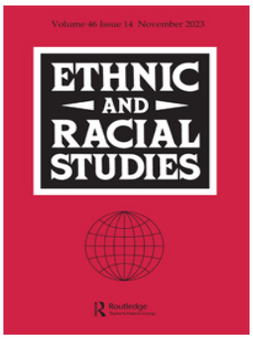

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# Memories of violence in the Rwandan diaspora: intergenerational transmission and conflict transportation

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**ABSTRACT**

How are memories of a violent past in the country of origin reproduced, contested and reinterpreted by younger diasporic generations? And what consequences do processes of memory transmission of a violent past have on younger generations' identities and patterns of mobilisation? Based on an exploration of the transmission of memories of the 1994 genocide in the Rwandan diaspora in Belgium, this article demonstrates that the intergenerational transmission of conflict memories shapes the mobilisation of second-generation diasporans in significant ways, and largely explains patterns of conflict transportation in the country of residence. However, a reframing of issues related to Rwanda's past, as well as a reorganisation and rethinking of diaspora cleavages and/or solidarities, from one generation to the next can also be observed. Such patterns can be explained by the need to translate memories of a painful past so that they can make sense and resonate in the country of residence.

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**KEYWORDS** Conflict; diaspora; intergenerational; memories; mobilisation; youth

## Introduction

> In Rwanda, there is a ceremony every five years, during which a perpetrator and the family of those he has killed reconcile. It is a beautiful gesture, it is also beautiful at the human level, but the generational wound that was caused by what happened is not going to disappear because you took a photo, because you kissed, and because you said "it is all good now". Even our children are going to carry that wound, although they were all born outside of Rwanda. (Stéphanie, 29)

Research has shown that we can be deeply affected by war without having ever been in a war zone (Dekel and Goldblatt 2008; Hirsch 2002). Children or

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grandchildren of people who have witnessed or participated in fighting can experience distress by seeing and hearing their parents or grandparents grappling with war memories, or with their physical and mental trauma (Lev–Wiesel 2007). But how does this affect the descendants of those who originate from so-called conflict areas, and who have resettled elsewhere? Do (forced) displacement and migration impact the transmission of conflict memories? We know that conflict can be transported from home to host countries through the maintenance of cleavages between and within diaspora groups (Baser 2015; Féron 2013; 2017), but how these processes of conflict transportation are affected by the intergenerational transmission of memories is unclear.

Over the past decades, multiple studies have rebutted the image of diasporas as ahistorical communities remaining unaffected by the passing of time, and by the environment in which they live (Bell 2013). The processes through which they evolve and adapt, however, remain relatively unexplored, especially in the case of diasporas originating from conflict areas. These issues are important to study because they help to better understand the relations between diasporas and conflicts, their political choices and whether and how second and subsequent diaspora generations mobilise. They illuminate complex, fluid and multiple processes of belonging, and demonstrate how important memories of past events are for structuring the political struggles in which diaspora members are involved, one generation after the next.

Change of generations, particularly in diaspora settings where younger generations are brought up in a different cultural environment, is seen as "both a threat and an opportunity" by older diasporans[1] (Chernobrov and Wilmers 2020, 915). For older generations, new generations can bring adaptation and stability in the country of residence, but often at the cost of a loss of diasporic memory and identity. In practice, however, the passing of generations does not entail sudden transformations and ruptures, as processes of creolisation tend to occur (Cohen 2010). But how do these processes of cultural change impact the transmission of collective memories, particularly in relation to a violent past?

In order to provide some tentative answers to these questions, this contribution uses the case of the Rwandan diaspora in Belgium as an illustrative example. Over the past few decades, the Rwandan diaspora in Belgium has attracted some academic attention notably related to its genocide commemoration activities (Orjuela 2020a; 2020b), or to trauma and victimhood narratives (Kuradusenge-McLeod 2018; Orjuela 2022). So far, however, few studies have focused on how memories of the Rwandan genocide and of former episodes of violence reproduce or challenge identities in the diaspora, especially among younger generations. In parallel, studying the Rwandan diaspora in Belgium is particularly interesting as it is a migration destination and political hub for Rwandans, the significance of which is heightened by Belgium's special status as the former colonial power. The article builds on various

sources of data, gathered since 2018 through onsite observation, online data collection and biographic interviews, and looks at how conflict memories are maintained and rearticulated in diaspora settings one generation after the next, and how this affects diaspora cleavages. The research expands on theories of conflict transportation and autonomisation in diaspora settings (Baser 2015; Féron 2013; 2022) by looking at how memories of a violent past are contested and reinterpreted by younger diasporic generations.

This article is divided into three main parts. In the first I discuss what we know of (diasporic) conflict memories, and how these matter for the mobilisation of diasporas from one generation to the next; in spite of a vibrant research culture at the intersection of memories and diaspora studies, the issue of how conflict memories are reframed and rearticulated by younger diasporic generations has hitherto been largely overlooked. I also detail my data collection and analysis methods. In the second part I focus on entangled processes of active, passive and indirect transmission of conflict memories within the Rwandan diaspora in Belgium, and I examine how they affect the sense of belonging of subsequent generations. In the last section, I examine how conflict memories are reframed and rearticulated within the Rwandan diaspora in Belgium among younger generations, and what consequences this has on their identities and patterns of mobilisation.

## Diasporic conflict memories and conflict transportation processes

During the past half century, the topic of memory has attracted a lot of attention in social sciences, notably in peace and conflict studies. Countless studies have been produced on how collective memory – broadly understood, for the purposes of this article, as encompassing the stories, artefacts, symbols and traditions shared by members of a group (see, e.g. Halbwachs 1992) – is produced and transmitted after wars and violent conflicts. Specific attention has been paid to the social and cultural actors transmitting these collective memories, such as families, organisations or even states (Halbwachs 1992), and to the mechanisms through which these memories are transmitted, either "vertically" over time or "horizontally" in time and across spaces/transnationally (Eyerman 2004; Pickering and Keightley 2013). While some of this scholarship has focused on these memories' content, especially in the case of traumatic memories (e.g. Hirsch 2002; Hunt 2010), other scholars such as Assmann (1995, 130) have laid stress on how memories, although structured around fixed and immovable figures, are transformed, reconstructed and adapted to the change in cultural context over time.

A concept that has been closely associated with that of memory transmission is the concept of generation, developed by Mannheim (1959). For Mannheim, new generations emerge through a dialectical process of social

remembering and forgetting, and can therefore be understood as "communities of memory" (Irwin-Zarecka 2017). In this perspective, a lot of literature focusing on the intergenerational transmission of war-related memories has been produced. Although not primarily focusing on diasporas, this literature has coined key concepts for understanding how diasporas, especially conflict-generated ones, relate to their past and to their home countries. For instance, the concept of post-memory (Hirsch 2008; see also Müller-Suleymanova 2023a) describes processes through which second generations relate to traumatic experiences preceding their births and eventually adopt these memories as their own. In these processes of memory transmission, family plays a crucial role, as do photographs, movies and biographies (Nouzeilles 2005). However, transmission is never straightforward, as older generations tend to silence some events and/or aspects of the past (Bloch 2018; Kidron 2009; Orjuela 2020a, 369). Similarly, visual culture tends to focus on a small number of specific events and historical figures. Yet, beyond data collected on specific case studies, what exactly is remembered or forgotten of wars, and for what reasons, remains largely unclear.

Research has also shown how memories can be used for understanding the present situation, making decisions, and conceptualising the future (Biderman, Bakkour, and Shohamy 2020). For instance, Macdonald (2013) describes the process through which the past is performed and experienced in the present as "past-presencing". The concept of past-presencing suggests that the past is constantly reinterpreted and performed in the present, thus continuously adapted and repurposed in function of the individual's or group's current positionality and objectives. Therefore, the transmission of memories, and their reactivation in the present, are key in understanding individuals' and groups' sense of belonging and mobilisation patterns. The past serves as an analysis grid for present events and provides a basis for collective identity and mobilisation (Müller-Suleymanova 2023a).

This is important for the study of conflict-generated diaspora groups since what happened in their home country can determine how they feel in host countries. Like many other groups perceived through identity labels, diaspora groups are often described in policies and politics as having stable identities. In fact, diasporas are characterised by fluid identities and, as a consequence, the causes they mobilise for and their mobilisation patterns evolve too (Baser 2017; Brinkerhoff 2008). Memories, especially as related to "home", are at the core of diasporic practices and everyday life, and they are essential for the maintenance of diasporic identities (Agnew 2005; Baronian, Besser, and Jansen 2007; Redclift 2017). But memories of home are shifting rather than fixed as they are reconstructed in relation to the lived realities in host countries (Lacroix and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2013). Among all memories of home, memories related to past traumas and/or to wars constitute a crucial part of "diasporic imaginaries" for conflict-generated diaspora groups (Axel

2002). And like other types of memories, they are fluid and evolve in relation to the context in countries of residence, and to the challenges faced by one generation after the next (Müller-Suleymanova 2023a).

However, so far, most of the existing work on traumatic memories explores either second and subsequent generations in general, without a specific focus on diasporas (for example, the large body of work on descendants of Holocaust victims: Hirsch2002; Kidron 2009; Lev–Wiesel 2007), or conflict-generated diaspora groups, without a focus on intergenerational transmission processes (an exception here is Müller-Suleymanova 2021). The question of how traumatic conflict memories shape relations between and within diaspora groups, and their consequences on patterns of conflict transportation in host countries, has also been largely overlooked. Answering this question is likely to make a decisive contribution to the literature on diaspora cleavages and political mobilisation, which has grown steadily over the past decades. One issue that this literature has explored is whether, and if yes how, cleavages existing in home countries, particularly related to violent conflicts, are reproduced in diaspora settings. Factors such as living conditions in host countries (Féron 2017), the influence exerted by home countries (Turner 2013), or the size, degree of homogeneity and time of arrival of the diaspora group itself (Baser 2013) have all been shown to determine the existence and extent of "conflict transportation" processes. This literature has also highlighted the existence, in many cases, of patterns of "conflict autonomisation", whereby the transported conflicts transform in function of the context and challenges faced by diaspora groups in host countries, while retaining some of their core symbols and narratives (Féron 2022). However, the role played by conflict memories in these processes remains unclear. By exploring the relation between the transmission of conflict memories and conflict transportation with specific reference to the case of the Rwandan diaspora in Belgium, this article aims at filling this gap.

## *A note on methods, data and ethics*

There are approximately 30,000 Rwandans in the diaspora in Belgium, Rwanda's former colonial power. It is a very diverse diaspora, constituted through successive waves of migration triggered by different factors, notably by political instability and insecurity since the country's independence in 1962, and particularly by the genocide primarily targeting the Tutsi that occurred in 1994 (Turner 2013). Some Rwandans also migrated over the past decades for educational purposes. It is a heavily divided diaspora, but not only – or even sometimes primarily – following the Hutu-Tutsi distinction. Other cleavages matter considerably, such as those related to the time of arrival in Belgium, the region of origin in Rwanda, and political opinions. Since the genocide, one generation has passed, and

some Rwandan families had settled in Belgium before then, for three generations or even longer.

In order to explore how memories are passed on from one diasporic generation to the next, and how this shapes identities and mobilisation among second-generation diasporans, the article builds on various and complementary sources of data, combining onsite observation, online data collection and eight biographic interviews with second-generation members[2] of the Rwandan diaspora in Belgium, recruited primarily through the snowball sampling method. Data collection was conducted following a strict adherence to the guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK).[3] Informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews. Research participants were informed about the research project, about how data would be anonymised and stored, and how it would be used and disseminated. Participants were also explained the potential benefits and risks associated with participating in the study.

Five research participants identified as female, three as male, and all were between 18 and 30 years of age. Four self-identified as Tutsi, two as Hutu, and two as of mixed heritage. They live either in Brussels or in the French-speaking region of Wallonia, and all self-described as middle-class. As will become evident in the analysis below, some are heavily involved in diasporic activities, while others participate only sporadically. The interviews, conducted in French in 2022, lasted between one and two hours, and explored the research participants' views on Rwanda's violent past and on current divisions within the Rwandan diaspora in Belgium, and their own attitudes and preferences in terms of mobilisation. All research participants have been anonymised, given pseudonyms to protect their identity, and all personal details that might enable their identification were removed.

In parallel, I have observed diaspora-led genocide commemoration events in Belgium and other types of diaspora meetings, events and demonstrations, since 2018. In addition to numerous informal oral conversations and email exchanges with diasporans, I have collected online video material including interviews and material from intergenerational focus groups conducted by the Belgian civic and social organisation BePax[4] (notably two videos of 39 and 21 minutes each: BePax 2020a, 2020b) and videos of genocide commemorations and diaspora-led events. I have also consulted the websites and social media accounts of various active Rwandan diaspora organisations and initiatives in Belgium such as the Diaspora Rwanda Belgique, the Rwandan embassy in Belgium, Ibuka or Jambo ABSL – approximately 600 online posts published between 2018 and 2022, representing a total of 25 websites and 23 social media accounts (Twitter, Facebook and YouTube). Diasporas have long been active in digital spaces (Brinkerhoff 2009), and an increasing number of studies focus on their online mobilisation. Considering the fact that online spaces are likely to attract younger diasporans (Leurs

2015), online data collection is a good complement to onsite observation and to biographic interviews for studying intergenerational patterns. Thus, rather than comparing online data to information gathered through observation and interviews, online data has been used to complement and enrich it.

In order to analyse this diverse material, I have used a discursive method, aiming at uncovering themes, meanings and issues emerging when speaking about intergenerational transmission of memories in the diaspora. Broadly speaking, the analysis, therefore, uses interpretive theorising and meaning-making (Theriot 1990) as a way to make sense of the collected data. On the basis of this data, the next section explores the multiple processes through which second-generation members of the Rwandan diaspora in Belgium constitute their own memories of Rwanda's violent past.

## Entangled processes of memory transmission

In diaspora settings, multiple actors are involved in the transmission of conflict memories, such as diaspora organisations, home country governments, relatives and friends (Lacroix and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2013). It also involves institutions and public opinions in host societies, like newspapers, school manuals, courts and human rights organisations. When these different actors propose and disseminate diverging narratives of the past, processes of memory transmission become extremely complicated. In the case of the Rwandan diaspora in Belgium, it is possible to roughly divide processes of memory transmission into two broad categories: on the one hand, public memory transmission processes and narratives, usually organised and/or supported by the Rwandan and Belgian governments and by various non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and on the other hand, personal and informal memory transmission processes occurring through conversations with friends, family and acquaintances, and also through visual culture, books, internet and/or social media.

### *Public memorialisations of the Rwandan past*

Rather unsurprisingly, considering the extreme severity of the 1994 genocide, most official memorialisation initiatives regarding the Rwandan past focus on the genocide and tend to silence episodes of violence that occurred either before or in its direct aftermath. Both diaspora organisations active in Belgium and the Rwandan government have taken an active role in these processes. Maintaining and passing on genocide memories is generally done through relatively conventional repertoires of action, such as political meetings, commemoration events and ceremonies, usually organised every year in April, to mark the time when the genocide started. Events sponsored by the Rwandan government and diaspora organisations related to it

disseminate highly standardised memories of the genocide, for instance equating the terms survivors and Tutsi. Harsh condemnations of critics of the Rwandan government, accusing them of being "genocide *négationnistes*" or "*divisionistes*", are repeated. This alienates diasporans of Hutu or mixed descent because such events disseminate a vision of the past that is not echoed in their own family stories, and/or that excludes them: "It is only the Tutsi who can mourn their dead during these commemorations. But many Hutu died too, and some of us come from mixed families, and we don't feel welcome" (Éric, 24). In parallel, opponents to the Rwandan government organise their own unofficial events, during which they promote alternative memories and narratives on the genocide.[5] As a result, these opposite commemorations of the genocide tend to maintain and feed pre-existing identities and divisions between diasporic Rwandans (Orjuela 2020b).

Interestingly, diaspora organisations as well as the Rwandan government actively try to harness diasporic youth during these events. However, many young diasporans find them too formal and divisive, and prefer to promote more creative types of memorialisation, for instance arts-based (Diaspora Rwanda Belgique 2020). This is what Yves (20), a student at the university in Louvain-La-Neuve, explains: "They are repeating the same thing over and over. It is important to remember, but there are other ways to do so, for instance through theatre, poetry or music". And, indeed, according to my observations, most participants in official genocide commemorations are middle-aged or elderly, and none but one of the Rwandan Tutsi youth I spoke with had ever attended these events, except as toddlers or kids with their parents.

In parallel, as representing both the former colonial power and the host country, Belgian authorities and NGOs play a crucial role in how Rwanda's past is understood and remembered by young diasporans. Belgian officials and elected politicians regularly attend genocide commemorations held in Kigali, and they have recognised Belgium's responsibility in the genocide (Georis 2019). Their narratives, however, are sometimes at odds with the memories foregrounded by the Rwandan government (e.g. Broulard 2020), which are themselves highly contested within Rwanda (Ibreck 2012). Thus, people living in Belgium, and particularly second-generation Rwandans, are exposed to different official narratives about Rwanda's past. This leads some of them to view any discussion on Rwanda's past with suspicion:

> These discussions are all very political, so I am listening from far away, because there are too many issues, and it gives me a headache to think about it. You never know if anyone here in Belgium, or even in Rwanda, is telling the truth about what happened [during the genocide], there is always some hidden purpose. (Alice, 28)

One characteristic of Belgium's approach to the genocide is also to uphold its Universal Jurisdiction Law, passed in 1993. This law allows anyone to bring war crime charges before Belgian courts, and has been used to prosecute alleged *génocidaires*. The stress put on a punitive (rather than reconciliatory) approach to the genocide is supported by many Belgian civil society organisations too. However, most of these organisations, such as the Centre d'Action Laïque (2021), do not have any direct link to the Rwandan diaspora, thereby generating suspicion regarding their motives (Éric, 24; Pierre, 23).

The way in which the past is framed in host societies has a strong effect on how the conflict is remembered. In the case of the Rwandan diaspora in Belgium, it tends to foreground an ethnic reading of the genocide, which allocates guilt and innocence to individuals, depending on their ethnicity: "People here, at least those who have heard about the genocide, they can only think about Hutu and Tutsi", said Pierre (23). In the Belgian society at large, and despite the presence of Rwandans whose accounts of the genocide point at other factors such as land scarcity, poverty or corruption, the genocide is understood as primarily caused by ethnic divisions. Narratives stressing the importance of ethnicity for understanding Rwanda's past tend to veil the complexity of individual experiences and memories of the genocide, and to put more weight on certain memories and memorialisation initiatives at the expense of others.[6] Most of my research participants blamed this limited understanding on the fact that the history of the genocide is either absent from school curricula, or only studied in passing, alongside other genocides, such as the genocide of the Jews or of the Armenians (Marie, 27; Éric, 24; Yves, 20; Camille, 27; Sandrine, 27; Stéphanie, 29).

What is important here is that the actors engaged in public memorialisation activities regarding Rwanda's past do not necessarily transmit the same narratives and memories, especially about the genocide, or frame it in similar ways. Also, they do not always engage with second generations like with the first. For instance, older diaspora organisations often try to adapt their communication to reach out to youth, as second generations prefer to use social media and are not necessarily fluent in Kinyarwanda (an African language of the Bantu family spoken in Rwanda) (Alice, 28). However, instead of joining these old organisations, many Rwandan diasporic youths prefer loose discussion groups on WhatsApp or other social media apps, and/or organisations whose main focus is not necessarily the genocide, or even Rwanda itself.[7] These organisations' discourses, agendas and practices only partly coincide with that of the older diaspora organisations, even where genocide memories are concerned. If many stress the importance of remembering Rwanda's past, and of mourning the genocide's victims, they do so through alternative and creative memorialisation initiatives using art, digital media or training programmes.[8] In particular, as a space where diaspora activism can be initiated and maintained, but also

where contestation can arise through alternative narratives on the past (Chernobrov and Wilmers 2020), the internet is one of the main terrains of Rwandan diaspora youth's activism. It allows for the dissemination of different framings of the genocide and for the contestation of the hegemonic narratives promoted during official commemoration events. Éric (24) explains: "We have restricted discussion groups on Facebook and on WhatsApp, where we can discuss more openly, and be more critical of all these official events and discourses". In that sense, there tends to be a generational disconnect both in terms of means of communication and information dissemination (formal organisations vs informal discussions and creative initiatives, notably on social media) and in terms of content (focus on official narratives on the genocide vs plurality of narratives).

### *Personal memory transmission processes*

Besides these collective and more or less formalised initiatives and activities, memory transmission happens informally too, as, for instance, during conversations with friends and family (Halbwachs 1992). The memories of first-generation members, those who have survived or fled the genocide and/or the violence that preceded or followed it, are a mix of direct and indirect memories, that is a mix between what they have themselves lived or witnessed and the stories that they have heard or read from a great variety of sources, such as family, friends, journalists or public authorities:

> When my mother speaks about what happened during the genocide, it is always a mix of so many different things, what she has seen, witnessed, but also what she has heard, from family members, neighbours and also on the radio or on television. It can also be what she remembers reading in the newspaper, or hearing some politicians say, and so on. It is a bit like a mosaic of a tonne of different things. (Pierre, 23)

Subsequent generations are in a different situation because they do not have direct memories of the violence that they can complement or map against stories disseminated through other channels (Pickering and Keightley 2013). Therefore, they sometimes find it difficult to make sense of the multiple and even contradictory memories and narratives. Older diaspora members are often reticent to speak about what happened, and when they do, it is often to refer to very specific events or people:

> Within Rwandan families, the genocide is still a taboo subject, so it is not necessarily mentioned. My parents' generation don't speak much about it, because of course when they do it brings back painful memories. … And when they speak about it, they mention this and that name, this and that place, and I can't understand a thing. Now that I have visited Rwanda, I am starting to understand better, but when I was younger, I could not relate at all to what they were saying. (Sandrine, 27)

As a result, several research participants explained that they had done "their own research" on Rwanda's past, and more specifically on the genocide (Alice, 28; Camille, 27; Sandrine, 27; Stéphanie, 29), and stressed how difficult they had found it: "We don't know what to read, whom to ask, whom to trust. So what I know [about the genocide] is a combination of family stories, and research I did myself on the internet" (Stéphanie, 29).

The often traumatic nature of the memories that are passed on renders memory transmission within families particularly complicated. Several research participants explained how distressed their parents were when talking about the genocide, and how the annual commemorations triggered strong emotional reactions for their parents, and also for them:

> After seeing my mother cry times and times again, one day I asked her "why are you crying?", and then she began to tell me. When I was little, I cried with her. … Today, all these stories, it creates an atmosphere that I don't like. It makes me sad, it makes me feel emotions that I don't want to feel. (Alice, 28)

For first generations, the challenge is therefore to pass on these memories, without creating trauma for their children, and without passing on their pain (Chernobrov and Wilmers 2020; Kidron 2009). Some second-generation diasporans fear as well that if their parents directly pass on their memories, it will lead to a reproduction of the conflict in the diaspora:

> It is really not ideal to sit with our parents and to speak with them about that history … . Their wounds are still open, they have been wounded, and thus they are still full of anger and of a conflict that dates back 20 years. What kind of history are they going to transmit to us? They will just pass on their anger. (Stéphane, BePax 2020a)

However, as Schwab (2010, 14) explains, even if close relatives and friends avoid speaking about the past, processes of unwitting or reluctant transmission happen, through silences, emotions, traumas, and so on. This is what a second-generation woman describes: "Transmission occurs, whether you want it or not. Whether you speak about the past, explicitly, or implicitly. … What is unspoken will influence the child, whether we want it or not" (Sophie, BePax 2020a). For many genocide survivors, what happened is unspeakable, which explains why the family environment is not a space where genocide memories are easily transmitted: "Our generation is in denial. We always speak about "the events", we don't name what happened" (Caroline, BePax 2020a). In Hutu families, guilt can also explain why the genocide is not much talked about, even if they were in no way responsible for the massacres:

> For my parents but also for me and my brothers and sisters, this is a very delicate subject. Everyone sees us as perpetrators, even if my family has not participated in the genocide, and even if they tried to help [the Tutsi] as they could. But this label of perpetrator is very heavy to carry, it is like a very heavy suitcase

> that we have to carry around, everywhere we go. So we prefer not to talk too much about all this. (Éric, 24)

With the passing of time, nuanced accounts of the genocide, and of the help that some Hutu tried to provide to the Tutsi, seem to be less mentioned and even forgotten (Marie, 27; Éric, 24). For second-generation Hutu, this creates difficulties not just with remembering and commemorating what happened, but also with their own identities, as Hutu, as Rwandan, but also as Belgian (Kuradusenge-McLeod 2018, 436). This sometimes leads Hutu families not to deny the existence of the genocide, but to place it within a broader narrative, where their own potential victimhood can be recognised too. In these cases, family memories put the stress on the violence that occurred before and after the genocide:

> My grandmother does not speak about the genocide as a separate event, she speaks about the war. … Because she saw the army come and kill her son, and she saw Kagame's army kill so many other people, she says that it was a war, during which everybody has lost somebody. … So for me what happened is war-genocide-war. Everybody is interested in what happened during the genocide, because it was the most scary and the most violent period. But what happened before, and what happened after, when Kagame went in the refugee camps in Congo to kill Hutu refugees there, is important too. (Camille, 27)

Regardless of the specific family history, all the families of the people I spoke with organised their own private ceremonies and/or rituals each year in April to mourn their dead. Even for second-generation diasporans, the month of April is not like any other, it is dedicated to contemplation and moderation: "Even here in Belgium in April I know no Rwandan who will go on holidays. I have a friend, second generation, who was planning to marry in April, but she had to postpone. You just don't party in April" (Stéphanie, 29).

Sometimes, tensions complicate intergenerational memory transmission, for instance the idea that second generations cannot really own these memories because Rwanda is not really their home. One first-generation mother says: "Some parents are reluctant to speak about what happened because they feel that their children are more European than Rwandan" (Claire, BePax 2020a). In addition, some second-generation diasporans have trouble relating to these memories: "I don't relate to the identity of survivor. My parents and my brothers do, and I understand because they have experienced the genocide and have had to flee, but it is not my case" (Sandrine, 27). Another research participant explained: "I know these horrors happened, but I cannot feel what they [my parents] feel, and I cannot really understand either, because it is completely out of touch with my own experience" (Yves, 20). The overall result of these complex and entangled processes of memory transmission is a maintenance of some genocide-related memories and identities, while others are discarded or slowly fade. In parallel, some

actors, both within families and diaspora organisations, continue to promote interpretations of what happened that differ from official ones. Consequently, and as we will explore in the next section, diasporic divisions built on conflict memories are not only maintained, but also reinterpreted and reframed.

## Memory reframing and rearticulation

How do all these entangled processes of memory transmission help us explain whether, and if yes how, genocide memories are rearticulated in the diaspora by subsequent generations? The collected empirical data demonstrates that: (1) genocide memories are central in second-generation Rwandan's identities, sometimes leading to a maintenance of internal diasporic cleavages; (2) the transmission of these memories structures the diasporans' everyday lives and practices, thereby contributing to "conflict transportation" processes; and (3) at the same time, these memories are also reframed, reassessed and rearticulated in relation to the context in Belgium, leading to "conflict autonomisation" processes. Let's explore these three points in turn.

First, genocide memories play a central role in the identity of all the young diasporans with whom I spoke. Several research participants underscored how their own lives are structured by the genocide, although they were not born at the time:

> The genocide has determined who I am, because I was born right after, and I was named after my uncle who was killed at that time, and I was raised hearing all these horrible stories … . I feel completely tied to the terrifying history of Rwanda. (Camille, 27)

> It is by learning what happened to my family during the genocide that I understood many things not only about my family, but also about myself. For instance, people say that I am really ambitious, but they don't understand that I don't want to waste any opportunity, because we came so close to be killed, so many times. These stories remind me that I have to make the most of my life. (Sandrine, 27)

In some cases, the research participants looked for explanations when they realised that their families did not resemble those of other children in Belgium: "My family does not look like others', so I had to look for information in order to understand why, why I don't have a grandfather, why I don't have any family left" (Marie, 27). In order to answer these questions, second-generation diasporans look for information on their origins, on what happened in their home country, on what role their parents or grandparents played during the genocide and/or before and after. In that sense, receiving information about the past helps answer key identity questions, from one's perspective, but also from the perspective of the host society (see also Müller-

Suleymanova 2023b). A second-generation woman describes the role stories about Rwandan's past play in resolving tensions between different aspects of her identity:

> It is not that we are Rwandan or we are Belgian. This is difficult to understand for the others. … From our parents' perspective we are more Belgian than African or Rwandan … , and from the perspective of the environment we live in, we are not Belgian. … For us it is no problem receiving this information [about the past], … it is always good to have, in order not to find ourselves with identities full of question marks, it is going to help us build ourselves, one way or another. (Second-generation woman 1; BePax 2020a)

In addition, links between the genocide and second-generation Rwandans can be strengthened by identity assignment processes occurring in Belgium, notably via the question "where are you from?". This question, usually asked of those who are perceived as being "from elsewhere", can trigger traumatic memories of the genocide, and of the violence that occurred before and after, because answering this question often leads to a discussion on the genocide, and on ethnicity: "When I say that my family comes from Rwanda, the only question that I will be asked is whether I am Tutsi or Hutu" (Camille, 27). This can lead to a process of identity (re)discovery through the collection of genocide-related memories, which can be polarised and divisive, in turn leading to a reproduction of cleavages in the diaspora.[9]

This explains the second role played by the transmission of memories of Rwanda's past in second generations' lives, that of structuring their everyday lives and practices. Indeed, most research participants reproduce, sometimes unwittingly, the ethnic and/or political cleavages inherited from Rwanda's past. This can manifest in avoiding friendship with "people of the other ethnic group" (Marie, 27), in being cautious in what they say to whom (Camille, 27; Stéphanie, 29), and in favouring endogamy, that is marrying people who share the same ethnicity and/or political views:

> Mixed [Tutsi-Hutu] marriages are always very complicated. I went to one mixed marriage, and the pastor refused to hold the hand of the husband … . And when children are born from mixed marriages, they are often not treated the same way. For instance, a grandmother might consider that this grandchild is the child of a killer, so she won't treat him like the others. (Stéphanie, 29)

There is even a feeling among the people I spoke with that second-generation diasporans are more willing to reproduce these cleavages than their elders: "Some youth are more radical than older people who are more nuanced, maybe because they have seen so many things' (Camille, 27). The radicality expressed by some youths seems related to the fact that they feel authorised to speak more openly about the genocide:

> Those who know what they are talking about are my parents' generations, and those before them. But the youths here talk a lot about what happened, it looks

> like it is more important to them, whereas my parents' generation doesn't talk much about the past. (Sandrine, 27)

Open conflicts between organisations representing different ethnic groups and/or different political views are also quite common. For instance, diaspora organisations such as Ibuka (close to the Rwandan government) and Jambo (opposed to it) frequently clash, demonstrating the continued relevance of these divisions in the diasporic setting.[10] In addition to instances of physical tension between different political and/or ethnic groups (Éric, 24; Yves, 20), this generates a climate conducive to suspicion and even paranoia. Stories on potential cases of "ethnic fraud" (usually a Hutu pretending to be Tutsi) and on "agents of the other group" monitoring diasporic activities abound (Éric, 24; Yves, 20; Camille, 27; Pierre, 23; Stéphanie, 29). These patterns are indicative of "conflict transportation" processes, whereby divisions inherited from the conflict and genocide period are reproduced and performed in diaspora settings (see also Voytiv 2023).

Finally, a third process of memory reframing and rearticulation is at play under the influence of the context in Belgium. Although they tend to reproduce cleavages and divisions inherited from the genocide, second-generation diasporans seem to read genocide memories primarily through the prism of their lived experiences in Belgium. This is visible in the way they link the racism they face in Belgium to the history of colonialism, which is itself conveyed for understanding the genocide. In that sense, the experience of racism and discrimination in Belgium is structuring for people originating from the Great Lakes region (see also Demart et al. 2017). This is what an NGO worker explains:

> These tensions [within the Rwandan diaspora] inscribe themselves in a Belgian context that is characterised by a deep structural racism that is connected to the Belgian colonial past in central Africa, with important differences between young and old generations. Among young generations, political issues related to the genocide of the Tutsi and to the current situation in Rwanda are often paired with a form of militancy against structural racism and the paternalism of white traditional institutions: who is legitimate to talk about what? who speaks in the name of whom? who is funded to do it, and above all to say what? (Private correspondence, worker in a Belgian anti-discrimination NGO, 2020)

In a striking example of "past-presencing" (Macdonald 2013), second-generation diasporans use genocide memories for understanding their own lives in Belgium: "Understanding colonisation helps to understand systemic issues related to racism in Belgium, and it helps [in] realising that the life of a Black person does not have the same value [as] others'" (Camille, 27). Similarly, for several research participants, the need to remember and condemn the genocide and the need to lead an anti-colonial struggle go hand-in-

hand. To them, the Hutu/Tutsi division is a product of colonisation (Yves, 20), and so is the genocide:

> Belgian colonisation was done in a way as to reproduce the communal tensions that exist in Belgium. But there were no divisions similar to the Flemish and Walloons when Belgium arrived in Rwanda. And Belgians brought with them these tensions, they created these divisions, and this has led to what happened in 1994. So to me, there is no doubt that colonisation is one of the major explanations for the genocide. (Stéphanie, 29)

Some second-generation diasporans are also angry at their parents' generation for focusing almost exclusively on the genocide, and for leaving them to deal alone with the fight against racism and colonialism (Yves, 20; Pierre, 23). In effect, second generations seem to be decentring genocide memories by shifting the target of memory and activism work from the genocide to colonisation in general:

> Everything is connected, the racism and the difficulties that we are facing here, the divisions within the Rwandan diaspora, the horrors that happened in Rwanda, and also the problems that Africa is still facing today. And the link between all that is colonialism. (Yves, 20)

One consequence of this shift is an acute awareness of common colonial experiences, but also of (potential) links and solidarities with other diasporas from the Great Lakes region, especially the Burundian and Congolese diasporas.[11] Living in the diaspora multiplies opportunities for contact with groups with similar experiences of violence and conflict. This leads to processes of cross-referencing and of borrowing, putting the stress on common experiences of suffering and of decolonisation struggles (Mémoire Coloniale 2020b): "Whenever I organise something, I am trying to collaborate with youth from the Burundian and Congolese diasporas. I think it is important, considering our common past, our common suffering" (Éric, 24). The fact that the multiple conflicts experienced by the Great Lakes region can be explained primarily by colonisation is repeated frequently (Mémoire Coloniale 2020a). In fact, as Turner explains, memories related to colonisation are often used by diasporas from the Great Lakes region as an analysis grid for reading the past and the contemporary situation in Belgium, for instance for explaining discrimination patterns (2007, 76). And because "one of the most violent characteristics of colonisation is memory erasure" (Télévision LAVD-Congo-Panorama of Africa 2020), remembering the genocide and why it has occurred is seen as an anti-colonial duty in itself:

> We cannot let Belgium forget about their responsibility, about the fact that they are responsible for the genocide and all the other massacres. So it is important to remember, to pass on these memories, and even to shout them, so that Belgium doesn't forget either. (Pierre, 23)

As a result, memories of Rwanda's violent past are reframed, rearticulated and repurposed by the subsequent generations. In particular, second-generation diasporans seem to mobilise more around broader issues and causes than the first generations who focus almost exclusively on the genocide. The engagement of second-generation diasporans is often characterised by cosmopolitanism, but also by a stress on universal values, and by links with other struggles. It also leads to mobilisation and awareness-raising activities linking youths of different national origins, and not necessarily organised along national and/or ethnic lines. These "conflict autonomisation" patterns can be explained by the fact that some second-generation members of the Rwandan diaspora in Belgium read and interpret memories of Rwanda's violent past through the prism of the challenges they currently face, thereby granting them a new meaning and purpose.

## Conclusion

The case of the Rwandan diaspora in Belgium illustrates and confirms insights from the existing literature, notably regarding the evolution of cultural memories with time and context (Assmann 1995), the role played by multiple actors in intergenerational memory transmission and the importance of social frameworks in individual and collective memories (Halbwachs 1992), the importance of horizontal and vertical transmission (Pickering and Keightley 2013) and the phenomenon of past-presencing (Macdonald 2013). However, focusing on this empirical case also highlights the striking complexity of memory transmission processes in diasporic settings. Here, in addition to family, friends, the media, schools and the Belgian government, other actors such as the Rwandan government, the concerned (and divided) diaspora group and its organisations, and other diaspora groups sharing the same colonial experience, all play a role in how memory is transmitted and reframed.

Moreover, the collected data shows how the intergenerational transmission of genocide memories shapes the mobilisation of second-generation diasporans, and largely explains conflict transportation patterns in Belgium. Indeed, the sometimes conscious, sometimes unwitting reproduction of cleavages in the diaspora from one generation to the next is tightly related to memory transmission processes. Memory transmission does not just constitute the diaspora, it also determines its patterns of mobilisation and of belonging in the host society, one generation after another (see also Baser and Toivanen 2023).

In addition, this study shows how generational change can induce a shift in the temporality of memories: an event that is key and pivotal for one generation can become one among others, crucial but not necessarily central, for the next generation. While the genocide constitutes the centre of gravity of

most first generations' memories, some second-generation diasporans seem to consider Rwanda's history as "a place of constant suffering" (Éric, 24). As opposed to first-generation diasporans, second generations primarily look at the genocide through a long-term perspective, a *temps long* interpreting the genocide as one (terrifying) episode in the much longer experience of colonialism. This perspective is reinforced by the fact that some second-generations interpret the genocide through their own experience of racism and discrimination in Belgium, which they explain by colonialism too.

We can therefore observe a reframing of issues related to Rwanda's past, and a reorganisation and rethinking of diaspora cleavages and/or solidarities, from one generation to the next. New ways of engaging with memories of violence emerge, for instance through a shift towards anti-colonial struggles and more creative forms of activism through art or online mobilisation. Such conflict autonomisation patterns can be explained by the need to *translate* memories of a painful past so that they can make sense and resonate in the host country. Younger generations are instrumental in this shift, as they reframe these memories for themselves, for the wider public, and for other diasporas with similar experiences and positionalities. But instead of trapping them in the past or setting them apart from the rest of the society, such initiatives demonstrate the capacity of second-generation diasporans to exercise an active citizenship in the "here and now", as opposed to the "there and then" in which many first-generation diasporans seem to remain.

## Notes

1. A diasporan is a member of a diaspora.
2. I use the term "second generation" in reference to the Rwandan genocide, not to Rwandan migration to Belgium in general, which predates the genocide by several decades (O'Dubhghaill 2019). The "second generation", therefore, includes those whose parents have directly experienced the genocide and/or migrated from Rwanda at the beginning of the genocide or during the few years of mass violence that preceeded and followed it. Two research participants were babies when their parents left Rwanda in 1994 and do not have a direct conscious memory of the genocide, which does not mean that it hasn"t deeply affected them.
3. See https://tenk.fi/sites/default/files/2021-01/Ethical_review_in_human_sciences_2020.pdf Following the TENK Guidelines, the research did not meet the requirements for approval from an independent ethics committee (see TENK Guidelines, pp.19-20).
4. BePax is a Belgian civic and social organisation whose mission is to raise awareness around issues of racism and discrimination.
5. See, for instance, the organisation Jambo, which is seen as one of the main opponents to Rwandan President Paul Kagame's government in the diaspora, and which defends the idea that the Hutu have been victims of genocide too in the 1990s: https://www.jamboasbl.com (last accessed 30 June 2022).

6. Academic explanations for the genocide are more diverse and do not exclusively focus on the ethnic factor, although they still tend to be monocausal (for a detailed discussion of scholarly debates, see Uvin 2001).
7. See, for example, the websites of Mémoire Coloniale (https://www.memoirecoloniale.be) and of the Centre Féministe de réflexion et d'action sur le racisme anti-Noir·e·s (https://www.bamko.org) (both, last accessed 30 June 2022).
8. See, for instance, the Debout.Be, a street art project aiming at commemorating the victims of the genocide in Rwanda (https://africalia.be/fr/Nouvelles-Agenda/Debout-Be-du-street-art-en-memoire-des-victimes-du-genocide-au-Rwanda?lang=fr, last accessed 30 June 2022). See also the organisation Muyira, Arts et Mémoire (https://www.muyira.be, last accessed 30 June 2022).
9. For first-generation diasporans, processes of identity assignment linking conflict memories and questions of identity can be externally imposed too, since asylum application processes often involve a narration of violent memories. In other words, legal processes in host countries formally link conflict memories to identity recognition and to legal status for the first generations.
10. Conflicts around genocide commemorations are particularly frequent: see, for instance, https://www.ibuka.be/2022/05/19/ibuka-m-justice-belgique-demande-linterdiction-dacces-a-jambo-asbl-aux-steles-erigees-en-belgique-a-la-memoire-des-victimes-du-genocide-contre-les-tutsi-au-rwanda-en-1994/ (last accessed 30 June 2022).
11. The Belgian Congo (now DRC), as well as Rwanda and Burundi, were part of the Belgian colonial empire.

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