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Photographing Loss: Drawing on Argentinian Photography in Rwanda
Zoe Norridge

‘We work to tell our own life history, our own questions in relation to the horror and our own obsessions and anguish. But this does not imply making images of how others see us. This is important – not to take on stereotypes of ourselves, of our history. We are not doing photojournalism about ourselves.’

Lucila Quieto (Email July 2015 np)

Lucila Quieto was born in Argentina in 1977, five months after her father, Carlos Alberto Quieto, disappeared. A 32-year-old Montonero, he was one of the estimated 30,000 people who were forcibly taken by the civico-military dictatorship between 1976 and 1983. He never returned home and Lucila grew up knowing him only through photographs and stories.

Mussa Uwitonze was around six years old when his family fled to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC, then Zaire) during the 1994 genocide
against the Tutsi. He lost his mother in a crowded refugee camp and never found his parents again. Instead, he grew up in the Imbabazi Orphanage in Rwanda, close to the border with Congo. He has no family photographs and doesn’t even know his parents’ names.

Both Quieto and Uwitonze experienced parental loss at a young age due to political violence. And both have become photographers, vowing to use the storytelling potential of the camera to advocate for social justice in Argentina and Rwanda. This reflective essay describes how Quieto’s photography, alongside images by other Argentinian artists, inspired Uwitonze and fellow Rwandan photographers who grew up without parents to explore their own personal histories of loss through their work for the first time. It draws on interviews and close readings of selected images to describe a particular encounter and reflect on cross-continental points of connection between Argentina and Rwanda.

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In May 2015, with my own four-month-old baby in my arms, I travelled to Argentina to meet with Argentinian artists who had experienced parental or family loss as children. I joined my co-researchers on a recently awarded AHRC Care for the Future grant: Noa Vaisman, an Israeli anthropologist specialised in Argentinian transitional justice, and Maíre Braniff, a Northern-Irish sociologist researching memories of conflicts in Bosnia and Belfast. Although Argentina, Northern Ireland, and Rwanda (my research area) have experienced very different conflicts, we had the sense that there were generative connections to be drawn between childhood experiences of violence in these settings. We wanted to understand how adult artists remember the
losses that marked their early lives, and what avenues for justice they might find through artistic practices that reflect and move beyond traditional legal frameworks. We also thought comparative academic work might be able to provide forums for creative artistic exchange.

I’d been working with Rwandan photographers for several years and curated a group show *Rwanda in Photographs: Death Then, Life Now* in London in 2014. It featured ten Rwandan photographers and Rwandan visual artist Christian Nyampeta alongside work by Andrew Esiebo (Nigeria), Jenny Matthews (UK), and Brendan Bannon (US). Two features of the Rwandan work stood out. Firstly, the dominant photographic style in Rwanda was NGO-inflected photojournalism. Secondly, in contrast to Rwandan writers, film-makers, and performers, none of the photographers in the exhibition chose to explore their own personal stories through their artistic practice. There seemed to be multiple reasons why this might be the case: unlike neighbouring Uganda or DRC, Rwanda didn’t have a fine art school and was relatively unconnected to international contemporary art networks; in the aftermath of genocide Rwanda had been flooded with photojournalists and most photographers working in country had learnt from these outside visitors; employment opportunities for photographers were with local newspapers or NGOs interested in reportage style work; and photography is arguably an unusually challenging medium for exploring the past, compared with verbal art forms with more established temporally agile traditions (such as testimony, memoir, historical novels). I hoped that in Argentina I would find examples of photographic memory work that I could take back to Rwanda — that I might be able to connect Rwandan photographers with Argentinian artists to help open up new spaces for creative exploration of the past.
Photography in Argentina has an established and engaged relationship with past injustice. As Piotr Cieplak’s interview with Ludmila da Silva Catela in this special issue explores, families of the disappeared, particularly mothers and grandmothers, have mobilised personal photographs in the public sphere — using them to search for their missing children and grandchildren, displaying them to demonstrate against forced disappearances and manifest the ongoing existence of their lost family members in their memories. Artists have also worked with family and archival photographs to protest and reflect on violence inflicted by the dictatorship. Marcelo Brodsky’s most famous photo essay *Buena Memoria*, for example, features a class photograph from the Colegio Nacional in Buenos Aires, taken in 1967. Working with the photograph in 1996, Brodsky circled the faces of the students, added biographical notes about what happened to each person and crossed out those who were forcibly disappeared. David Michael Rojinsky sees such experimental techniques as characteristic of the ‘memory-art-photo-essays’ which evolved in Argentina over the following two decades. Writing about Lucila Quieto’s participation in the field, he identifies three recurrent techniques:

Firstly, those that offer an ethnographic re-framing of the personal archive or family photo-album in the *caja china* effect of a photograph within a photograph to evoke inter-generational memory; secondly the evocation of absence through images of empty spaces or buildings, often former detention centres or burial sites, and decaying objects, usually personal belongings, found at the same sites; finally, using montage and collage, the visualization of an imaginary encounter between the dead or disappeared and their surviving relatives. (Rojinsky 172)

All these techniques mobilise symbolism and imagination to render loss visible.
Amongst the photo essays coming out of Argentina in the aftermath of the dictatorship, Lucila Quieto’s *Arqueología de la ausencia* (1999-2001) is perhaps the most striking. She produced the work whilst she was studying photography and active in HIJOS, an organisation composed of children of the disappeared that was ‘instrumental in rejuvenating the struggle of the Argentine human rights movement’ in the mid-1990s, whose full name translates as ‘Children for Identity and Justice and against Forgetting and Silence’ (Drulliole 260). *Arqueología de la ausencia* grows out of this context of protest and resistance, offering personal, familial meditations on the ongoing presence of absence in the lives of those who lost parents as children. It features family or archival photographs of the disappeared, chosen by their remaining sons and daughters. These images are projected onto a wall and the adult survivors stand beside or in front of the projection so that for some the image is imprinted on their own bodies. The resulting black and white photographs of members of HIJOS with their missing parents are both beautiful and, as critics have argued, subversive and defiant, resisting the dictatorship’s attempt at erosion (Bell). Gaunt asserts they stand in opposition to ‘the accepted order of what can be seen, and who can speak about state atrocity’ both because of the active state erasure of the lives of people who were disappeared, as we see in Gwendolyn Diaz Ridgeway’s interviews in this issue, and because the remaining families of these ‘subversives’ were actively suppressed through the abduction of children and culture of fear (65-6).
When we met with Quieto she told us that photography has always been important for her because photographs have mediated her relationship with her father every since she was a baby and her mother would show her his image. She reflects: ‘I found something more in them that words and family stories couldn’t tell me’ (Interview np). Her parents weren’t married when her father disappeared so, in part for safety, her mother gave Lucila her own last name. Given this lack of verbal lineage, she recalls: ‘it was as if I also needed the confirmation of that family connection in an image’. However, such connection was often incomplete. For example, Quieto remembers finding a photograph of her mother pregnant, presumably taken by her father, but she doesn’t have a photograph of them both together — there was no ‘family picture’. She began taking her own photographs during a picnic with her mother at the age of four. After getting her own camera at the age of twelve, for a while she took photographs of her daily life, including her time at school, ‘as if I felt the need to capture those moments [so that] at some point, if something happened to me, […] my children would be able to see what my life was like’.
Quieto studied photography, both at art school and in workshops held with members of HIJOS by more established Argentinian photographers such as Adriana Lestido, workshops Quieto recalls as being key to her realisation that ‘photography wasn’t only a documentary record, but also [offered possibilities for] being able to reflect on images and tell other types of stories’ (Interview np). It was as part of her final photography degree project that she began work on Arqueología de la ausencia. During our conversation she recalled that she knew she wanted to explore her personal history and involvement with HIJOS but couldn’t find the right angle, abandoning initial ideas including a huge family tree of photographs (both of her own family and of other families of the disappeared) and hybrid photographs made from collages of other individual portraits (which she describes as giving monstrous and grotesque results). Finally, she began to experiment with photographing projected archival photographs alongside her father’s remaining personal belongings. She included herself in the image, to one side, as if looking at a picture. In class, her teacher suggested the missing element was that she hadn’t ‘carved out’ space for herself in the image. She recalls realising, ‘of course, I have to place myself inside the picture’ (Interview np).

One of her colleagues in HIJOS had a projector and a ‘huge old house’ (Interview np). Working with her friends, and very little time, she set up images and, in the case of the self-portraits, once happy with the composition, ‘I would go over and get inside and they would take my picture’. In one day, she took the photographs required for her project and developed them overnight at a fellow student’s house. That morning, carrying them home to trim them, she realised many were out of focus and worried that technically she might fail. Nervous, she remembers showing them to
her mother who froze and then began to cry. In class when the work was examined, the whole class was in tears. She remembers her teacher’s words:

The truth is I don’t know what to say, because we listened to you throughout your whole process, talking about your work, and now to see this… It’s so much, way beyond what we imagined, what you talked about, maybe even more than what you wanted… (Interview np)

She had created the lost image that she longed for as a child — a photograph of herself with her father. In doing so she both honoured and refused to be defined by the past; she rendered visible emotional connections between the members of HIJOS and their enduring ties to their missing parents. As Jordana Blejmar argues in her analysis of the playful, interpretative aspects of Quíeto’s work, by replacing ‘victimhood’ with ‘agency’, she transformed the memento mori of the photograph of the disappeared into a memento vita (121).

As we sat, talking with our children in Quíeto’s home in Buenos Aires, I described the challenges facing Rwandan photographers, particularly those who had also lost parents and were still searching to find a voice to explore this loss. Pregnant and unable to travel, she agreed to mentor and respond to their work from a distance.

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A few months after our interview with Quíeto in Buenos Aires, I returned to Rwanda to work with four Rwandan photographers: Jean Bizimana, Gadi Habumugisha, Claudia Ingabire and Mussa Uwitonze. All had grown up in the Imbabazi Orphanage located around forty minutes from Gisenyi, near the border with DRC. Founded by Rosamond Carr, in the aftermath of the genocide against the Tutsi, this institution had
offered a home to children of all ethnicities, living together in smaller ‘family groups’ on the beautiful flower-studded grounds in Mudende. In 1999 David Jiranek, a photographer and friend of Carr, travelled to Rwanda to document the aftermath of genocide. Finding it harder to connect with the local population than he had ever imagined, he instead spent time at the orphanage and founded a photography project later named *Through The Eyes of Children* that was to change the lives of many of the participants. Carr selected children who were doing particularly well at school and Jiranek trained them in how to use disposable cameras. They were encouraged to take photographs of daily life that were then shown both locally (in the orphanage), nationally (in Kigali) and eventually overseas (the US). Jiranek died in an accident in 2003, aged just forty five. Claudia Ingabire commented: ‘Everyone cried. What an important thing David had done for us. We loved him because he gave us knowledge’ (np). The project continued through the ongoing commitment of his friends and colleagues: Kirsten Ashburn, Joanne McKinney, Jennifer Howard and Kesra Hoffman, amongst others. Sales of the participants’ photographs paid for their subsequent studies at university. But whilst the former ‘camera kids’ participated in further photographic projects run by visitors such as Marcus Bleasdale and Gary Knight (VII Photo Agency) none of them studied photography in a formal educational setting.

I had worked with Bizimana, Ingabire, and Uwitonze in 2013 and 2014. Bizimana in particular was clearly a talented photographer and soon afterwards he chose to become a professional, working first for Kinyarwanda newspaper *Igihe*, then as the Reuters photojournalist in Rwanda. For the 2014 *Rwandan in Photographs* exhibition, all the photographers chose to work on projects about families. Ingabire photographed families who participated in the government Girinka ‘one cow per
family’ project. Carefully composed, her work foregrounded the emotional connections between people struggling out of poverty and their beloved cows.

Uwitonze returned to one of his ongoing preoccupations, children living on the streets in Kigali. Often invisible to wealthier Rwandans and visitors, he photographed these young people playing improvised board games, walking amongst makeshift shelters, passing time at the market, and in some cases with their parents. We displayed the work as postcard-sized snapshots, printed on MDF, grouped together as a photo diary.

Bizimana’s work featured in the main room of the exhibition, alongside Nigerian photographer Andrew Esiebo’s images of young Rwandans who had grown up in exile and returned to Rwanda after 1994. In contrast with the glossy Kigali aesthetic of these young ‘returnees’, Bizimana’s photographs explored the lives of families in a rural community in North West Rwanda. Marked by the black volcanic earth characteristic of this region, they were tonally muted in greys and greens. But the subject matter was lively: intimate images of children playing, women peering back at the photographer from between their washing lines.

Our brief, when developing work for the exhibition, had always been that photographers could work on any topic of their choosing. But Mark Sealy and I were still surprised that although, to a certain extent, all the photographs were marked by legacies of the genocide against the Tutsi, none of them chose to explicitly explore their personal histories. The Imbabazi photographers have since explained to me that this is because they needed to focus on paid NGO-commissioned work, they didn’t know how to approach the past and, in the case of Bizimana, the past was so painful, growing up in an orphanage so socially stigmatised, that he had avoided the topic all his adult life (Emails, May 2020, np). During the 2014 exhibition, two of the photographers, Mussa Uwitonze and John Mbanda, joined us in London for a public
discussion of their work with (then) Rwanda-based Korean-American photographer Laura Pohl, and for a professional workshop with photo editors from international NGOs and news agencies to explore the reasons why international organisations were still sending foreign photographers to Rwanda rather than commissioning local artists to portray their own country.

Whilst in London we saw Richard Mosse’s bright pink infrared photographs of the hills in eastern DRC as part of the Deutsche Börse Prize at the Photographer’s Gallery and Matisse’s late period cut-outs at the Tate. Uwitonze in particular was fascinated by these alternative ways of looking. He was searching for new visual vocabularies beyond what he encountered through mainstream media in Rwanda. Conscious of the long histories of inequalities inherent in artistic exchanges between Europe and Africa, and the dominance of Holocaust-inflected curatorial practices in official Rwandan memory spaces, I began to look to South America for alternative points of connection, inspired in part by Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar’s extraordinary conceptual responses to genocide in Rwanda. It was in the immediate aftermath of Uwitonze and Mbanda’s visit that I co-wrote a funding application to connect artistic memories of political violence in Argentina, Rwanda, and Northern Ireland.

After Argentina, I returned to Rwanda in July 2015, this time without my son, although I do remember the enveloping fog of that new parental role, expressing milk in the toilets of roadside restaurants as we drove across the country. I invited Uwitonze and three more of the Imbabazi photographers (this time also including Gadi Habumugisha) to spend a long weekend with myself and US photojournalist Brendan Bannon near the northern border with Congo, the area where they grew up. There they would respond to work from Argentina and Quieto’s prompts, drawing on these to explore whatever memories they wanted from their own pasts. I hoped to
generate cross-cultural visual conversations between Argentina and Rwanda; to discuss the place of the lost generation of parents in the work of these particular photographers; and to nurture a creative space to rethink how to imagine presence and time through photography. We spent our evenings looking at work from Argentina and reviewing portfolios; we undertook daytime exercises around emotions, memories and loss; and we visited the site where the photographers grew up twice — once to explore and discuss memories and strategies for representation, once at dawn to take photographs.

Sat around an outdoor table with sodas in glass bottles and mosquitoes dancing across the laptop screen, the Rwandan photographers responded to *Arqueología de la ausencia* with excitement and emotion. In an email to the photographers, Quieto asked them: ‘Can we use photography, with all its technical and aesthetic means to play with history of the inevitable? Can we use photography as a means of repair?’ (Email July 2015 np). There in the Gisenyi night, they immediately grasped the meaning in her work and sensed the radical potential of her images to bring the past into the present, to reconfigure relationships characterised by loss and absence. Whilst their own photographs had always focused on the literal depiction of daily life in Rwanda, often framed by the ideologically charged Rwandan vision of development and ‘progress’, here suddenly was a window onto the past, a symbolic language that enabled them not only to depict but also to rewrite their own histories.

Bizimana and Habumugisha, like Uwitonze, had lost their parents during the genocide and have very few memories of their earlier family lives. Ingabire lost her mother from illness shortly after the genocide. They were aged between two and six when they last saw their parents and although they had been taking photographs since
they were eight or nine they had never considered using photography to reflect on their own personal sense of loss. Their training as children had always focused on the technicalities of ‘showing’ the present. Like Lucila, they felt the lack of an adult-to-adult relationship with their parents. They saw in her images a gesture of reparation, the dissolution of childhood isolation through a virtual juxtaposition. But they also read these images as varied and personal. Lucila’s photograph of herself with her father in an open space is infused with loss and animates a missed encounter: their gazes never meet and he remains forever amused by the humour of a past moment (see above). But in another of her images in which she stands in front of his identity papers, matching his gaze as both father and daughter look directly at the camera, they read accusation and political protest. The identity card, instrumental in facilitating ethnic violence in Rwanda in 1994, was a symbol that travelled with a jolt of shock and recognition across the Atlantic. They saw the photograph as an enduring testimony to the injustice of Carlos Alberto Quieto’s death.
Responding to Quieto’s images and questions, the Imbabazi photographers began work on their own photographic essays exploring their sense of identity and family, encompassing both life at the orphanage (where many of the shots were taken) and the distant past that they now could hardly remember. As this process unfolded it became clear that they had a complicated temporal conception of loss. Whilst 1994 remains the iconic date for researchers writing about the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, for these four photographers it was one of three nodes of loss that had marked their lives. Firstly the loss of their parents during or immediately after the genocide, secondly the death of Rosamond Carr, their ‘other mother’ and founder of the orphanage when they were in their late teens, and finally, the closure of the orphanage a few years earlier, leaving them without a familial ‘home’ or any place to return to during university holidays. Three of them focussed their essays on memories and emotions associated with the orphanage where they grew up. Only Uwitonze decided to explicitly explore the connection between the loss of his biological parents in Congo and the loss of Mrs Carr.

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Claudia Ingabire chose to explore children, family connections and domestic settings with her camera as a way to evoke her memories of childhood. She was unusual in this group because she remembers her mother, remembers being carried by her everywhere, remembers sleeping with her, even on the night she died. At the
orphanage she took on nurturing roles and recalled looking after children who needed additional help, such as one eight-year-old boy who didn’t yet know how to use the toilet. Talking about her images, she commented: ‘the important thing I want to show is that every person may love, may take care of someone who needs help’ (np). In several of her photographs this connection is shown by depicting young children being carried, one in the arms of a mother, another on the back of his brother. In both cases the portraits are overlaid with other aesthetic devices: in the first the image is taken through a wire fence, in the second the children are irrevocably out of focus. In other photographs she revisits familiar cooking and gardening spaces within the orphanage, exploring the potential of objects to evoke people in the past. Quieto remarked on her good eye and her use of varied focus and objects (Email December 2015 np).

Claudia Ingabire. Photographs exploring the past, 2015.

Copyright, permission and title being sought from the artist.

Jean Bizimana has no memories of his biological family: ‘When Ros was alive she used to tell me that I came to the orphanage when I was too young’ (np). His photographs explore his love for Ros (whose name he pronounces as ‘Rose’) through the gardens around Mudende. This was his first passion, before photography. He
remembers that whilst other children received footballs or thread for presents, he would be given seeds. Explaining these images, he commented:

Others smell roses. But I put this rose on my head thinking about the good things she did for me. Even if she’s not alive I’m still thinking about her. The flower is damaged. I chose this damaged flower because the garden is not in good condition and she is no longer here. (np)

He found reflecting on the past challenging, but also commented that ‘This weekend I learned that I can’t forget […] The past will help me to prepare the future’. Lucila responded with warmth to his personal reflections, explaining that from her perspective ‘we cannot stay suffering forever’ and photography, or other art forms, ‘helps us to think about the past again, to free ourselves, to continue towards a better future’ (Email December 2015 np). In the photographs she found colour and unity, ‘like a great painting’ and particularly loved the composition, in form and colour, of the crowd image below. I am also struck by the intense colours, the unusual crops and moments of stillness, captured in the midst of implied (but resisted — the shutter speed remains quick) movement.

Mussa Uwitonze articulated a direct sense of connection with Lucila’s personal story, commenting: ‘We face the same thing. Her father was taken away without her knowing. I don’t know where my mother went’ (np). His essay aimed to tell the story of his ‘two mothers’. To do so he photographed children living in the area around the orphanage and attached these images to a narrative about the past. He suggests that a photograph of a woman holding a child evokes the worry in his mother’s eyes as she looks to the future; another of children running in the dust evokes the flight into Congo in the midst of chaos. Other images include a self-portrait taken in his old dormitory, leaning against a post where the word ‘Maman’ has been etched into the peeling black paintwork, and an archive photograph of Ros Carr herself. The final image of his photo essay brings his double loss into the present in a striking manner. A young girl stands on an earthy bank, dusty clothes incrusted into the ground where the cross section of earth meets the grass above. Beside and behind her are tall trees grown for timber, soon to be logged. Behind them the clouds gather. Mussa explained: ‘This is me in the present. Now, where I am currently, as my father and my mother. The cloth is like my father’s cloth and makes me think of the dead. I am standing there in my father’s place. These are pictures of a story I’m trying to live.’
The adult man, who would go on to get married a few months later, points to an image of a child and declares this to represent himself, his father and mother. It is a moment of intergenerational identification and compression that suggests both connection and enduring isolation. This interface between complex storytelling and a striking visual image appeals to me as a literary theorist. But as a visual artist Lucila was wary of the use of images as illustration and encouraged him to explore emotions and political context in a more experimental, conceptual manner (Email December 2015 np). I’d seen Mussa asking the children to run in certain ways, setting up photographs with the mother: a form of staging that offered the potential for new modes of storytelling. But Lucila felt the poetic and evocative possibilities of the photograph could be further explored.

By contrast, Gadi Habumugisha’s essay is the most abstract exploration of loss I’ve seen by a Rwandan photographer. As he himself reflected, this is in part because of the complete lack of material traces of his past: he lost his parents when he was two years old, can’t remember their faces and recalls only ‘pieces’ of how he lost them (np). His photo essay explored ‘the feeling of having left the orphanage’. When
the closure of orphanages was announced he had to return to collect his belongings. He recalls of this trip:

I realised the emptiness of the place. There was nobody in our bedroom. In Kinyarwanda we call it itongo – like a deserted house when someone dies and no one is living there any more.

His images capture this emptiness through their subject matter and aesthetics. One shows the window of Mrs Carr’s sitting room, taken from outside at a child’s height. The paint is peeling off the wooden frame. In another, a rusty gate hangs open, beyond a faint path is apparent in the grass. Some of his photographs are intended to be shown in pairs. These further extend the loneliness and sense of desolation. A shot of dried pyrethrum flowers on a rack is juxtaposed with an image of rubbish and organic debris floating on dark water. In both the contents are uncontained, the flowers and debris fill the frame, extending out beyond the photograph. What was alive has dried, what was once useful has been thrown away. And yet there is a strange beauty in the abstract patterns and shapes. Pyrethrum flowers are a natural insecticide and their harvest provided much of the money for Rosamund Carr to fund the orphanage. But they are no longer grown in Mudende. These remaining blooms are kept for foreign visitors not for the children themselves. The politics of the pairing is complex.
In another diptych, Habumugisha’s childhood friend, Mussa, lies on his back on the sandy banks of Lake Kivu. He is well-dressed, wearing good shoes, a watch just visible on his left wrist: an image of relative ease. But the golden evening light, his closed eyes and the dried leaves that are scattered across the beach evoke a mood of reflection and wonder, whilst the incongruity of a man, lying on the ground echoes those terrible images from 1994 (Cieplak 27). This photograph is paired with another of a table and four stools made from a tree trunk in the orphanage grounds. Grass has grown up tall around the low stools and it is dotted with wildflowers. This is where the children used to sit but there are no children now. They have grown and moved away. The stillness also tells a story about the closure of orphanages and the loss of childhood places that might otherwise still be alive with laughter and play. The angle of Mussa’s body on the sand and the angle of the table and chairs echo each other, adding an implication of the sadder past, of those children lost to genocide in Rwanda and to cholera in the refugee camps. The pairing suggests both a mood and many layers of meaning. Lucila saw this sense of absence in all of the images. She found their ‘poetic search’ very beautiful and was struck by how this was enriched by the pairings (Email December 2015 np).

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In this body of work the Imbabazi photographers used a range of aesthetic strategies to explore the past: strategies not externally imposed (none of their work directly echoed images by Quieto, Brodsky or other photographers we discussed) but rather inspired by contact with Argentinian explorations of loss. In many cases, the visual language that began to emerge was grounded in Rwandan aesthetics. So for example, the use of symbol and metaphor by Bizimana and Uwitonze, echoes the structures of Kinyarwanda, a highly metaphorical language whose speakers are adept at reading double meanings, allusions, implications (Kagame, Mugiraneza) and more traditional visual art forms such as basketry or imigongo (three dimensional cow dung paintings in which abstract repeating patterns convey specific meanings, Ministère de la Famille). In the case of Bizimana’s rose self-portrait, this draws both on the linguistic realm (Ros(e) the person and flower) and polythetic allusion (roses from the garden, the garden of childhood, a space mother and child worked on together, a place that is damaged and lost). In other cases, such as Ingabire’s use of objects and places to evoke memories of the past with a certain tone or mood, there is a deviation from Rwandan cultural expectations as what is traditionally perceived as private (the
domestic cooking space) is rendered public (albeit whilst preserving a sense of intimacy).

All the photographers explored representations of emotion and relationship in new ways. Ingabire and Uwitonze did so through illustrative work, drawing on visually apparent connections between contemporary mothers and their children to evoke their own loss. Habumugisha on the other hand took up the challenge of using form and composition (alongside symbolism) to render absence visible. This sense of the ephemeral was extended through experimenting with shutter speed and focus as seen in Habumugisha’s depiction of fleeting joys of the past in ‘The Sound of Music’, and some of Ingabire’s portraits that remain blurred and inaccessible. By contrast, Bizimana’s sharply defined imagery suggests a different form of precision recall, memories of the past with vivid hue.


Understandably, given the timeframe, none of the photographers developed the level of aesthetic coherence apparent in Quieto’s Arqueología de la ausencia. But they all perceived a fundamental shift in their practice. As Habumugisha observed:
I used to take pictures that other people wanted me to take. If I [work] for an NGO they tell me what they want and then I take pictures, applying my photographic skills. But this time it was a bit different. I had to create things in my mind and then take the pictures […] When I saw [Lucila’s] pictures I learnt that I can create something in me and put it [out] there and show it. (Personal Interview, np)

Uwitonze similarly comments that “Lucila’s work taught me how to add meaning to photographs and more importantly creativity” – for the first time he was able to conceptualise photographs as telling his own story (Email, May 2020, np). In the years since the workshop, this experimental approach to aesthetic languages has continued to shape their work, even on commission. Bizimana for example, in recent projects exploring relationships between perpetrators and survivors, has paid increasing attention to family photographs of the past, symbolic objects and evocative close crops. All describe the workshop as having changed the way they perceive their own artistic practice. Bizimana also explains that the work we did together also had a profound affect on him personally: “It was after this workshop that I began to think deeply about why I was orphaned and the other problems I was going through as an orphan because of the life [I had led]. I would say that the workshop helped to know myself and understand who I want to be” (Email, May 2020, np).

The characteristics of Rwandan photographic memory work are still evolving, and it is too early to identify coherent aesthetic trends. One notable feature is that this evolution is taking place exclusively in the digital space. Rwandan photographers rarely work with film and printing in the country remains a challenge (the Kigali Center for Photography for example routinely print in Kampala). This means that in contrast to Quieto’s preference for working with her hands-on projects including Arqueología and the later Filiación, developing, printing, cutting and collaging,
nearly all photographic work in Rwanda takes place on screen. I hope that new collaborations between fine artists and photographers, such as the nascent work between Jacques Nkinzingabo and Willy Karekezi overlaying illustration onto photographs, might generate more work across mediums in future.

Quieto’s work grew out of a particular political moment when the children of the disappeared realised they must take action to stand against impunity (Lessa & Levey 208-9). In their ‘Open Letter to Argentine Society’ HIJOS asserted in 1995:

We have grown up. Today we are together not only to ask questions, but also to speak and demand. This society is the offspring of silence and terror, and there is an attempt to spread a veil of oblivion over the history of our country. We are not bricks in this wall of silence. We want to pull it down. We need to know the truth of our histories to reconstruct our identity. (Cited in Drulliole 264).

Whilst much has been done to establish, hear, share and record memories of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, further testimonial work is still needed to explore the legacies of earlier violence from 1959 onwards and to shed light on some of the enduring silences within Rwandan society (Norridge ‘Papaoutai’ 16). Silences around deaths in Rwanda as the Rwandan Patriotic Front came in from Uganda to stop the genocide; silences around civilian deaths in the camps in Congo in the aftermath of genocide; and silences about how marginalised groups, including children of both survivors and perpetrators, have struggled with poverty and ongoing mental health difficulties over the past decades (Jesse 215-236). Such silences have been compounded by international foregrounding of adult survivor narratives to the exclusion of other perspectives (with the Fest’Africa writers Tadjo, Diop, and Monénémbo as notable exceptions) so that artists with without such memories of
genocide, particularly those not necessarily from Tutsi backgrounds, feel their personal stories are unmarketable. Civil society spaces are opening up to discuss these topics but there is still widespread hesitation and self-censorship amongst both those affected and artists (many also affected) wishing to engage with such memories. Work by the Imbabazi photographers includes untold stories of family loss amongst refugees not targeted by genocide, orphanage closure from an adult child’s perspective and cross-racial identification that remains underexplored. Could visual languages offer angles for exploring these topics in manners that are less volatile than explicit verbal approaches?

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Photography has shaped both the Imbabazi photographers and Lucila Quieto’s impressions and approaches to (missing) family members. Habumugisha recalls:

I began photography when I was eight years old and just holding a camera was precious to me. […] When I started visiting families in the community [to take their photographs] I started to realise why I was different from other kids in school. Our daily activities were different. Slightly different but significant somehow. For example, the way we used to eat lunch and dinner. At the orphanage everyone had their own plate. But when I went to visit other families they used a bigger dish and all shared together. That’s something we were lacking as Rwandans at the orphanage. It’s very Rwandan to share from one plate. (np)

It was through his camera that Gadi first visited parent-present families. It was through photography that he realised what he had lost in losing his parents was not only the sense of a family unit but also the practices that contribute to social and national identity. For Quieto it was through photography that she was able to imagine
the lost parent and to trace the contours of his absence, his missing laughter, his gestures. As one of the anonymous reviewers for this article observed, perhaps ‘what connects Quietó and the four Rwandan photographers is their use of images to contemplate, remember mourn or even invent “alternative” family structures’. Blejmar notes that between 2006 and 2007 Quietó created ‘a series of collages based on the theme of what she calls ‘la familia armada’, meaning ‘the assembled/armed family’ (124). The Rwandan photographers certainly manifest the existence of an assembled family, but they also mourn its dissolution, the triple loss of parents, surrogate mother, and orphanage family home.

When Lucila, writing from Buenos Aires, asks Rwandan photographers in Gisenyi ‘Can we use photography as a means of repair?’ (Email July 2015 np) it is a deeply personal and resonant question. It was a privilege to be present to bear witness to the Imbabazi photographers’ response. It was also not an unproblematic position: I grew up with my parents and live with my children, I’m not a photographer but a cultural facilitator and an academic, I come from a country whose wealth was built on the back of disregard for colonial and transatlantic family connections, although my husband, who comes from Jamaica and Trinidad, has experienced the legacies of such severances intimately. I was aware of my own ‘northern’ UK identity as a facilitator in this imperfect ‘South-South’ encounter and whilst I tried to mediate it by adopting a position of listener, of witness, I was also in many ways the instigator, the holder of power.

Anupama Sekhar, interviewed in Art Africa about the feasibility of solidarity in the Global South commented:

Although we frequently speak of solidarity in the South, it is not often reflected in concrete actions. We have been talking about greater South-South cultural exchange
and cooperation for a while now, but funds for this are not always easily forthcoming. If they are, they often come from the Global North.

This project, funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council, took steps to mitigate power inequalities: facilitating dialogue between the photographers across continents, inviting participants to work with their own interests rather than prescriptive time periods from the past, and asking the photographers themselves to select the images they wanted to share. But significant boundaries remained, not least geographical distance and the need for translation which meant that there was a temporal delay between Lucila’s prompts and her responses to the work, limiting ongoing exchange. Whilst programmes such as UNESCO’s International Fund for Cultural Diversity (IFCD) do have specific goals to increase ‘South-South and North-South-South cooperation’, in practice the vast majority of their projects are regional rather than cross-continental (IFCD np). Work across languages and continents remains a challenge.

In addition, one of the puzzles facing these kinds of projects is how to position such professional-professional artistic conversations in the public eye. Brendan Bannon, who has successfully placed many stories about his participatory photography projects with Syrian refugee children, was unable to interest any media outlets in publishing the Imbabazi photographers’ stories. Reasons may be complex. Fairey reminds us that participatory visual work funded by NGOs grew out of the context of critiques around images of famine and suffering and perhaps as a result, they tend to be feel-good or celebratory in mood (114, 120). Photographic projects exploring loss may be harder to grasp. Difficult, too, is the framing for such work: these Rwandan photographers are (aspiring) professional photographers, our project was not participatory but rather professional to professional. The Through the Eyes of
Children organisation that grew out of Jiranek’s work at the Imbabazi orphanage has had significant media success publishing images these photographers took as children and gaining coverage of them, in turn facilitating their own participatory photography projects with children and young people in Rwanda, the US, and Haiti. The common thread here is a Western fascination with childhood and children’s perspectives in the popular press.

In the end, what remains is that these conversations resulted in paradigm shifts for the Rwandan photographers involved. Their connection with Lucila, whilst mediated through translation, distance and screens, was both alive and profound. What they took from our time together was a sense that as photographers they are also creators, both authors of their work and activists in their own worlds. Daniel Palmer, drawing on Azoulay, argues that ‘photographs are the product of an encounter and the start of a dialogue’ (172). Creativity is social and relational. Rwandan photographers who previously worked in relative isolation are bursting into dialogue through collaborations, increasing mobility, and initiatives such as Jacques Nkinzingabo’s Kigali Center for Photography and Kigali Photo Fest. What was extraordinary about this project was that the encounters were not only with the living, but also reached back through time and across continents to (created) memories of the dead. They formed an exercise in the right to remember.

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---. The caveat here is that writing about photography has always foregrounded its ‘past’ nature, its ability to explore both death and loss. See for example Jay Prosser’s Light in the Dark Room: Photography and Loss.