Facing History: Memory and Recovery in the Aftermath of Atrocity

Emily Jastromb, Emory University

This paper examines how a people and a nation use memory to heal after experiencing egregious violence and atrocities. It explores the themes of truth, justice, and reconciliation through the lens of post-conflict justice modalities employed, or sometimes not employed, by the state and international actors in an attempt to encourage personal and social recovery. I contend that aspects of post-conflict justice mechanisms that prioritize justice by engaging memory ultimately help to facilitate recovery in that society. In contrast, aspects of post-conflict strategies that emphasize “forgetting,” rather than memory, ultimately deteriorate the path towards peace, justice, and reconciliation. Facing History demonstrates this assertion through aspects of healing mechanisms implemented in post-conflict societies including domestic and international prosecutions, truth commissions, conditional amnesty, lustration, personal memoirs, education reform, and memorialization. It draws on examples from a variety of conflicts or genocides, including those that occurred in Armenia, Rwanda, Cambodia, Nazi Germany, South Africa, El Salvador, Korea, and Japan.

“One million, three million, six million (United Nations, Office of the Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide). These estimated death tolls of three 20th-century genocides quantify the physical damage to a society in the aftermath of atrocity. Although statistically important, death tolls measure the effects of genocidal violence in its most reductionist form, by how many people lost their lives. They cannot begin to assess the extent of psychological and emotional damage conflicts have inflicted upon their victims, nor can they convey the extent of structural

“Forgiving is not forgetting; it’s actually remembering - remembering and not using your right to hit back. It’s a second chance for a new beginning. And the remembering part is particularly important. Especially if you don’t want to repeat what happened.”

– Desmond Tutu, Head of South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission

Emily Jastromb grew up in Highland Park, Illinois. She studied International Studies at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. The seed for Facing History sprouted during a conversation about Cambodia with a professor in August 2009. He asked her, “How do people start to recover after experiences of tremendous violence?” She thought about it, and answered, “with truth, which comes from memory.” Facing History was awarded the 2011 Woodruff Undergraduate Research Award at Emory. Emily thanks Dr. Carol Anderson for her support in helping her “keep the faith.” She is 22 years old and enjoys music, travel, good food and yoga.
damage on the state and its society. Furthermore, death tolls offer a limited interpretation of the situations at hand because they focus only on the victims of the conflict, defined only as those who were killed. However, genocide injures all members of the affected society. As Desmond Tutu famously addressed the people of South Africa at the outset of national reconciliation, “We are a wounded people…We all stand in need of healing” (Wilson 2001, 14). All people affected by genocide or similarly atrocious violence possess a fundamental need for justice in order to sow the seed for personal and national recovery.

Societies decimated by egregious violence begin to heal by addressing the fundamental need for justice. Post-conflict justice modalities to promote recovery include the following: national and international prosecutions, truth and reconciliation commissions, reparations, amnesty, lustration, vetting, education and memorialization (Bassiouni 2007). Each of these serves a distinct purpose in achieving a particular aspect of justice. For example, the purpose of prosecutions is primarily to punish the perpetrators and discourage similar crimes in the future, whereas truth commissions and education focus on creating a more accurate and complete record of the violations committed. Because the purposes of the modalities vary, it is essential to incorporate more than one into a strategy to foster recovery and peace in post-conflict societies. The way in which the conflict ended affects the choice of mechanisms and, therefore, the outcome expected. It is essential that the mechanisms address the fundamental need for justice in a particular conflict which is likely to vary depending on that society’s healing needs. The first step is to acknowledge the injury of the victims, both individually and as a subset of national recovery (Biggar 2010, 10).

Therefore, post-conflict justice begins with memory. Personal memory is “the mental faculty that permits individuals to acquire, retain and retrieve knowledge related to their personal experiences and identity forming” (Cairns and Roe eds. 2003, 94). Individual memory can also be constructed into the collective memory of the affected society as a means to help address the past (Cairns and Roe eds. 2003, 95). When a nation acknowledges atrocities by engaging personal and collective memory, it has taken the first major step towards reconciliation and stable peace; when a nation “forgets,” or ignores an atrocity, it impedes healing and may sow the seeds for further violence. States that employ memory as a means to implement and complement justice pave the way towards sustainable peace and eventual reconciliation.

Both “remembering” and “forgetting” play important roles in the achievement of peace, justice, and reconciliation for national healing. “Remembering” and “forgetting” are exemplified in aspects of a variety of post-conflict states. Analyzing the successes and limitations of memory and its institutionalized forms in post-conflict justice is essential to creating a framework for addressing justice, peace, and reconciliation in current and future conflicts. Satisfying the need for justice at the individual and national level constitutes an enormously difficult, but also enormously important, task for individuals, states, and non-state actors. The extent to which a nation does or does not integrate memory into recovery not only affects national healing, but also future dialogue and relationships with other states. In this way, effective recovery impacts international affairs.

The terms order and justice are both extremely relevant in examining how to bring about peace in a post-conflict society. Some traditional scholarly opinion ranks the achievement of order above that of justice. For example, international relations theorist Hedley Bull argues that peace depends on the maintenance of order in society, emphasizing its importance over the pursuit of justice. He asserts that justice is not possible without the structure of order (Bull 1977). However, Bull’s theory refers to interstate war, suggesting a broad model that purposefully excludes the complexities and nuances of intrastate conflict. Contrary to Bull’s initial diagnosis, the proposed tension between order and justice may prove much less severe when peace is redefined to include two distinct ideas of peace. Bull’s theory is consistent with the concept of “negative” peace, an absence of immediate violence.¹ “Negative” peace brings order to the conflict by ending physical violence. However, it fails to foster an environment of recovery because it does not address the victims’ need for justice.

The case of the Armenian genocide provides an excellent example of a conflict in which order was achieved but recovery was not. In the years 1915-1916, the Turkish (then Ottoman) government forcibly removed many Christian Armenians from their homes to the Syrian Desert and other locations, during which several hundred thousand Armenians died. Others were murdered on the spot or starved to death (Gellately and Kiernan

¹ Galtung’s concept of negative peace refers to the absence of physical violence, as opposed to his definition of positive peace, in which society is free from structural violence as groups may have collaborative relationships. Johann Galtung, “Violence, Peace and Peace Research,” Journal of Peace Research 6 no. 3: 167-191
Armenia cannot move on from the past conflict with-

Although these trials appear to constitute post-conflict 

The strained relationship is also politically relevant in 

The reason lies in a miscarriage of justice early on which 

Turkey admit to genocide before gaining entrance into 

were later deemed inauthentic, thus convicting people 

planned to eliminate the Christian Armenians. Several 

that members of the Young Turk “Special Organization” 

organized to eliminate the Christian Armenians. Several 

high-ranking members were sentenced to jail and death. 

Although these trials appear to constitute post-conflict justice by providing punishment to those most responsi- 

ble for committing the crimes, they were in fact consid- 

ered a gross miscarriage of justice because they denied due process to the defendant. Furthermore, the memoirs 

were later deemed inauthentic, thus convicting people on false evidence (Lewy 2005, 5). These trials ended up demonstrating a travesty of justice, rendering them illegitimate in the modern eye. Therefore, The Turkish government and others assert the view that intent was never proven, allowing genocide denial to take root due to false evidence and poorly conducted trials. The gains of punishing those responsible were undermined by the failed procedures.

No real justice for victims occurred in Armenia or has occurred since, rendering relations between victim and perpetrator acrimonious 90 years after the event. The strained relationship is also politically relevant in international affairs, as France and other European nations with large Armenian populations demand that Turkey admit to genocide before gaining entrance into the European Union. This has remained a major issue in allowing Turkey to benefit from the status of an inte- 

grated European country (Hakobyan 2004). Turkey and Armenia cannot move on from the past conflict without acknowledging the need for justice, starting with a Turkish admission of guilt. The case of the Armenian genocide provides an example of a society that is no longer engaged in active hostilities, but whose process of recovery remains gravely impeded by a lack of justice. Therefore, although stability and “negative” peace were established in 1917, sustainable peace requires justice for the victims.

The case of Armenia suggests that justice plays a vital role in the ability of a society to recover in the aftermath of atrocity. Justice denied ignores the plight of the people in favor of political expediency. As Harvard Law professor Martha Minow asserts, impunity for atrocities “institutionalizes forgetfulness, and sacrifices justice in a foreshortened effort to move on” (Minow 1998, 15). Even justice delayed renders victims prisoners of the past, impeding the ability of the society to heal. As a result, the past can continue to haunt the present.

Post-conflict Cambodia exemplifies the effects of jus- tice delayed. “Negative” peace in Cambodia was initially attained by outside intervention; the Vietnamese invaded in 1978 and eventually deposed Pol Pot and his regime that terrorized, starved, and murdered nearly a third of the population. Although systematic and widespread violence had ended, the resurging Khmer Rouge continued targeted attacks. The Vietnamese army continued to occupy the country and the international community was polarized over the legitimacy of the ruling government. A comprehensive peace settlement was not signed until August 1990 (U.S. Department of State). It took 12 years after the Vietnamese invasion to establish a peace settlement in Cambodia because the country was in shambles. The practical reasons of continued attacks and the eventual decline in foreign aid are partly to blame, but the fundamental ingredient for recovery was absent almost entirely – justice.

The struggle to achieve stability and peace was futile without adequate attention to the suffering of the victims. This caused many Cambodians to consider themselves “ghosts,” feeling only half-alive. Many Cambodians to this day return to Tuol Sleng, the prison turned memo- rial for victims of the Khmer Rouge, stuck in a pattern of grief and searching for definitive answers about their lost loved ones. Some victims feel they “have been left hanging in space,” or in a “liminal” state, suggesting that a victim can not be whole again without acknowledg- ment of their suffering by the state in the form of post-conflict justice mechanisms (Cairns and Roe eds. 2003, 151). Even those who managed to seek refuge in the United States felt plagued by the “liminal” state, as if they were shells of their former selves. Someth May, a Khmer Rouge survivor and refugee, poignantly penned an expression of loss of self in his memoir. He wrote, “At that time in my life I had no idea where on earth I was” (May 1986, 287).
Politically, Cambodia did not employ lustration, the mechanism in which members of the party responsible for the atrocities are removed from political power. Furthermore, the Cambodian government, under the auspices of the United Nations, did not establish the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) until 2001. Pol Pot, the head of state at the time of genocide, died before his trial (ECCC). The death of the official most responsible for the genocide impeded the ability of victims to claim a sense of justice through vengeance. Vengeance in the form of criminal prosecutions provides catharsis for the victims by acknowledging the wrong done and allowing moral retribution. However, it is essential that vengeance remains institutionalized in prosecutions. Victims who take vengeance into their own hands for the sake of “getting even” often suffer the most in the attempt to recover in the aftermath of atrocity (Minow 1998, 13).

Other high-ranking officials received life sentences recently, but the delay in justice inevitably caused a delay in healing. The case of Cambodia demonstrates two important points regarding peace and justice. First, that failure to meet the human demand for justice may re-sow the seeds for violence, as indicated by the sporadic attacks that continued for nearly a decade. Secondly, serious trauma without formal justice often leaves victims exactly where the genocide left them - effectively abandoned by their nation, unable to move forward without formal acknowledgement and redress. The abrupt Vietnamese invasion and overthrow may have halted the systematic violence perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge, but the delay in justice failed to sufficiently acknowledge the suffering of victims until decades later. Without acknowledgement of the victims’ suffering and memories, they become further degraded, thus perpetuating the dehumanization that occurs in genocide (Minow 1998, 12).

The fact that the ECCC took over 20 years to be established is an acute example of a common but critical concern regarding prosecutions – trials easily become delayed by lack of capacity, political will and procedure. In an effort to bring those accused of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide to justice, the international community drafted the Rome Statute which created and endowed the International Criminal Court with limited powers of prosecution for these crimes, effective in 2002 (United Nations, Treaty Series vol. 2187, no. 38544). However, the Court has been widely criticized for its difficulty in obtaining and effectively prosecuting the accused, due to delays lasting years and difficulty of demonstrating conclusive proof. Minow articulates a more severe opinion on the problem by asserting “legal responses are inevitably frail and insufficient” (Minow 1998, 6). Although prosecutions face numerous logistical hurdles, the testimony produced can prove to be immensely helpful to the healing process. The testimony acquired, documented, and disseminated at trials acknowledges the injury of the victims and enables them to tell their story. By exporting the personal narrative into a permanent, external form through which others can access the memories, testimony may facilitate breaking out of the “liminal state” of which so many victims become prisoners.

Similarly, written memoirs, one’s personal account of his or her life or particular life experience, create a permanent memory depository of events from that person’s unique perspective. The numerous autobiographies of Holocaust survivors are a prime example of a people’s attempt to heal.

Primo Levi, a survivor of the Auschwitz concentration camp, wrote several works regarding his experience as a Holocaust survivor. In the afterword of his memoir *Survival in Auschwitz*, novelist Phillip Roth interviews him about his experience penning the memoir and his other works. Roth observes a profound effect of writing a memoir – that “[Levi’s] reconciliation with life takes place in a world that sometimes seemed…like the primeval Chaos” (Levi and Roth 1996, 182). Two aspects of Roth’s comment are exemplary. First of all, he notices Levi’s “reconciliation with life,” or his ability to adapt himself back to life after the horror of Auschwitz. Secondly, he manages to facilitate recovery within the context of his past experience, constantly engaging with his memory. Therefore, recording a personal memoir is as much about the process as it is about the truth record ultimately produced. Through the memoir, victims are able to interact with their personal memories and begin to individually ascend from the “liminal state.” Victims may be able to eventually reconcile their experience with their current life, as in the case of Levi.

Personal memory is not limited only to the victims of genocide or egregious violence. Memoirs and testimony from others in the affected society are essential to the promotion of healing for two reasons. First, they help establish a truth record of the events that occurred. Second, the memories of all persons in an affected society help to rehumanize all who participated in the atrocity, particularly victim and perpetrator. The crime of genocide requires sorting people into immutable categories of “us” and “them” in order to carry out the systematic destruction, in whole or in part, of a group of people.
Perpetrators become the “us,” all alike in a way that they perceive the “victims” to be different, rendering victims in the “them” category. Nazi doctors who experimented in concentration camps categorized their victims as *lebensunwertes Leben*, or “life unworthy of life” (Lifton 2000, 21). The psychological label that the Jewish people represented a “them” that deserved to be killed demonstrates the cognitive impairment of the perpetrator to understand the victim as human. Once an absence of violence has been maintained, it is important to work towards undoing the strict categories of “us” and “them” by trying to understand why the events occurred. No amount of understanding can and should ever excuse the crimes committed, but acknowledging the memories of the perpetrators can help the victims heal, as well as the perpetrators. If the goal is reconciliation, it is essential to view the “other” as human.

The notion of including perpetrators as people who require healing may appear like heresy. One might ask, why include the memories of those who actively committed or were complicit in crimes? Why examine the memories of those who stood by the violence? Why honor more than the memories of the victims of genocide and those who managed to survive? Part of the answer is that these memories help complete the understanding of the events that occurred and render the unthinkable acts of genocide and related atrocity thinkable. “Writing about suffering, about the victims, should also mean asking questions about the killers, about guilt, about the reasons for cruelty and death…That at least one should do—bear witness” (Timm, Bell trans. 2003, 114). “Bearing witness” requires engaging the memories of perpetrators in order to fully do justice to the victims and acknowledge the atrocity as such.

By definition, genocide and crimes against humanity represent the inhuman because they defy the innate human instinct that some acts of egregious violence are just intrinsically contrary to nature and to humanity as a whole. Therefore, those who are directly a part of or bear witness to this kind of violence often struggle to articulate and even conceptualize the horror they have committed or accepted, either personally or as part of the affected society. Memories, as real-life accounts, begin to open the path to psychological awareness of genocide as something real, something the mind can begin to grasp. All memories are important in understanding genocide as truly “restorative justice emphasizes the humanity of both offenders and victims” (Minow 1998, 92).

The following narratives represent two distinct perspectives on the same event – The Final Solution.

It’s not that somebody killed her with a gun or anything; but she more or less starved to death….and typhus was…everybody had typhus, including myself. She was down to about 60 pounds – nothing but skin and bones…she died sitting on the floor, and, by that time, there were so many dead that they could not bury or burn them. They were just piled up in front of the barracks…like a mountain. And then, I was all alone…very, very lost, with no one to help me or protect me.

– Livia Greeson, Holocaust Survivor (Lorrie 1978, 4).

We were all in a straightjacket. We were all just as much numbers as the prisoners…You weren’t really human. How could we dare to question anything?


The first captures a moment of vulnerable remembrance from a victim’s experience at Auschwitz. The second, from the standpoint of a perpetrator complicit in the crimes committed, provides a psychological justification for atrocity. Both recount an experience in the concentration camps, yet offer drastically different lenses through which each person remembers it. Each lens offers a distinct human perspective in a larger context, a tiny piece in the massive jigsaw puzzle depicting the Holocaust as we understand it today – the systematic murder of approximately six million Jewish people at the hands of the Nazi regime. Each piece is an important slice of memory, and each memory brings forth a better understanding of the atrocities committed.

Furthermore, the account of the survivor and that of the perpetrator have more in common than meets the eye. Both memories share the common thread of a sense of hopelessness, despair and loss of humanity. The first account of the survivor recalls the treatment of a victim killed in a concentration camp. However, she is also a victim of genocide, apparent in her story. Although ultimately she survives the Holocaust, she articulates a sense of lost hope and vulnerability, rendering her just as much of a victim as the victim she describes who was killed in the camp. She herself was lost in Auschwitz, her humanity stripped and degraded. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, the second quotation of the perpetrator tells a similar tale of psychological imprisonment and dehumanization. He felt reduced to a “straitjacket,” a “number,” in a way that he identified to some extent
with the prisoners in the concentration camps. Their experiences in concentration camps were as drastically opposed as possible, with one accountable for the terror and another receiving it. However, both the narratives of survivor and perpetrator express the deeply perturbing emotions and psychological damage that plague individuals and societies affected by genocide.

When violence formally ends, the emotional turmoil continues. Individual people and the societies they comprise, including victims, perpetrators, and everyone in between, are left filled with mass disillusionment, fear and emotional upheaval. The emotions presented in these memories are the true indicators of individual damage in the aftermath of atrocity. Understandably, genocide victims often characterize their oppressors as monsters, demons, or the devil himself. The atrocities committed are certainly monstrous, and by definition, defy the limits of humanity (Lauren 2003, 86). Although extremely difficult, a victim’s awareness of the perpetrators as terrible people who committed terrible crimes, ultimately allows for perpetrator accountability for crimes committed. It is the emphasis on the humanity of the respective “other” that ultimately allows for reconciliation in society (Minow 1998, 92). To be clear, recognizing the perpetrator as human does not require forgiveness, and certainly not forgetting. The goal is to simply weaken the “us” and “them” divide and hopefully foster coexistence. It is perhaps even more essential that perpetrators recognize their victims as human beings, and break their understanding of “us” and “them” as well.

In support of breaking the “us” and “them” chains, peace theorist Johan Galtung asserts, “The major cause of violence is inattention to the subjective reality of the famous other” (Galtung 2000, 162). The previous comparison of Holocaust memoirs presents one example of giving attention to the subjective reality of the other. The Rwandan genocide presents a more complex characterization of the “us” and “them.” The Rwandan genocide refers to the systematic massacre of approximately 800,000 Rwandans, primarily members of the Tutsi ethnic group, although some of those murdered were politically moderate members of the Hutu ethnic group (Gellately and Kiernan 2003, 325-333). Efforts to promote peace and stability through breaking the “us” and “them” categories therefore cannot be simply reduced to “Hutu” and “Tutsi.” In light of this, the official post-conflict Rwanda government policy was to eliminate ethnicity in politics and promote national unity. However, the attempt to promote unity can also create dissent by politicizing victimhood. For example, the now Tutsi-dominated government promotes a policy of erasing ethnic identity, yet many of the memorial ceremonies still adhere to binary categories of “us” and “them.” The words inzirakarengane and abarokotse, which mean “victims” and “survivors” respectively, almost exclusively connote Tutsi in Rwanda society. Likewise, abacanyi and abacengezi, which mean “perpetrators” and “infiltrators” respectively, denote Hutu (Hinton and O’Neill eds. 2009, 80-97). Despite the national policy, the binary categories of “us” and “them” remain so stringently intact in Rwanda that Hutu victims of the genocide are often not recognized as such. For example, Seraphine is a Rwandan Hutu. Her Tutsi husband was rounded up by the Armed Forces of Rwanda (FAR) and brutally tortured, yet he managed to marginally survive the attacks. She was also subject to repeated rape by a FAR officer. Because she is Hutu, she expressed disillusionment at the fact that she is marginalized as a victim: “I am a survivor, even if people don’t see it” (Hinton and O’Neill eds. 2009, 91).

The state’s national policy attempts to “forget” ethnic divisions while they are still deeply internalized. This is likely a result of the renewed “ethnisme” of the now Tutsi regime that successfully mobilizes the past (Hinton and O’Neill eds. 2009, 100). This aspect of post-conflict Rwanda presents one example of how “forgetting” on the part of the state can impede healing by trying to erase deeply ingrained identity.

In other respects, post-conflict Rwanda constitutes a strong example of a successful post-conflict justice. The domestic gacaca justice system was implemented in 2002 to attempt to decrease impunity for crimes committed in the early 1990s at the domestic level. Although there exists an International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) that has successfully convicted some of those responsible for the most egregious crimes of genocide, Rwanda developed the capacity to manage domestic proceedings for the lower-profile accused, putting around 1.5 million on trial for complicity in genocide (Hinton and O’Neill eds. 2009, 90). This alone represents a significant development in Rwanda’s ability to create and cement a rule of law system that strengthens the country. Furthermore, Rwanda appears to be making strides towards reconciliation by addressing the memory of genocide. The fifteenth commemoration of Rwanda’s genocide featured thousands of people who collectively spelled out the slogan of the commemoration, “Icyi-reze,” meaning “hope” (Hron 2009). This display of unity through memory suggests steps toward greater justice and reconciliation in the future.

As demonstrated in Rwanda, personal memory can
be institutionalized into a national memory. Although the institutionalization of deeply rooted ethnic divides impedes healing, the creation of collective memory can promote reconciliation if it “remembers” the suffering of all. Post-conflict truth and reconciliation commissions gather personal accounts and produce an official truth record of the atrocity. The mandate and organization of the commission, however, affects its outcome. For example, the UN established a truth commission in 1992 to examine “serious acts of violence” during the civil war in El Salvador between the government and the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), a left wing political party. “Serious acts of violence” included arbitrary arrests, forced disappearances and political killings between 1980 and 1992, when a peace agreement was signed under the auspices of the UN. The mandate of the commission endows it with two specific powers - to make investigations and recommendations to the domestic judiciary. 1,145 victims of “serious violence” in 1982 alone gave direct testimony to the truth commission, paving the way for truth and reconciliation (UN Security Council, Report of the UN Truth Commission on El Salvador 1993). However, the Truth Commission found that the domestic judicial system was “either deficient or implicated in cover-ups, and amnesty laws on [El Salvador] blocked prosecution” (Ensalaco 1994, 659). Therefore, the Truth Commission on El Salvador was mandated to promote truth and reconciliation, but not justice (Ensalaco 1994, 657).

The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, in contrast, successfully integrated personal memories to achieve reconciliation. Truth and reconciliation commissions, in general, aim to create a truth record of the atrocities that occur as a means to create a national memory. The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (SATRC) was able to foster reconciliation between the people of South Africa and the apartheid regime because it openly embraced all South Africans. Desmond Tutu, the prominent leader of the Commission, asserted that “we are all wounded people” in South Africa after apartheid (Wilson 2001, 14). His words provided a strong symbol of national unity that included all South Africans in its healing – victims, perpetrators, and bystanders.

One way in which the Commission managed to involve so many people was through the Registrar of Reconciliation, which allowed all people to write in their emotions about apartheid, peace, justice and reconciliation. In recognition of the long road to reconciliation, the Registrar continues to operate online today, expressing the views of all people touched by reconciliation in South Africa (South Africa Department of Justice 2003, 651). This particular feature of the SATRC presents memory as the first step to justice, and eventually reconciliation. Victims, perpetrators, and bystanders in South Africa and abroad wrote in to communicate their feelings, and, in some cases, pronounced them publically in front of the Commission. The following excerpts are from testimonials of survivors in front of the SATRC:

Antjie Krog expresses telling her loved ones’ story to keep them alive.

Beloved, do not die. Do not dare die! I, the survivor, I wrap you in words so that the future inherits you. I snatch you from the death of forgetfulness. I tell your story, complete your ending—you who once whispered beside me in the dark (Biggar ed. 2001, 27-28).

Lukas Baba Sikwepere, who was blinded by the police while in custody, expresses a similar need for catharsis.

I feel what...has brought my eyesight back is to come back here and tell my story. But I feel what has been making me sick all the time is the fact that I couldn't tell my story (Biggar ed. 2001, 27-28).

Both testimonies bear witness to the suffering of survivors as a means to promote healing in the aftermath of apartheid.

Nelson Mandela, who led the African National Congress (ANC) at the time, wanted to specifically avoid prosecutions for apartheid. Instead, he chose to embrace an agenda grounded in collective memory, focusing on truth and ubuntu, meaning humaneness (Biggar ed. 2001, 207-215). His decision to avoid prosecutions was met with some criticism by those who argue that prosecution is essential to healing because it legally reaffirms that the actions taken were criminally wrong, not just morally wrong (Biggar ed. 2001, 57). In light of this opinion, Truth and Reconciliation Commissions may appear a second-best option as compared to prosecutions. The Commission did involve paying reparations to victims of apartheid. However, the most significant aspect of the choice to pursue justice in the form of truth and reconciliation is that it brings a more immediate sense of truth to the victims, allowing them to heal faster than the inevitable delay of prosecutions. One is not a substitute for the other, but in the case of South Africa, it appears Mandela’s decision had an effect on establishing a truth
Facing History: Memory and Recovery in the Aftermath of Atrocity

record and fostering healing and reconciliation. For example, some observers of the Commission’s process in South Africa have noted images of those victimized by apartheid shaking hands with some of the government officials and police officers who were in part responsible for carrying out the discrimination of apartheid (Minow 1998, 17). Although this image does not necessarily conote forgiveness and reconciliation, it provides evidence that some healing is going on, in connection with the truths that the Commission brought to light. It is not necessary for victims to forgive perpetrators in the sense of fostering total collaboration, respect, and love, but to recognize the perpetrator as human, understand his truth, and begin to move forward together.

The discovery of truth ultimately paves the way for justice and reconciliation (Biggar ed. 2001, 101). Conversely, scholar Michael Ignatieff argues that “truth will not necessarily be believed, and it is putting too much faith in truth to believe that it can heal” (Minow 1998, 52). This notion directly contradicts the Commission’s agenda for healing. Ignatieff’s remark in the context of South Africa references the central criticism of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission – the exchange between amnesty and truth. One way in which the Commission gathered evidence for truth was by granting amnesty to perpetrators who were able to provide important factual information that the Commission believed would be essential in creating a truth record and fostering peace and reconciliation in South Africa. In general, amnesty and memory appear as opposing forces, since amnesty “forgets” the crime by not punishing it, thereby inherently contradicting the goal of “remembering” in healing. However, the amnesty granted in the case of South Africa was far from granting blanket amnesty to perpetrators in exchange for any truth they could offer. Instead, people who felt they held invaluable information and truth about the crime of apartheid could apply to the Amnesty Committee, offering their information in exchange for the potential to receive some amnesty, not guaranteed if the applicant was found to not be telling the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. A key section of the mandate of the SATRC made amnesty conditional upon a perpetrator’s willingness to share all he or she knew about the violence and crimes committed during apartheid (South Africa Department of Justice 2003, 680). Therefore, the tension between “remembering” and “forgetting” embodied in the amnesty and truth trade-off in fact constitutes much less sacrifice on the part of memory and healing than meets the eye.

The pursuit of the twin policy objectives of peace and justice starts the process of knowing the other side’s story through their memories. The subjectivity of truth, sometimes perceived as a limitation, in fact works with the pursuit of truth to uncover a more complete version. Memories are capsules of truths that ultimately mold the public perception of truth when synthesized. The subjectivity of these memories, some of which may compete with others, in fact allow mutual acknowledgment between victim and perpetrator.

Truth commissions require certain conditions to be successful in implementing truth, reconciliation, and justice. These conditions necessarily involve engaging the victims, perpetrators, and bystanders, but must also be nuanced to best fit the affected society. Therefore, there is no “one size fits all” truth commission, nor are truth commissions as a post-conflict justice modality a panacea on their own. Complementarity is essential in using memory as a vehicle for recovery. Memory can be institutionalized in ways other than formal commissions. One way is through memorialization, which externalizes memories into physical representations of the truths of the past. Memorialization as a post-conflict justice mechanism honors the dignity, suffering, and humanity of victims, both living and dead, by observing their suffering at a community and national level. This commemoration of suffering may take form in public memorials, national holidays, sites of commemoration such as battlefields or prisons, the renaming of public places, and various other forms of public engagement with past atrocities (Bassiouni 2007, 60). Memorialization is specific to the needs of an affected nation.

Toul Sleng, a converted prison, now museum, in Cambodia, remembers the victims of the Khmer Rouge. It provides photographs of as many of the victims who were imprisoned there as possible to create a tapestry of faces with names. This facilitates collective grieving while specifically identifying individuals to permanently engrave their names in history. Photographic evidence and identification renders it nearly impossible for future generations to deny the atrocities committed and the accountability of the perpetrators. The goal of the museum is to recreate a specific victim’s experience in order to draw attention to the human cost of genocide and crimes against humanity committed during the Khmer Rouge regime. In contrast, the Kigali Genocide Memorial Centre in Rwanda was opened as an international memorial site honoring the victims of all genocide, not only those that suffered in the Rwandan genocide. The all-inclusive nature of the Centre reminds visitors
of the enormous human cost of ignorance or indifference (Kigali Genocide Memorial Centre). This approach demonstrates an international effort at including all victims of genocide that refocuses the scope of genocide at a global level.

Memorialization is an ongoing process that must be maintained in order to be effective. This differs greatly from reparations, for example, in that they provide a one-time compensation and prosecutions, which have a fixed end point. Memorialization also addresses the whole society, not just the victims. Therefore the goal of memory for truth and reconciliation is “not final and comprehensive history, but the memory of specific injustices” and the goal of memorialization is “collective moral responsibility for responding to victims” (Minow 2003, 101). As a result, memorialization renders all affected people active in reconciliation.

Memorials can be used to remember but also to forget. The Japanese turned the burial grounds of those convicted of committing war crimes into a national shrine (Hein and Selden 2000, 30). In doing so, it has erased the atrocities committed during the Pacific War and WW II from Japan’s national memory. Japan invoked the rationale that “moral recovery,” the restoration of national dignity, should take precedence over acknowledging Japanese accountability for past atrocities in an attempt to move forward from the pain of the past and recover in the present.

The process of writing and rewriting history textbooks in Japan has strategically reconstructed the past. Because they present a conclusive national narrative, history textbooks are “agents of memory” and function as a sort of “supreme historical court” that guide future generations towards an understanding of the past (Wang 2009, 12). Battles over the content and presentation of the national narrative are battles over competing memoirs, idealized pasts, and the way in which collective memory becomes ingrained in the future. Therefore, debates over history textbooks can be extremely intense, as the very notion of national memory and citizenship are at stake (Hein and Selden 2000, 28). Japan has experienced an enormous domestic and international backlash against some of their history textbooks. In 1953, Japan granted the Ministry of Education the power to screen textbooks, concerned with presenting the country as peaceful after the destruction of WW II. Japan wanted to appear a world power committed to peace in the future, but at the expense of glossing over the aspects of its colonial past that were aggressive to neighboring Asian states.

For example, the Japanese imperial army’s use of “comfort women” in the Pacific War and WW II has been one of the most contentious points in Japanese history, and consequently the history textbooks. “Comfort women,” about 80% of whom were Korean, were coerced into sexual slavery by the Japanese imperial army. The conservative Ministry of Education strategically excluded this facet of Japanese history from textbooks for decades.

In the 1990s, pressure from Korean and Japanese non-governmental organizations mounted, involving several lawsuits of former Korean “comfort women” against Japan, demanding reparations. One of the plaintiff’s demands also included the correction of Japanese textbooks to explain the truth about the “comfort women.” These demands contributed to a political climate that demanded Japan include the suffering of the “comfort women” as a crime of the imperial army, and culminated in a 1996 UN condemnation of Japan for its use of sexual slavery during WW II (Soh 1996, 1132). The battle over Japanese textbooks, therefore, represents one way in which a need to control history and memory may erupt into an international affair.

Since 1996, Japanese textbooks largely adopted the UN recommendation to include the use of “comfort women” in textbooks. One example is the following: “there were also some women from Korea and Taiwan and other places who were made to work in battlefront comfort facilities” (Hein and Selden 2000, 25). This mention of the “comfort women” is not particularly prominent, but offers recognition of the use of “comfort women” in a middle school textbook. However, some conservative backlash still exists, which argues that Japanese students must be proud of their national history at the expense of recognition for atrocities. The Ministry of Education approved a textbook, Tsukurukai (New History Textbook), written by the conservative group Society to Make New History Textbooks in 2001 that minimizes the wrongdoings of the Japanese imperial army and ignores the use of “comfort women.” This book makes up only .5 percent of the textbook market, indicative of its narrative of no longer being widely accepted (Soh 2003, 168). However, the refusal to acknowledge the strife of “comfort women” at all in the New History Textbook disseminates a normative notion of who should be valued in society and who should not.

Japan’s general trend to include “comfort women” in textbooks demonstrates a more balanced perspective in the national narrative. In contrast, some nations actively garner support for exclusive control over the national narrative. Turkey, for example, has attempted...
Facing History: Memory and Recovery in the Aftermath of Atrocity

to exclude any mention of the Armenian genocide from textbooks. Furthermore, it has funded institutes and scholarly research that exclusively aim to disseminate a narrative that refutes the Armenian genocide as such (Smith et al. 1995, 1-22).

Robert Jay Lifton, a prominent scholar on genocide studies, received a letter from Turkish Ambassador Nuzhet Kandemir in 1990 that expressed outrage at the scholar’s references to the Armenian genocide in his work, The Nazi Doctors, Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide. The letter asserts the following position on the Armenian genocide: “To compare a tragic civil war (perpetrated by misguided Armenian nationalists) and the human suffering it wrought on both the Muslim and Christian populations, with the horrors of a premeditated attempt to systematically eradicate a people, is, to anyone familiar with the history in question, simply ludicrous” (Smith et al. 1995, 10).

Two features of this letter demonstrate an attempt to conceal the Armenian genocide. First, the letter avoids using the term genocide, instead conflating the victims of the massacre with soldiers and blaming “misguided Armenian nationalists” for the violence. Second, the letter minimizes the nature of the conflict by comparing it to the Holocaust. The acknowledgement of a well-established genocide attempts to demonstrate that the Turkish government does not deny genocide outright, but only the notion that the violence in Armenia should be characterized as genocide. Therefore, this letter demonstrates the Turkish denial of the Armenian genocide through relativism, meaning any actions on the part of the Turkish government pale in comparison to the atrocities committed by Nazi Germany against the Jewish people. Turkey invoked relativism to lend their argument for genocide denial more legitimacy, but their attempts to “forget” any wrongdoing through relativism are futile. As Professor Deborah Lipstadt asserts, “Denial aims to reshape history in order to rehabilitate the persecutors and demonize the victims. What relativism seeks to do is not that different” (Lipstadt 1993, 216).

All instances of genocide are in fact sui generis, as they are distinct from one another and cannot be placed on a relative scale. To compare instances of genocide by trying to make “immoral equivalences” is useless, as there is no immoral equivalence to explain an instance of genocide away. An expert in Holocaust denial, she challenged a Holocaust denier’s work by refuting his claims that attempted to debase the fact that the Holocaust was genocide. She fought his allegations with history, confronting each assertion he made with the known facts that his case excluded or perverted (Lipstadt 2010). Lipstadt further asserts, “If Holocaust denial has demonstrated anything, it is the fragility of memory, truth, reason and history” (Lipstadt 1993, 216). Although her argument refers to Holocaust denial, which is a distinct political phenomenon, the “fragility of memory, truth, reason and history” is essential in understanding how a nation heals in the aftermath of atrocity. All healing begins with memory, evident in personal testimony and memoirs, as well as collective narratives in truth and reconciliation commissions, memorials, and textbooks. Therefore, the acknowledgement of all memory – victims, perpetrators and bystanders – in the wake of post-conflict justice, delivers the best prospect for healing, justice, and reconciliation.

References

Government and International Body Material:


Personal Memoirs:

Levi, Primo, S. J. Woolf, and Philip Roth. Survival in Auschwitz: the Nazi Assault on


**Interviews:**

Lipstadt, Deborah. Interview by Author. Atlanta, GA. October 5, 2010.


**Books:**


**Articles:**


**Scholarly Principles:**


**Website Information:**
