

**READING MONUMENTS: THE POLITICS AND POETICS OF
MEMORY IN POSTWAR NORTHERN UGANDA**

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Abstract

This project examines ways in which postwar northern Uganda has been reimagined by the agency of public memorials on the one hand, and alternative, private memorialization on the other. It studies selected sites of mass violence where the district local governments, the central government and non-governmental organizations are seen as prime authors. While public memorials emphasize spectacular events of war and the grand narratives of financiers and state agencies, private memorials seem to foreground micro experiences of individuals in everyday life. An engagement with memory theories of remembering and forgetting interrogate the existential relevance of war memorials at the different sites that they occupy. These monuments have become rhetorical spaces that give presences and visibilities to selected voices while systematically eclipsing the everyday narratives of common people. This project claims that a more comprehensive and representational character of the war is embedded in lived experiences in villages, markets, schools, gardens, and internally displaced people's camps. Because war monuments are material objects around which the history of war is contained the project engages literary theories of New Criticism and Historicism to interrogate the extent to which their textuality, materiality, and artistry illuminate phenomenological connections between literature and material arts. The politics and poetics of memory in postwar northern Uganda conceptually espouse the ambivalences between memory as culture, and also memory as politics. Against the dominant presence of the state and NGOs during anniversaries and commemorations, "ordinary" people have invented local technologies of memory through songs, drama, dance, and speech utterances, in attempt to translate, reinterpret, and reassert their agency in memorial spaces dominated by power holders. In this way, war is presented as a multifarious experience whose memory script cannot generically be limited to tragedy, loss, and pain only. In war there are also possibilities of progress, opportunity, and advancement. And the way war is remembered has a bearing on transitional processes. Critical, is how war memorials through the agency of monuments, mnemonics, songs, and other artifacts confront what appears to be crises of memory in northern Uganda. Using ethnographic study of memorial sites and interviews with former war actors the project interrogates the kinds of agency that monuments produce in their surroundings and the kind of relations that have been created through different modes of memorialization.