grows pumpkins and fights off a ferocious animal. She has opinions; however, she acts upon those beliefs rather than pushing them onto her husband. She is hardworking, looks for firewood and cooks meals. Simultaneously, her existence is bound to men and the home. Sebwgugu’s wife literally runs from home to home and in doing so, runs from Sebwgugu to the forest king. We only know about Sebwgugu’s wife from what she does, not from what she says.

The story of Sebwgugu and his wife is the story of a woman who is never named, yet whose choices drive the folktale – the discovery of pumpkins, the separation in marriage and ultimately, a new union between man and wife. Without Sebwgugu’s wife, there would be no
new marriage, there would be no folktale. She, like many Rwandan women, has compelled the story to continue.

The most recent Rwandan census suggests that the country is returning to the demographics that existed prior to the genocide. According to Rwanda’s Fourth Population and Housing Census conducted in 2012, 51.8% of population is women and only 28.8% of households are headed by women. This number is only slightly higher in rural villages, where 29.8% of households are female-run. 44.9% of women in Rwanda are married, .8% are separated, 2.2% are divorced and 10.9% are widowed (National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda 2014). These statistics attest to the strides Rwanda has made in the past two decades. With its fast paced economic development, higher standard of living and commitment to education and health, the future looks bright for families in Rwanda. However, what is less apparent is that these statistics are also a testament to women - to the female-heads of households who have raised children and maintained homes in the last two-decades.

In the women’s collective, many collective members tell me that the younger generation is now marrying and starting families. These marriages are markers of reconciliation within the collective - one woman tells me that her son, a Hutu man, recently married a Tutsi woman. “Due to the love we had for each other, our kids started loving each other,” explains Clementine. Clementine says that recently, there was a wedding within the collective. A man had been released from prison, and after returning to the village, he married a young wife.16 Seraphine recalls the wedding – which many collective members attended. She explains:

16 Since the genocide, men charged with crimes of genocide have been released from prison and have since returned to the village. However, this has not seemed to impact women’s narrativizations of the genocide nor of the collective – as their stories have remained largely intact.
When they [the bride and groom] got home in the morning, we brought *ibiseke*\(^{17}\) with beans in it. Even *amasaka*.\(^{18}\) And then we gave it to the bride and groom. So far in this cooperative, we’ve seen so many good outcomes in it. We help each other, and you find out that any problem can be solved.

Marriages not only contribute to the growing number of households comprised of husbands and wives living in the same home, but they are also ceremonies that signify reconciliation – one of the goals of the women’s collective. Marriage as an institution is a testament to the “good outcomes” or reconciliation efforts among the collective. The same can be said of births.

There have been two recent births within the collective. Clementine says that for these events too, collective members attended and provided materials for the celebrations put on by the newborns’ families. She says:

> We gave them [the parents] umbrellas for their children, so that they can you know - [motions, to cover the child so that the child is protected from rain/sun] We as the members of [this collective], we put together the money and then we bought beer, we bought hens, and brought them to the family, the born child’s family. The good thing about the collective, there are too many. But the good thing is that our children have got *umurage*. And in case we won’t be alive, our kids will stay loving each other. […] And in case they are getting older, it will stay with their kids too.

Both Clementine and Seraphine, in describing wedding and birth ceremonies, elaborate upon these events as proof of the success of the women’s collective. Weddings and birthing celebrations are not merely social gatherings, they are clear markers of the “good” the collective has achieved. As Clementine explains, the collective is a way that children are ensured peace and social support. These inheritances are embodied in both marriage and birth ceremonies within the collective.

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\(^{17}\) Baskets

\(^{18}\) Small red or white grains used to make porridge
The story of the women’s collective is one that is located on the peripheries of Rwanda’s national borders, Rwanda’s social landscape, and Rwanda’s dominant narrative. The women’s collective’s story is a story of everyday and has the potential to be dismissed as mundane, daily life. It is a story of women waking and praying, working and sleeping. Of raising children as mothers, of raising food as cultivators. However as women continue to carry on their daily life as female-heads of households, they pass on stories of reconciliation, stories of new marriages. These are stories that children of collective members now carry – As Clementine says above, “In case we won’t be alive, our kids will stay loving each other,” says Clementine. The story of Rwandan women is central to understanding Rwanda’s history. “Now there is peace between us, there is strength,” says one woman in the collective. “We’ve done good things as Rwandan women.”

**Narrative Theorizing: Women’s narratives in post-conflict settings**

What would the folktale of Sebwugugu and his wife sound like if it was told by Sebwugugu’s wife? In this study, as I propose that women’s narratives be understood not as objects of analysis but women themselves as subjects of their own knowledge production, I would like to describe how Rwandan women’s narratives can be theorized and applied - specifically by non-Rwandan audiences. Women’s narratives are a way for outsiders to more aptly understand conflict and post-conflict settings.

The gendered participation of violence around the world is such that in the aftermath of conflict, many women face the challenges of reconfiguring daily life. Rwandan women’s narratives in this study depict both the structural realities as experienced by women, and the daily negotiations women make given these conditions. Understanding these two components of women’s lives, both of marginalization and solution making, is essential for international bodies
whose aims are to support reconciliation and peacebuilding efforts in post-conflict settings. In order for non-government organizations, foreign countries and humanitarian aid organizations to support women in their lived realities, they must first understand women as participants in their culturally specific social locations, and as their own agents of change.

In this study, women’s narratives are powerful calls to peace. The women’s collective presents a specific case study of women engaging in peacebuilding in a post-conflict setting. However, the structure that undergirds peacebuilding in the women’s collective is a model that can be applied to other post-conflict settings. Often, western notions of peacebuilding involve prolonged periods of intentional dialogue. However in the case of the women’s collective, economic engagement produces the landscape upon which women build a collective narrative of reconciliation. Sustained economic stability coupled with social reconciliation are intertwined structural supports of reconciliation. This intersectional foundation of reconciliation, communicated through women’s narratives, is a model that can be adopted, altered and applied by outsiders aiming to support reconciliation efforts in other post-conflict settings.

What would the world looked like if we centered the lived experiences of women, via their own voices and within their own culturally specific contexts? What if women’s narratives were used to inform larger structural policies and changes? These are the questions I would like to end with, as they were prompted by many of my informants, who often ended our interviews with questions for me. After speaking with Beatrice, I ask her if there is anything else she would like to tell me. We are sitting across from each other at a wooden table in her living room. Beatrice says that she just has one question – “I’m asking you,” she says “in your place where you reside, do you also have gatherings of women’s cooperatives? Or, is it just a happy country with no problems? Let’s take an example of here in Rwanda, there was the genocide and there
were a lot of widows. And at least we’ve managed to gather up and think of small things we could do in order to make our lives better. But, is it the same with you? Do you have orphans, do you have widows who come together to think of something that can make their lives better? Or it’s just…a very peaceful and happy country?” Beatrice asks. Rwandan women’s narratives prompt further inquiry about the centrality (or lack thereof) of women’s voices, individual voices structurally ‘heard’ within societies around the world.

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For our last interview, Beatrice invites me to her home. I get off of my moto and walk up a windy dirt path to her house. She comes outside and stands, gazing over the edge of one of countless hills in the area. Beatrice is wearing her everyday clothing - a dark blue shirt tucked into her igitenge wrapper. Pink floral fabric wrapped around her head. “Muraho, amakuru?” I ask, as I embrace her shoulders and hold her hand – a respectful greeting in Rwanda. She guides me inside and we walk through the house. Beatrice introduces me to her daughter, an orphan whom she adopted after the genocide. She also introduces me to her granddaughter, a young child held at the hip of her daughter.

Beatrice lives in a house full of women - that is, aside from her son, Patrick. Since returning to the United States, Patrick has continued to stay in touch with me. Each time we speak, he asks me to greet my mother.

And I ask him to do the same.
GLOSSARY

Abahima
One of the Ugandan ethnic groups whose features are often described as similar to the Abatutsi of Rwanda.

Abahutu/umuhutu
Members of the traditional Hutu social class who lived in the regions now known as Rwanda, Burundi and Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. Hutu are traditionally farming people.

Abatutsi/Umututsi
Members of the traditional Tutsi social class who lived in the regions now known as Rwanda, Burundi, and Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. Abatutsi are traditionally cattle-herding people.

Abatwa/umutwa
Members of the traditional Tutsi social class who lived in the regions now known as Rwanda, Burundi, and Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. Abatwa are traditionally hunters.

Akuzuye umutima
A Rwandan proverb: you speak what is in your heart; you are what you speak

gasesekara ku munwa
How are you?

Amakuru ki?
fried African donut

amandazi
small red or white grains used to make porridge

amasaka
fried flat Indian bread

chapati
Traditional Rwandan councils and tribunals comprised of elders and used to resolve conflict through administrative justice. In Kinyarwanda, “a resting and relaxing green lawn in the Rwandan homestead.”

Gacaca
In French, “those who commit genocide.”

génocidaires
In Nyamagabe/Huye District in the Southern part of Rwanda

Gikongoro
a Rwandan proverb: sharing fire

ibiseke
baskets

igikomere
wound
Igitenge fabric for women’s casual dress
Ikiriyo Funeral ceremony; wake
Indushyi rejected wife
Interahamwe Hutu extremist militia group that backed the former Rwandan government in organizing and executing the genocide. In Kinyarwanda, “those who stand, work, fight, attack together.”

Kutishobora Not being able to support oneself financially
Moto motorcycle
Muraho Hello
Murakoze Thank you
Naraye mu kiriyo “I spent the entire night at a funeral ceremony/wake.”
Umurage ukomeye Good inheritance
Umurage Non-material inheritance
Umuryâângo Family, lineage. The term translates directly as “the gate to the compound.”
Umuzungu white person
Umwunguti “The grass that grows on top of bodies”
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