

Jeff Stewart

Being Near:

Visiting the Rwandan Genocide Memorial Site at Murambi, Gikongoro

Just as in our personal lives our worst fears and best hopes will never adequately prepare us for what actually happens, because the moment even a foreseen event takes place, everything changes, and we can never be prepared for the inexhaustible literalness of this 'everything'... (Arendt, 1953: 389).

Opening

There is a trauma about being in Rwanda for me that needs to be acknowledged. This 'everything' that changes manifests in moments of 'awakening' in the sense suggested by Cathy Caruth:

As an awakening, the ethical relation to the real is the revelation of this impossible demand (of responsibility) at the heart of human consciousness (Caruth, 1995: 100).

This is a compelling demand.

Bearing Witness

This writing (*Being Near*) is concerned with a recent trip to Rwanda (April 2006) where I visited five of the major genocide memorial sites in the east, west and south of the country. The primary site for *Being Near* is Murambi, Gikongoro, to the south west of the capital Kigali. While conducting research for my thesis I heard the ABC's *World Today* radio program presented by the Australian journalist Sally Sara from the school at this site (Sara, 2003).

Following her report I began to look into the genocide and it became apparent that it was important for me to visit and witness Murambi, to travel to Rwanda, to be in this place; to

continue my research without visiting would have been in this instance to take what I thought would be a too distant, objective position denying the humanity of those who were still lying at Murambi. I needed to be near to where Sara had been while reporting so I could honour the research and those murdered. To bear witness or offer testimony is at once intersubjective and transformative, like confession or prayer, where the words one speaks are said to change one. To bear witness, in one significant sense, is also to be in relation with that event through one's bodily awareness, by being present in place, and it is this awareness that *Being Near* attempts to reflect.

I travelled to the five memorial sites by car with a guide. These major memorials are occasionally in quite inaccessible locations, such as a resistance site near Kibuye in the west above Lake Kivu. By visiting Rwanda and being driven through the mountains, witnessing the Pays des Mille Collines (Land of one Thousand Hills) I became cognisant of the reality of how organized and systematic the genocide had to be for it to be carried out in such a rugged environment where each hill reveals its own sorrow. To be able to travel within this landscape became a privilege.

Being Near is a reflection partly in the sense described by Thomas Merton in his *Spiritual Direction and Meditation*, where:

Reflection involves not only the mind but also the heart, and indeed the whole being. One who really meditates does not merely think, he also loves, and by his love - or at least by his sympathetic intuition into the reality upon which he reflects - he enters into that reality and knows it so to speak from within, by a kind of identification (Merton, 1969: 42).

The attempt at such a reflection has meant that in this instance I have not written an academic essay as such, but hopefully a writing that responds to my being in Rwanda, a writing structured within a time frame of travel, from my first hearing Sara's report to my last night after visiting Murambi. The writing takes the form of impressions and meditations that arose from my Rwandan travel journal, and the impetus of Sally Sara's *World Today* program. This then accumulates layers that include a personal email that speaks of my isolation, and the presentiment of the trauma of being with the dead at Murambi. There are also considerations on embodied ethics, drawings from my Rwandan sketch-book, and reflection on witnessing and testimony as an ethical, as prior to a political, way of making a work of performance, or art generally. The suggestion hopefully is that testimony and witnessing, as acts that make, cannot embrace each other unless as a partaking by someone with another, not as colonising, but within that sympathetic intuition of Merton's about one's own place, and one's place with others.

The Scent of Genocide

When you enter someone's home, its smell can recall difference, a smell that sets the place apart. The Akazu, Kinyarwanda for 'little house', a name given to the group headed by Agathe Kaziga, wife of the then President of Rwanda, Juvenal Habyarimana, was such a

house. Agathe and her three brothers, Zigiranyiro, Ruhengeri and Rwabukumba formed the nucleus of the northern Hutu oligarchy Hutu Power, along with key figures such as Colonel Theoneste Bagosora. These are amongst the people who led and organized the genocide in Rwanda. And while standing amongst the bodies at Gikongoro, which is a legacy of this 'little house', the smell is of death.

Bodies Carry the Memory of Rwanda Genocide

The World Today, ABC Radio - Friday, 22 August, 2003 12:36:16

Hamish Robertson: Our Africa Correspondent Sally Sara has just been to Rwanda – and a warning that some listeners might find her report disturbing.

Sally Sara: The school sits on top of a hill in Gikongoro in rural Rwanda. From a distance, it looks plain and bare – something is missing. There are no children here, no playground, no noise, and no life. The school has become a memorial; the classrooms here are full of bodies: the bodies of the local people who were murdered during the 1994 genocide. ...

The rooms have tarpaulins on the windows, which keep out the weather but keep in the smell. The scent of genocide is so sickening; it's as if a trap has gone off in your chest. It's a damp, sorry smell like old fertiliser. It's so unmistakable it takes your breath and gives it back, just before each word comes out of your mouth.

I don't know why, but I thought after almost a decade the bodies would be just bones and dust – neat skeletons that would be a bit easier to look at. But the remains are intact, they look strange and fragile, the skin is chalky white, the limbs are withered and thin. They look out of proportion like an unborn baby on an ultrasound.

Some are still wearing necklaces; others still have hair. Each body has its own posture: some are curled up clutching their head; others are stretched out in agony with arms reaching for help that never arrived. Bullet holes, broken bones and missing limbs give some clues of the merciless way they were killed. ...

The bodies are real, not an abstraction ... they are not memorialized in that they are represented by a plaque or symbol. They are there as the dead that they are ... This is Sally Sara, in Gikongoro, Rwanda, for *The World Today* (Sara, 2003).

The scent of genocide is so sickening; it's as if a trap has gone off in your chest. It's a damp, sorry smell like old fertiliser. It's so unmistakable it takes

your breath and gives it back, just before each word comes out of your mouth (Sara).

This is what made me listen. I heard this in Sally Sara's voice. She gasped: she was near to those bodies, bearing witness to the dead. While my writing of *Murambi* will be more like that of the radio 'chatter' on UNIMA (United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda) radios after the plane crash of President Habyarimana, and the subsequent methodical house-to-house extermination of targeted Tutsi and Hutu:

Users (of military command radios) lost their tempers, yelled louder and became incomprehensible; less and less information was getting through. Even the most vital messages had to be repeated time and time again as Bangladeshi tried to relay it in broken English through a Uruguayan who in turn had to relay it through a Ghanaian who in turn had to relay it through a French-speaking Belgian (Dallaire and Brent, 2004: 231-232).

Is to write the genocide sites of Rwanda to be in this confusion – a confusion necessitating the sense of breath that Sara gasped? After the shocking acknowledgement that I am standing in a small classroom with the massed bodies of other human beings, who have been killed by fellow human beings – among the number of which you must count yourself – I absorb the smell that this is. The dead I stand beside take my breath, yet by being near I am reminded of the gift of that return of breath, which 'corresponds to the first autonomous gesture of the living human being' (Irigaray, 2002: 73).

Fagaala by Janti-Bi (2005) Friday October 14, 2005: 'Warning', reads the program, 'violent themes.' The Senegalese dance troupe, Janti-Bi, performed *Fagaala*, which means genocide in Wolof, one of Senegal's main languages, as part of the Melbourne International Arts Festival. The program also states that Germaine Acogny, one of *Fagaala*'s choreographers based the performance on personal interviews and testimony of survivors of the Rwandan genocide as well as the Senegalese writer Boubacar Boris Diop's novel, *Murambi, The Book of Bones* (Diop, 2006). Acogny says in the program notes:

I have tried to find a body language inspired by the inner distress of facing the collective madness. This suffering, the horror and the screaming pain caused by this tragedy, links with and is translated by the dancers' bodies, so as to call out to the world, and shock and disturb the bodies and spirits; but showing at the same time a tiny light of hope, ready to become a sunray (*Fagaala*, 2005).

After the performance there was a question and answer session.

In the middle of *Fagaala*, the lights came up, the music stopped and concrete walls were exposed in a moment utterly without artifice. Although Adorno wrote that, after Auschwitz, poetry is a form of barbarism, there is nothing about *Fagaala* that belittles its topic. The radical silence generated

in this rupture was a response to Adorno's quandary: that whilst the attempt to aestheticise genocide is obscene, suffering has every right to expression. Germaine Acogny managed to evoke the genocide in Rwanda without reducing it to the abject (Rothfield, 2005).

The Sunday Age, October 16, 2005. Dance of death lacks emotional muscle. Reviewer Neil Jillet:

One of the few points to emerge from the opaque wordiness of the program notes is that the starting point for *Fagaala* was a fictionalised account of the massacre of hundreds of thousands of Tutsi by Hutus in Rwanda in the 1990s. But *Fagaala* itself is so abstract and generalized that it is hard to spot any visual reference to violent death. (Jillet, 2005: 10).

Not until after the Friday night performance when the dancers and choreographer sat talking with the audience did I feel any relatedness to genocide and its affect. *Fagaala* had been athletic, physical and often brutal, and the beautiful masculinity of the all male troop was palpable on stage. But perhaps genocide *had* been aestheticised after all. It was not until I was sitting in the front row at the Melbourne Concert Hall with a few others facing the dancers and Acogny that Rwanda and a broader African reality began to become apparent. To be near in conversation began to disallow the genocide becoming merely 'another work of art'.

Adorno, as noted by Philipa Rothfield, wrote that 'writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,' that to represent the Holocaust, or in this instance the genocide in Rwanda, in art is to diminish the atrocity's 'extremeness' making of it a lesson, an example of 'an affirmation of human authenticity.' This makes the Holocaust, according to Adorno, a vehicle to be exploited, not an event in its own right (Adorno cited in Cooke, 2006: 273). However when standing near those who were massacred at Murambi, standing with these bodies, it is intersubjectivity that is exposed, where 'The bodily gesture is not a nervous discharge' as Levinas says, but 'a celebration of the world, poetry' (Levinas, 2003: 16). A poetry embedded in the tissue of our skin. The drawings I sketch that evening in my room after returning to Kigali from Murambi are for me an abidingness of being near, which is other than a mere affirmation of human authenticity, for it discloses the murderous possibilities of this very humanism. Adorno was also critical of what he called 'committed' literature because it 'extracts meaning from catastrophe, turning genocide into cultural capital' (Adorno cited in Cooke: 272). But to make of this a dogma would rob Diop's novel, *Murambi, The Book of Bones*, of its significance. A significance that was so important to *Fagaala*. In the novel's introduction Eileen Julien states the book was the product of an initiative by a Chadian journalist who took a group of African writers to Rwanda in 1998 to 'bear collective witness' (Diop: xv). Witness and testimony become the soil and air of a work, that through which I become.

Hand Writing

11.3.06: In his *Shake Hands with the Devil; the failure of humanity in Rwanda* Lieutenant General Romeo Dallaire, the Commander of United Nations forces in Rwanda, writes, 'The age of abstract "exercises" was over for me'. And when Dallaire's wife, Elizabeth, was flown in to visit he says:

I was caught in an emotional mental battle that pitted what I now considered the 'real' world – genocide in Rwanda – and the 'artificial' world – the detachment and obtuseness of the rich and powerful (Dallaire and Beardsley: 419).

It was the presence of his wife, the reminder of his home that made the horror not only of Rwanda, but also of the West's hypocrisy so blatant to Dallaire. His sense of home had been displaced, re-placed by the brutality of the genocide. Bodies in the street and their smell were now part of his personal landscape. For Dallaire place had become embodied.



Image courtesy of the author

In this same text there is a description of a rape, a description that I made a note to photocopy, along with other specific instances that bear witness to the atrocities of the genocide. It is my usual practice to write out such passages in my own long-hand script. This time I could not do so. Re-writing the account I feared I would become complicit with the horrific act. Distanced from the time and place of that rape I still felt present as a

participant; by writing it out with my own hand I be would enacting its very perpetuation. I felt, through my body, that if I wrote this writing out longhand I would become somehow a rapist. My hands, this one that holds the pen and this other resting on the page to be written on would be enacting abuse.

The horrific acts described in the texts on Rwanda are not isolated moments. On the 8 and 9 of August 2006, while I was transcribing these last paragraphs the *Sydney Morning Herald* carried two reports, each detailing gang rapes involving the same numbers of men. In Iraq five United States soldiers 'took turns to hold down and rape a fourteen-year-old Iraqi girl and (then) murdered her and her family' (Sydney Morning Herald, 2005). In Sydney, Australia, five men gang raped a nineteen-year-old woman for more than an hour in a toilet block in the busy tourist district of Darling Harbour (Kennedy, 2005). The rape of the young girl in Iraq occurred on March 12, 2006, and the rape of the Sydney woman on June 8 of the same year. It is now respectively six and three months since each rape and both incidents are before the courts.

Human Rights Watch investigations in the former Yugoslavia, Peru, Kashmir, and Somalia reveal that the rape and sexual assault of women are an integral part of conflicts. It was found:

that rape of women civilians has been deployed as a tactical weapon to terrorize civilian communities or to achieve 'ethnic cleansing', a tool in enforcing hostile occupations, a means of conquering or seeking revenge against the enemy, and a means of payment for mercenary soldiers. Despite rape's prevalence in war, according to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, '[Rape] remains the least condemned war crime.' (Commission of Human Rights, 1994: 64).

And here the *Sydney Morning Herald* reports on rape in my own backyard. To witness surveillance footage of five young men, in white overalls, amongst eucalypts and inner city street lighting walking away from a rape they had committed after work is shocking; masculinity happily returning home through the mall. My proximity is not merely spatial but ethical, a nearness it seems that is impossible to write by hand, being near becomes the responsibility for the other that Levinas recognizes as the possibility of murder, a responsibility however that is here not based in justice, but sympathy (Levinas, 1969: 198).

The next day, August 10, again in the *Sydney Morning Herald* newspaper, the story of the Sydney rape continued: 'Warning: the police allegations contain graphic details and language.' (Kennedy, 2006b). It is the warning, written twice, once as a headline and then followed immediately after with the above beeline that is revealing. It could marginally be seen as a legitimate concern for the reader and those affected, the woman, her family and friends, a concern reflecting the potency of the attack. In a paper given by Helena Grehan only three weeks before the above newspaper articles appeared she says of atrocities carried out in Borneo during World War 2:

There were 2,428 Prisoners imprisoned at Sandakan and only 6 survived. They suffered incredible brutality at the hands of the Japanese, so much so that the Australian press in a gentlemen's agreement decided to keep the stories quiet when they returned (Grehan, 2006).

In Rwanda,

An Interhaamwe (Hutu militia) had once told Philippe Gaillard, (head of the International Committee of the Red Cross) that the Kalinga, a sacred drum and a symbol of the Tutsi kings' suprememacy, had passed into different hands. From the Kalinga were hung the genitals of those killed in the conquered Hutu kinglets. Gaillard was sickened. Some of the atrocities witnessed in Rwanda would never be seen by the rest of the world. Gallard agreed with this self-censorship of the media (Melvern, 2005: 200-201).

And I cannot hand-write notes describing these atrocities. It is the hand that carries out the brutality, and the Kalinga is passed from hand to hand. And it is the hand that writes that makes for my feeling of complicity in the perpetration of violence. It is also, however, this embodiment that with-holds the hand, preserving a sense of nearness to those others to whom I am intimately entwined.

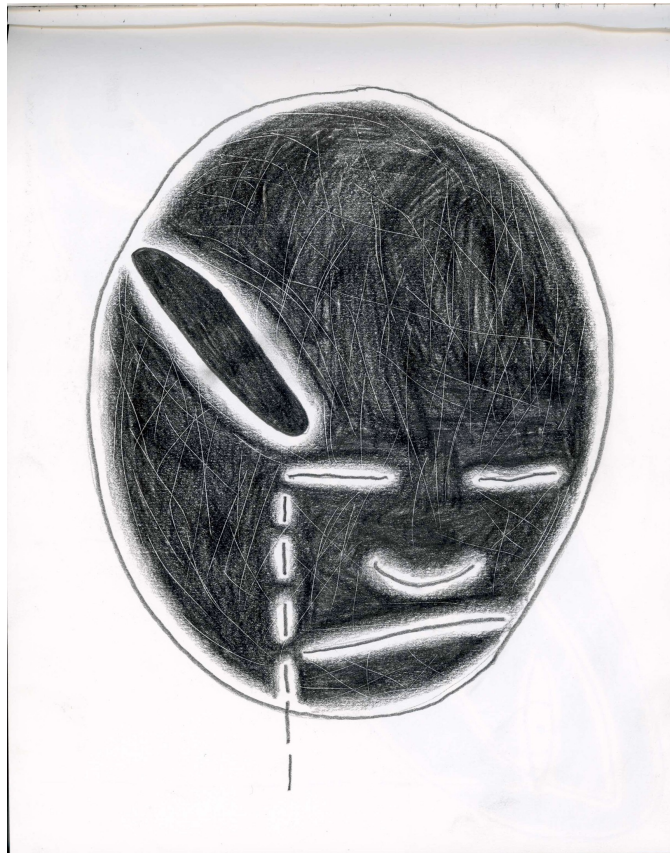


Image courtesy of the author

The way I hold myself, my comportment while writing, is what Heidegger saw as that which reveals in its 'grace' a corporeal memory (Kleinberg-Levin, 2005:248-249). I am enlivened by my relationship to the page, the text, the holding of this pen and the bodily act of writing, where my gesture of writing is in touch with a felt sense of being that I carry with me as somehow inscribed in my very flesh; this corporeality, that is at once of the world and preontological, a corporeal memory that holds in its hands harm as well as care; weapon as well as gift. Machetes, knives, hoes, sticks and hammers - hand tools - were used in the Rwandan genocide; ready-to-hand tools transformed into weapons by the manner in which they were handled. In the Kigali Genocide Memorial these implements are displayed at rest in a glass cabinet. Walking to the memorial, I pass, by the side of the road workers lifting hoes and machetes in their daily labour. The distance between victim and perpetrator is an arms length. To be so close and so distant is frightening.

This disquieting is highlighted, as Heidegger suggests, if 'writing (is) withdrawn from the origins of its essence i.e., from the hand,' and transferred to the machine, making for a transformation in the relation of man to Being, a transformation that forgets the hand as essentially human; human because it writes the language of grammar (Heidegger cited in Kleinberg-Levin: 2009). But this grammar disrupted by the writing of atrocities by hand becomes a stumbling, a tipping towards glossolalia that is other than any transference to machinery. The limits set by grammar so defining of our humanness are breached by the complicity that I felt when faced with writing the rape of Rwandan women and children. In this inability to write, my body recognizes, against Heidegger, a complicity with not only 'Man himself (who) acts through the hand', but also a body that meets through this breach the world-poor animal and the 'worldless' stone (Kleinberg-Levin: 219). For me not to write by hand atrocities that have occurred is at once an admittance to the possibility of my ability to murder and rape, an affirmation of responsibility that dwells in writing, and a recognized act of care. In this instance not being able to write atrocity is a with-holding, which at once reveals, and is an affect of, an indwelling of love that is before the responsibility of writing.

This essay was transcribed and re-worked using the computer, then again edited and added to by hand writing over the printed pages, and again re- worked finally on the computer, the writing originating from my Rwandan journal notes, written using a black fine point Ball Pentel pen into an A5 120 page spiral bound Visual Diary, which was a gift from friends to draw in (I drew however in a Daler-Rowney 265mm x 210mm ebony pad of acid free cartridge paper, made in England). In researching my concerns about writing by hand, its relationship to embodiment and the ways in which the act creates a possible complicity, I wrote notes onto scraps of recycled paper before transcribing them with additional thoughts into another journal kept for theoretical notations, a hard bound black and red notebook made in Indonesia, using, generally, a black biro. On page 53 of the Visual Diary is the written note to later make an image from my witnessing 'the languid touching of hands of two friends in the street – holding while talking.' Walking from the centre of Kigali, up the Avenue de la Gendarmerie there is a large roundabout on top of the hill. On its far side two men were standing under a eucalypt, talking. From the time it took me to walk unhurriedly the 180 degrees of the circular traffic island, and continue down the hill to

Kacyiru, the two men's hands gently touched – a touching that was not a clasp, or a grip, but rather like their conversation, leisurely, a caress arousing friendship and the proximity of their humanity, a caress touching on an ethic.

Kelly Oliver in *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* quotes the testimony of Harriet Jacobs (1861):

No pen can give an adequate description of the all-pervading corruption produced by slavery ... He came every day; and I was subjected to such insults as no pen can describe.' But Jacobs does speak writing herself away from slavery, offering testimony that entails one's transformation through witnessing, but she does not write the detail. The lifting of one's hand to say it is time to stop, the holding of one's hand over one's heart as witness, and in that saying she makes anew. The pen does not write the atrocity, the hand is too close, it recalls too vividly those acts which were 'too low, too revolting (Oliver, 2001: 102).

In the fear of the act of writing down is the fear of repeating through the motion of one's own body that which is so low, the harshness of trauma. Yet sentiment is exposed in this unwillingness to repeat the crime, a gentle re-call of one's hand touching one's heart, 'the first rational organ of the body ... the throne of grace where mind and all thoughts of the soul are to be found' (Palamas, 1983: 42). With our hand over our hearts we bear witness, and give thanks for the essential gift of our nature.

Writing by hand touches the very possibility of murder and its with-holding. Through this dilemma I greet the potency of these atrocities, my complicity in them, and my nearness to those who are the victims of violence, of death. If there is any guilt in this death that 'affects me in my very identity as a responsible I', it is a guilt as Derrida stated in his funeral oration for Levinas, that 'is without fault and without debt' (Derrida, 2001: 204-205).

Leaving and Arriving

Monday 03.04.06: Leaving Australia. Leaving for Rwanda. If it is research I am doing I am becoming it; my body is literally placed closer to those whom I first heard of via the radio, and then through the print media, internet and historical and theoretical texts. It is injections, tests, medicines, travel to the airport from the country to the city with handshakes and hugs, nervousness, stomach upsets and the relentless distance of air travel. The sameness of airports, the lighting, the duty free with its uniform array of alcohol, cigarettes by the carton, perfumes, cameras and teddy bears, while in the plane it is being treated as invalids are, with constant attention and duty of care. Meals are brought to you. There are blankets to wrap yourself in to become like a child. The plane is an indeterminate place in transit; you make of your seat, your blanket and the small screen in front of you a simulacrum of home. This becomes a form of reprieve, or nostalgia, yet this new place is also in the process of being stripped away and even with in-flight videos recalling an implied bourgeois contentment, I am all the while sitting with the unease of an anticipated

arrival, gradually entering that other place that disrupts my new transitory home. As the distance increases from my place of departure, and I become nearer to my place of arrival, this new place gains precedence. Even if I am thinking of events 'at home' that may be of great import, this only goes to make the distance from these events that much further. The plane transfers me from here to there, and it is the transit lounges that mark the journey. Gradually Rwanda is nearer. I become closer to that place. Melbourne, Bangkok, Addis Ababa. Bujumbura in Burundi is an unscheduled stop over because the plane is diverted due to bad weather at Kigali airport. Another four hours in another transit lounge, then Rwanda.

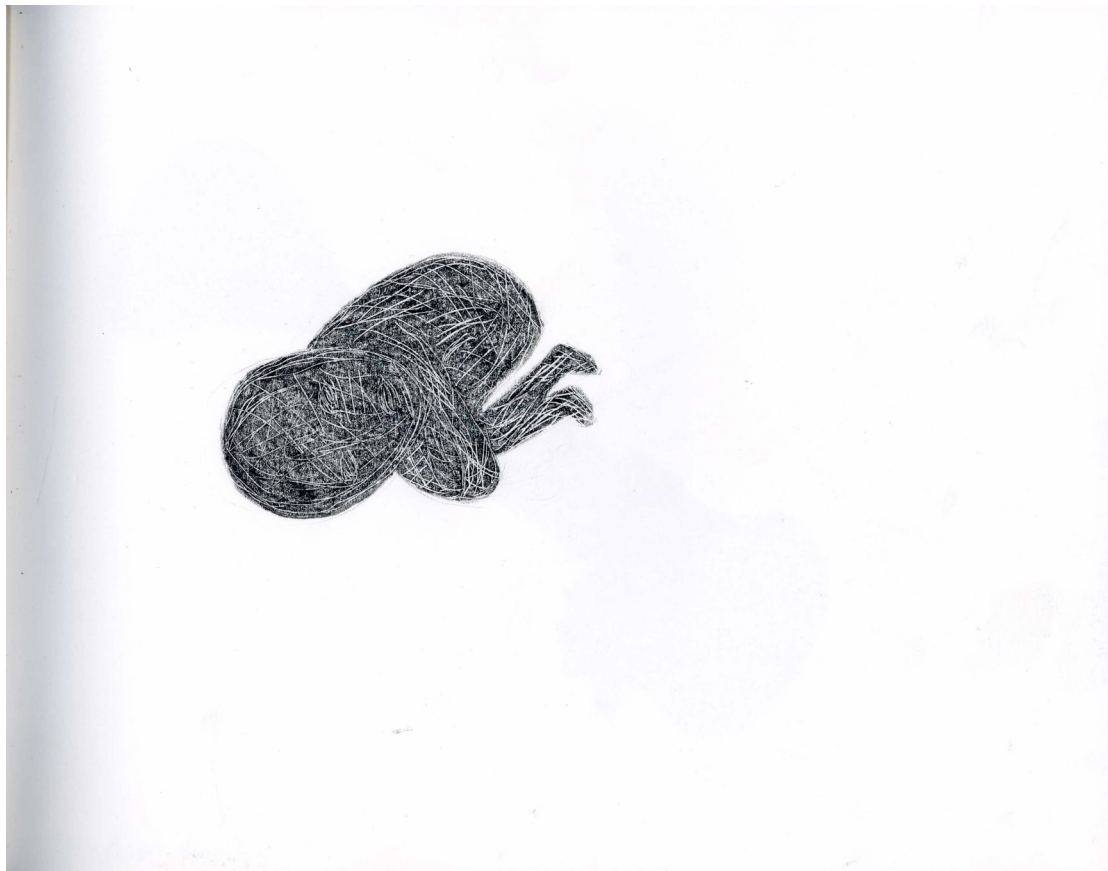


Image courtesy of the author

Pepetela, the award winning Angolan author writes in his 1995 novel, *The Return of the Water Spirit*:

A charter plane full of German tourists then arrived, immediately followed by one with South Africans, then one with Japanese, and then, surprisingly as it sounds, with Finns. They came with their anti-mosquito repellents, their travel bags ... electronic credit cards which were not accepted because the habit had not caught on, photographic cameras, video cameras, tape recorders, white pith hats and khaki shorts, introductory

letters and the usual sort of things tourists bring when they visit a country of savages (Pepelela, 2002: 67).

On the trip from Kigali airport into the town centre I feel like I am being driven through parts of Central Australia. It is the colour of the earth, the colour of people's skin and children with toys made from scrap.

Wednesday 05.04.06: My out-of-placeness is palpable. Anticipation is not the same as arriving, the 'literalness' is incomprehensible. The passage from one place to another; injections, the purchasing of a ticket, leaving work, farewells, all had seemed before leaving an adding up that would amount to my departure. But after walking through the sliding frosted glass doors of the International Departure Lounge at Melbourne Airport each step became, rather, a subtraction. But unlike a double entry account, where an equal amount of money is always transferred from one account to another, this passage from here to there was more than the required balancing of the hard fact of a coin, the strictness of language or the limit of any text. There is more to this arriving; to travel comes from the same word as travail. As Edward S Casey writes:

Places, like bodies and landscapes are something we experience – where *experience* stays true to its etymological origin of 'trying out,' 'making a trial out of it.'... It is to do something that requires the proof of the senses, and often of much else besides (Casey, 1993: 30).

07.04.06: It is my fourth night in Rwanda; I roll over in bed, reach out and my fingers lightly touch the shoulder of my partner Cath; she is in China and we have not seen each other for two months. Is she there?

dear jeff

how nice it is to get your email and know that you are ok. sounding a little alone though i think. I have found that you have to make a little life for your self for things to be comfortable and have some sense of meaning. when i arrived at the school the room i am in while palatial by every one else's standards, was kind of grotty. so I went and bought myself a clock and a lamp some washing powder and a cleaning cloth and cleaned it all up and put my lamp up and put all my books on the desk and put my clock by the bed etc etc

I am still lonely but I have something to do and a sense of place even if it is only going to be for 5 more weeks it still is home for now. 5 more weeks I can't believe it, it seems like stretching out to an eternity. I must be patient and concentrate on the things that i came here for. my chinese is really terrible, i can't understand a word anyone is saying. but i am going to keep trying. i would really like to be able to walk with you too, so we could look at things together and discuss them. i have been having some very intense

dreams lately i think it might be the chilli in the food at night, one of them was that we were lying on the bed together discussing something as we do, it was great just like the real thing. i long to hold you in my arms again, don't you just miss the touch?

Cath (Davies, 2006)



Image courtesy of the author

Falling Into Place

I begin by walking.

Out of place I walked myself into Kigali, out of the large blue metal front gates of Moucecore, where I was staying, onto the dirt road that leads up to the Boulevard de Umuganda roundabout, or otherwise down by the barbers, and then up another hill with a communal vegetable garden on the right in a dip in the road to reach the taxi bikes at Avenue de la Gendarmerie. I began to walk the path from Kacyiru to the centre of Kigali, which became as Casey suggests 'an immediate, unpremeditated engagement with a

particular place rather than a survey' (Casey: 276). Walking the hills from Moucecore each day I would stop to rest at a service station bar owned by Muhire, who was originally a refugee from Burundi, and now also owns a café that overlooks the Eglise Ste Famille (Church of the Family) on the Boulevard de Nyabuggo. I walked quickly at first through diesel fumes and traffic, but my pace gradually slowed and began to match those others on the path. Returning from Kigali required one last effort as I again passed the barbers on the steep incline to Moucecore. Curious children waved at the white man walking. "Bon jour." "Amakuru."

Looking from the back of Moucecore, past fields of vegetables towards a densely populated area, there is a small cleared patch of compacted ground where children play during the day, and later in the evening crowds gather to buy and sell produce. People walk narrow dirt paths through the vegetable plots to the clearing carrying lumber, baskets of food, fire wood and other necessities. Each morning by a wall at the intersection of two of these paths, a small boy sets up a plywood tray divided by simple shelves holding sweets to sell. In the evening the smell of smoke rising from cooking fires enters through my window with the sounds of people singing and clapping in rhythm as they gather at the clearing. Frogs begin to croak, which is said to be a sign of a healthy environment. During my three weeks in Rwanda I walked on made paths usually by marked roads. I never walked these narrower footways behind Moucecore. Perhaps not being completely in place in the sense of primal depth as defined by Merleau-Ponty, that 'dimension in which things...envelop each other,' making for simultaneity of presence, but still I often felt I was walking here (Casey: 68).

Murambi

No one escapes...not even the newly-born babies ... the victims are pursued to their very last refuge and killed there.
Committee on Human Rights (Melvern: 227).

Wednesday, 12.04.06: Today I went to Murambi, Gikongoro, which Sally Sara spoke of, where more than 50,000 people were massacred. The site, a large technical school, is situated on a hill that slopes down towards either villages or cultivated land and bush. The silence is what first struck me on arrival with Aimable, who had driven me from Kigali. We stopped at a gate which opened onto a long white gravel road leading to the seemingly abandoned administration building. However a room in this building now acts as an office where you may sign a visitors' book, and leave donations for the upkeep of the site. A man and a woman approached. He would be my guide through the genocide memorial, while the woman would open the doors to the 72 classrooms that shelter the dead.

Women, children and men from the surrounding districts had been told by authorities to gather at the school for protection, but this was merely in order to group people together and massacre them more easily. Once inside the compound, to diminish their resistance, water pipes and food supplies were cut, leaving those who were now trapped inside the

school without provisions for two weeks until the mass execution began on the night of April 20th, 1994.

To the right hand side of the three-story administration building is the site of a mass grave, which is marked by a simple concrete slab. As we turned left around a corner towards the back of the office block the guide suggests that I might like to prepare myself for the shock of viewing the bodies in the class rooms. There are a number of long dormitory style buildings, some closer together; others set apart, each divided into six classrooms. The first red door of the first classroom in the nearest dormitory is unlocked, and then another and another. Bodies have been placed onto racks, hundreds and hundreds of bodies, all treated with lime, their stretched and dried flesh retaining what is still their humanness. Some have tufts of hair. One woman wears a blue dress, and a child, probably two years old is clothed in an ashen red t-shirt with a faded yellow border around the neck and sleeves. I realise while writing this that I added the yellow edging to the t-shirt, making it one I have had for many years, and wear myself.

There is room after room of these bodies. These are people, who have been killed, and this is what is repeated, and this is who has been exhumed, and this is who are underground 40,000 times. So the 50,000 are no longer abstract, their witnessing is lived here in this place and it is smelt, for the bodies are still decomposing under their protective coating of lime. It is as Sally Sara said.

Each dead person is here in this place as am I, as is the guide relating how he managed to hide in the bush while all his family members, fourteen people, were massacred. Standing here in the doorway of this classroom there is a bodily sensation of falling into the racks of dead, of tilting forward, or backward, recognizing that you too are this person, this victim and that you too are the one who killed. Being so close to death, witnessing this smell of decay I fall into the bodies lying before me. There is no escaping. I am displaced, and not allowed any comfortable re-settling, to anywhere that can be named. I am floundering, trying to take in these bodies and somehow gain a purchase through their presence. But this is not happening. These people and their murderers have shattered my economy. I am thrown, and I mean this in the sense of being cast or flung down amongst those lying on these racks of wood, and also in Heidegger's sense of thrown as the 'not at home' of uncanny displacement, that which is unfamiliar to the everyday revealing an envelopment that arranges the room, the smell, the light, the dead and I around each other. An arrangement not determined from a single unitary perspective, but experienced as that complete and unmistakable absolute separateness from the other who you must face, an alterity that exposes with an unconditional shock of recognition ones responsibility, and beyond that the chasm of sentimental compassion, a being other than and being with concurrently. It is difficult to comprehend that you are amongst the dead; but at the same time those who have been killed are so present that they manage to make you as present as they. The shocking acuteness of this coupling is something I am not familiar with, it is as rare as love. Is this the shock that the guide had tried to prepare me for? If so, it was not possible.

I do not recall walking back towards the administration block until the guide stopped and indicated another large building. Some of the windows down both sides were broken and at either end there were no doors. The floor was covered in dust and the place at first seemed, like the administration building, to have been abandoned. Tentatively walking inside, I disturbed a pigeon resting on one of the metal trusses supporting the corrugated iron roof. The scale of the place and its emptiness contrasted dramatically with the school rooms I had only recently witnessed. The bird settled on one of three blue lines of synthetic cord positioned towards the back of the building, stretched between its high walls. These lines were heaped with the blood and mud stained clothes of the victims now lying on racks so close by. Clothes piled on top of each other like corpses in a mass grave, clothes on display in this vast otherwise empty, and derelict space to be witnessed and to bear witness, not to be dried and worn again. They and I coincided in this uncanny domestic space, unsettling my understanding of what a home and a school may be. I was at once displaced, but simultaneously found in place by my act of complicity, which was to bear witness.

Stupid as Daffy Duck

Thursday 13.4.06 Journal entry: The clothes lines ... it is the emptiness of the space, their (the clothes) positioning, and the colours, melded together blues, browns and reds. It reminds me of attempts by contemporary art ... to carry significance. It was not art however, it was testimony to those who were lying in the buildings nearby ... (But) there was artifice in the placing of the clothes lines, yet this is unavoidable, the objects have to be placed some where, some how ... So *is* it art? And if so are those bodies displayed in the class rooms also art. Does this thought simply obliterate, once again, those who were killed?

Obviously these clothes and the lines they hang on are not art; they are here to bear witness to those who were massacred. This thought which I wrote in my journal, the thought that Murambi could be witnessed as art, brought with it a sense of shame, which by its very nature was impossible to avoid. Even thinking that I could experience being at Murambi as some sort of gallery visit made me want to hide, but as Levinas writes, shame disallows this:

What appears in shame is ... the fact of being chained to oneself, the radical impossibility of fleeing oneself to hide oneself from oneself, the intolerable presence of the self to itself...What is shameful is our intimacy, that is, our presence to ourselves...What shame discovers is the Being that *discovers* itself (Levinas cited in Agamben, 1999: 105).

In shame there is not any place where you do not see yourself naked. I had stepped into this disorientating domestic space discovering an intimacy in its apparent emptiness. As a person who has been involved in making art for many years perhaps in my notes I habitually saw the building and the placement of the clothes and lines in context of this

making, a reference that I am acknowledging now, producing a feeling of disgust, disgust that as Suzanne Clark says of sentiment, marks the limit of critical discourse (Clark, 1991:11).

When I stepped into the building that housed the clothes and recognized them for what they were, the clothes of those lying in the classrooms, my face was struck, the clothes and I rushed towards each other and smack, we hit; just as when I visited a memorial where thousands of people were killed in the mountains near Kibuye, and was privileged enough to witness what a local farmer named as a sacred site. A wooden door in a low lying corrugated iron shed cut into the hillside overlooking the expanse of Lake Kivu was opened for me revealing shelf after shelf of skulls and bones. There is an animated cartoon of Daffy Duck I think it is, or perhaps it is Roger Rabbit, where the characters' eyes extend from his head towards an object of desire. The eyes telescope, throwing the character's entire body out behind while he is consumed by and consumes the woman, the pie...

The shock of recognition of the clothes belonging to the dead, and then shortly after coupled with the thought that the clothes line, and the room they were in could be an art exhibit, left me naked before not only me but the place, and the man still standing at the doorway looking away from the building's interior. I was naked before that which I must face, that which makes of the world a living world; its objects, its humanity and this visiting.

The memorial guide, the clothes of the dead and the dead themselves were testifying to genocide. To witness those killed and preserved in this memorial was to constitute myself through visiting. A necessarily relational, ethical and 'public' constituting, just as when I proffer an apology. In Medieval law to bare witness is an act, an action between people that requires community. Andrea Frisch in her article on *The Ethics Of Testimony* writes:

The belief indexed by the medieval purgatory oath is predicated on an ethical relationship ... Witnesses ... in effect swear an oath of solidarity with a person; they do not offer evidence about an experience or an event ... (The witnesses) are not referring that belief to a prior experience, but are rather performing that belief in the very act of bearing witness (Frisch, 2003: 44).

In the instance of this writing or this reading now, this relationship is with you. We are not at Murambi, we are not in the rooms with the dead, but we are at once complicit in the genocide and the possibility of its prevention. It is not decent to make of the clothes lines at Murambi art, that merely serves to diminish those who have been killed, and insult those who survived. But this does not lessen the encumbrance on us as artists, as witnesses, to act with the knowledge that we are part of the world that perpetuates genocide. It means we attempt to make through the disclosure of responsibly, whatever that may become for each of us.

The Preacher

George Gittoes, an Australian artist who works internationally was in Rwanda in 1995 and painted a series of images of a massacre perpetrated by the Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA). One of his works is entitled *The Preacher*.

Two days ago there were thousands of people standing and pleading for help. Now everything is flattened - bodies crumpled amidst rubbish - their few discarded possessions useless.... The RPA soldiers herded refugees into a compressed sea of humanity - denied food and water - tightly contained behind razor wire and barricades. As the killing has moved through them there have been wave-like bursts of panic - shifts and changes in the pattern of slaughter - bodies crushed and torn, rolled in mud and caught in the razor wire as crowds in herds press over them ... (Gittoes, 2002).

The complete text by Gittoes locates his image specifically at Kibeho, another site where clothes lie as witness to atrocity (Rwandan Peace Keepers). It is the writing however, the spelling out of the 'story', as Gittoes says of his way of working, that relates the work to any actual act of violence (Gittoes, 2006). The image, like the performance of *Fagaala*, requires more than the artwork to make of it a testimony to genocide. It requires the knowledge of a person's presence, and an appreciation of the event beyond what is available through the painting. It requires conversation, a dialogic relationship. Nicholas Mirzoeff in his article *Invisible again: Rwanda and representation after genocide* acknowledges Gittoes's courage in assisting Australian aid groups in Rwanda, but writes that it is this very act of witnessing which Gittoes has been praised for that does not allow for an acknowledgement of the complicity of the Church in the Rwandan genocide, and to 'ignore these connotations' is to 'fail to undertake the work that is entailed in constituting a visual culture that cannot sustain genocide;' if this is at all possible and in fact desirable (Mirzoeff, 2005: 8). Mirzoeff's critique of the involvement of Western artists in depicting the genocide is that again the West is seeing Africa as not part of the world of 'our' political process, something that made it possible in fact to deny the genocide for so long. Yet as Mirzoeff also suggests through a recognition of globalization Rwanda is very much part of the 'world'. In the Kigali market I saw amongst the rug and clothing stalls, mobile phone outlets, and brightly coloured plastic sandals, a painting similar to Gittoes's, a massacre scene, large, predominately reds and black hanging alongside a painting of a setting sun, another of an ibis and other works created for the tourist market.



Image courtesy of the author

By the Light of Our Mobile Phones

Thursday evening: We are still in the official mourning period for the 1994 genocide; it will be over at the end of the month. Purple is the colour that hangs in ribbons from archways made of branches and leaves at the entrance of the capital and many smaller towns. Albert, who helped organize my itinerary while in Rwanda, came to visit in the evening and we sat on my bed talking. Albert talked about the genocide and how neighbour killed neighbour. Those that once fetched water or shared their food with friends now killed them. "It cannot be imagined. How could people do it? It cannot be imagined."

We talked of the Gacaca (grass) courts, community based trials of those accused of perpetrating the genocide, courts that have been and are still being established by the government. They are trials headed by Inyangamuayo, local persons of integrity, working towards kwiungu, reconciliation. Albert was saying how positive they were, even if they had their faults (Africa Rights, 2003). If people confess to involvement in the genocide during the gacaca process often the location of graves are revealed, and the bodies may be exhumed, allowing any remaining family the possibility of a formal burial. While we were talking the lights went out as they had the previous evening. We continued our conversation in the dark, occasionally lighting the area around our hands with the blue

glow from our mobile phones. Across this glow Albert said how the courts allow people a chance to talk and take some control over what happens to the perpetrators of the atrocities that have so affected their communities and families. The lights came back on and Albert asked about the book I was currently reading, *A People Betrayed, the role of the West in Rwanda's genocide*, by L.R. Melvern. He said the United Nations did nothing in Rwanda, and was adamant that they were useless. This was the only time he ever showed any hostility about the genocide. He had been compassionate to both victims and perpetrators, but this inactivity of the West is still recalled with bitter disappointment.

I had asked a Rwandan refugee working in Sydney before leaving Australia about my visiting his country. He said that it is necessary to bear witness and speak about what happened in Rwanda, it has been denied by the west enough.

References

- African Rights. *Gacaca Justice: A Shared Responsibility* (Kigali: Africa Rights, 2003).
- Agamben, Giorgio. *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999).
- Arendt, Hannah. 'Understanding Politics', *Partisan Review* (New York: AMS Reprint Company, 1964).
- Caruth, Cathy. 'Traumatic Awakenings', Kosofsky Sedgwick, Eve and Parker, Andrew (ed.). *Performativity and Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1995).
- Casey, Edward S. *Getting Back Into Place: Towards a Renewed Understanding of the Place- World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).
- Clark, Suzanne. *Sentimental Modernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).
- Commission on Human Rights, Fiftieth session, November 1994, U.N. Document E/CN.41995/42, Preliminary report submitted by the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, its Causes and Consequences, <http://www.hrw.org/about/projects/womrep/General-20.htm>
- Cooke, Maeve. 'The Ethics of Post-Holocaust Art: Reflections on Redemption and Representation', *German Life and Letters* (April 2006).
- Dallaire, LGen. Romeo with Beardsley Major Brent. *Shake Hands With The Devil; the failure of humanity in Rwanda* (Toronto: Vintage, 2004).
- Davies, Cath. Personal email correspondence with author 10.4.06
- Derrida, Jaques. *The Work of Mourning*, Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (ed.), trans. Pascale-Anne Brault (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).
- Diop, Boubacar Boris. *Murambi, The Book of Bones*, trans. Fiona McLaughlin (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006; 2000).
- Fagaala*. Acogny, Germaine (artistic director/choreographer) Yamazaki, Kota (choreographer) Janti-Bi Company, Dance, the Arts Centre, Playhouse, Melbourne, 14.10.05
- Frisch, Andrea. 'The Ethics of Testimony: A Genealogical Perspective', *Discourse* (2003).
- Gittoes, George. *Common Theology*, July (2002), <http://www.commontheology.com/vol1no1july2002/thepeacher.htm>
- Gittoes, George. *Sunday Arts*, ABC Television, 15 October (2006), <http://www.abc.net.au/tv/sundayarts/txt/s1765976.htm>
- Grehan, Helena. (Murdoch University), 'Seduction and Estrangement: Performance, Ethics and Spectatorship in a Golden Age', a paper at *Being There: Before, During and After*, the annual conference of the Australian Association for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies, held at the University of Sydney's Department of Performance Studies, July 2006.

- Irigaray, Luce. *Between East and West: From Singularity to Community*, trans. Stephen Pluhacek, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002; 1999).
- Jillet, Neil. 'Melbourne International Arts Festival Review', *Sunday Age Newspaper*, 16.10.05.
Kennedy, Les. *Sydney Morning Herald Newspaper*, 9.8.06.
- Kennedy, Les. *Sydney Morning Herald Newspaper*, 10.8.06.
- Kleinberg-Levin, David Michael. *Gestures of Ethical Life: Reading Holderlin's Question of Measure After Heidegger* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Humanism of the Other*, trans. Nidra Poller (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003; 1972).
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969; 1961).
- Melvorn, L.R. *A People Betrayed: The Role of the West in Rwanda's Genocide*, (Cape Town: NAEP, 2005).
- Merton, Thomas. *Spiritual Direction and Meditation* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1969).
- Mirzoeff, Nicholas. 'Invisible Again: Rwanda and Representation After Genocide', *African Arts*, http://findarticles.com/p/articlesmi_m0438/is_3_38/ai_n16118531/print
- Oliver, Kelly. *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).
- Palamas, Gregory. *The Triads*, trans. Nicholas Gendle, forw. John Meyendorff (New York: Paulist Press, 1983; 1973).
- Pepetela. *The Return of the Water Spirit*, trans. Luis R. Mitras (Oxford: Heinmann, 2002; 1995).
- Rothfield, Philipa. *Real Time*, http://www.realttimearts.net/rt70/rothfield_miaf.html
- Rwanda Peace Keepers <http://warriordoc.com/rwanda/kibeho.htm#CCP%20Deployed>
- Sara, Sally. *The World Today* ABC Radio, 2003
<http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2003/s930252.htm>
- Sydney Morning Herald Newspaper*, 8.8.06

Editorial Note

Performance Paradigm issues 1 to 9 were reformatted and repaginated as part of the journal's upgrade in 2018. Earlier versions are viewable via Wayback Machine:
http://web.archive.org/web/*/performanceparadigm.net

© 2007 Jeff Stewart