

Delia Duong Ba Wendel. 2025. *Rwanda's Genocide Heritage: Between Justice and Sovereignty*. Durham: Duke University Press. 456 pp.

In *Rwanda's Genocide Heritage: Between Justice and Sovereignty*, Delia Duong Ba Wendel offers a powerful rethinking of how societies remember mass violence by foregrounding what she terms "trauma heritage." Rather than treating memorials as static sites of commemoration, Wendel argues that genocide heritage in Rwanda constitutes a dynamic field where memory, justice, and sovereignty are actively produced and contested. Drawing on ethnographic research and interdisciplinary engagement with heritage and memory studies, she demonstrates that memorialization is not simply retrospective but deeply political, shaping how the post-genocide state constructs legitimacy, historical truth, and national belonging. In doing so, the book intervenes in historiographical debates on memory and post-conflict reconstruction by positioning heritage as a central mechanism through which the afterlives of violence are governed.

Wendel's concept of trauma heritage, introduced in the opening chapter, reframes memorial sites as spaces of ethical repair and political authority. Rather than viewing these sites as passive repositories of memory, she argues that they function to "repair fractured histories while also shaping the political possibilities of the present" (p. 18). This formulation is significant in that it shifts attention away from juridical frameworks of transitional justice toward the material and affective dimensions of remembrance. Across the book, Wendel shows how bodies, landscapes, and memorial practices become forms of historical evidence, expanding what counts as archive and testimony in the aftermath of genocide.

A central contribution of the book lies in its attention to the sensory and embodied nature of memory, particularly in Chapter Two. Here, Wendel demonstrates how smell, decay, and proximity to preserved human remains shape encounters with genocide memorials, producing what she describes as "an encounter where the senses become witnesses to the violence of the past" (p. 57). By emphasizing affect, Wendel challenges distanced forms of historical knowledge and foregrounds embodied experience. In doing so, she not only contributes to memory studies but also compels historians to reconsider the limits of conventional archival approaches to violence.

At the same time, the book resists presenting Rwanda's memorial landscape as unified or uncontested. Through her analysis of sites such as Nyarubuye in Chapter Three, Wendel demonstrates that genocide heritage is unevenly produced, shaped by negotiations among local communities, survivor groups, and state institutions. Memorialization, she notes, reflects "uneven processes of recognition shaped by local custodianship and national political priorities" (p. 109). This insight is crucial, as it reveals how power operates within the production of memory, determining which sites, narratives, and experiences become visible within national history.

The ethical tensions of trauma heritage are further explored through Wendel's discussion of conservation practices at Murambi in Chapter Four and exhumation processes in Chapter Five. At Murambi, preserved bodies function as "material witnesses that refuse the erasure of genocide and confront visitors with its enduring presence" (p. 147), offering a powerful rebuttal to denial. Yet these practices also raise difficult questions about dignity and representation.

Similarly, exhumation and reburial practices are shown to be deeply political acts that “order the future of the past by transforming anonymous remains into recognized victims of history” (p. 211). Together, these chapters illustrate how the management of the dead becomes central to the construction of post-genocide narratives and identities.

Wendel extends this analysis in Chapter Six by distinguishing between visible and invisible memorials. While state-sponsored memorials establish official narratives, invisible forms of memory—embedded in personal recollections, rituals, and everyday practices—highlight the limits of institutionalized remembrance (p. 268). This dual framework underscores the coexistence of state authority and survivor agency, complicating singular narratives of national reconciliation.

While the book’s interdisciplinary approach is one of its greatest strengths, it also presents certain challenges. The theoretical language surrounding trauma heritage can at times be dense, potentially limiting accessibility for readers outside heritage studies. Moreover, although Wendel’s focus on Rwanda is richly detailed, greater engagement with comparative cases might further strengthen her broader claims about trauma heritage as a global analytical framework.

Overall, *Rwanda’s Genocide Heritage* makes a significant contribution to scholarship on memory, genocide, and post-conflict societies. By foregrounding the material, sensory, and political dimensions of memorialization, Wendel challenges historians to rethink how violence is remembered, archived, and institutionalized. The book demonstrates that heritage is not simply about preserving the past but about shaping the ethical and political contours of the present and future. For scholars of African history, memory studies, and transitional justice, this work is essential reading.

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