

8



PART EIGHT

DISARMING VIOLENCE: A RESTORYING OF EAST AFRICAN HISTORIES THROUGH CREATIVE ACTION AND CURATORIAL CARE

Dr. Kara A. Blackmore

Images courtesy of Borderlands Art and the artists



"The War Museum" by Elsadiq Janka, Khartoum, Sudan 2019. Multiple exposure photography and digital collage. Photo: Elsadiq Janka and Borderlands Art.

INTRODUCTION

This case study looks at curatorial practice as a process of research and exhibition making that can provide insights into healing processes in East Africa. It takes references from artistic practices spanning the geographies along the Nile River. Curatorial practice is a unique form of cultural work that can shift geographies and contexts yet hold forth solidarities and ethics. The curator is an intermediary who gathers in, who convenes, who installs infrastructures of care. Their role is distinctly public, bringing together the artist and the audience, further extending the network beyond the workshop format and collaboration with "participants." Curators have increasingly become part of humanitarian and NGO

networks as narrative agents, asked to interpret traumatic testimonies for public consumption. We curators are fully enmeshed in a kind of cultural organizing that sits at the intersection of activism and art.

Negotiating between the visceral and the forensic, there is a *need* to decenter instrumental violence, especially when it focuses on suffering others or bodies in pain. Artists not only disarm violence; they are also able to imagine a world otherwise. In this text I reflect on three different strategies:

1. Liberation and agency
2. Intimacy and collective space
3. Repairing through nature and neuroplasticity

The artworks that come from these practices offer the possibility to speculate in places where silence and forgetting have taken hold. The presentation of artworks that make such offerings is often ritualistic, set out in different series

or practices, many of which seek out an aliveness in hostile environments. In the examples discussed here, there is not an absence of violence but rather a way to find moments to soothe and subvert the violence. These artists are also looking at forms of healing that go beyond the body, into notions of citizenship for the new nation of South Sudan or Sudanese people during the revolution, collectivity for queer people facing oppression, and repairing the land in Ghana and Uganda.

Curating this type of work constitutes an interventionist practice. It deploys a certain set of tools to create proximities between artworks and audiences. At best, the curatorial foregrounds a position within a designated context. Connecting artists' work with curatorial approaches illuminates a series of responses to the question "What kind of caring is involved in storytelling, and in what way is this care also a cure, a remedy, a form of healing?" (Söderbäck 2024, p. 96).

Creative approaches to arts-based healing often ask what happens when we externalize, emote, or perform as a mechanism of transition. The evidence provided in this text focuses on creative work in the forms of photography, printmaking, papermaking, and exhibition making. Elsadig Janka, Piloya Irene, Gloria Kiconco, and the Likikiri Collective are cited as exemplifying important registers to investigate avenues for healing. This essay begins by looking at different processes of making that offer narrative beginnings. Each example offers a potential path to healing.

RE STORYING

Restorying is a conceptual and practical starting point for the strategies of healing presented here. The process of restorying is a challenge to dominant narratives. It offers both a form of redress to representational wounds and an avenue for new narrative approaches (Blackmore and Okwenji 2021). The South Sudanese Likikiri Collective uses story circles as a unique form of collective work to create new narratives. The collective organizes public and shared spaces for



"The Translucent Man" (close up) by Gloria Kiconco, 2025. Sculptural zine with lubugo barkcloth and vellum paper, typewriter and printer inks. Photo: Gloria Kiconco and Borderlands Art.

artists to link creative, cultural, and transgressive methodologies, such as through documenting oral histories, the making of embroidered Milaya textiles, dramatizations of historical events, and cartooning. This type of restorying approaches healing as a space of in-between, looking at the intermediary place between dialogue, creation, and collective action. In gathering groups of creatives, they offer small scale and affective paths to healing that are carved through the arts.

This approach also draws on Saidiya Hartman's concept of critical fabulation, which involves crafting narratives that combine historical and archival research, critical theory, and imaginative storytelling to fill in gaps in the historical record, particularly when it comes to histories of marginalized people. Through fabulation across dramatic, comedic, and symbolic registers, there is a new narrative that emerges and an unsettling of the past in the present. Articulating experiences as active, creative and liberated opens an alternative narrative pathway to the mediatized framing of the people as victims. By aligning their contemporary art and research processes with acts of enlivening heritage, the Likikiri Collective addresses the structural roots of distress and engages the problematics of colonial, humanitarian, and Sudanese ways of characterizing cultures in today's South Sudan.

FABULATION FROM THE FRONT LINES

Using restorying and fabulation aimed at reframing and creating new narratives of violent pasts is a dynamic process. Jessica Horn describes this when she says that "healing must be transformative both in the intimacy of caring relationships and in the pursuit of social justice" (AFSC Assembly research study 2026). Elsadig Janka—a Sudanese photographer, activist, and filmmaker—seizes power through his work and produces inspiring commentary on ritual, belonging, and resistance. His series *The Intermingled* reflects his time on the front lines of the Sudanese Revolution in Khartoum. Through multiple exposure and digital

"The inter-subjectivity of healing cannot be understated. We must be wary of the symbolic harm that can undermine processes of liberation."

collage, a layered documentation of young Sudanese seeking a more just condition is produced. There are no individual heroes; rather the series of artworks shows agency and action that are collective and immersive.

In this series Janka imagines a new Sudan that is liberated. This type of imagination requires a certain kind of elasticity with regard to time. While situated mostly in Sudan in 2019, it traverses different eras of repression, times when artists could not occupy the streets or create public works of art. It also tends to a gendered imagination, positioning women as caretakers of the revolution. In parts of the series, the Sudanese activist Alaa Salah can be seen leading the chants, sometimes elevated to stand on the billboard outside army headquarters. Her symbolism and the aesthetic of popular protest signals a moral mandate for action.

The images then memorialize the moment of liberated joy and imagination that forged political change. Healing in this instance, as we know from the violence committed against the protesters and the civil war that followed, comes not from the absence of violence but from the potential for an alternative future, a creative destiny. The works offer a nostalgia for times when people were able to create new moments for restorying, and reminiscing around the artworks offers a space to think beyond the ongoing newsfeeds, group chats, and headlines.

One image is even titled *The War Museum* as a gesture to freeze time and memorialize victories. Healing from the epistemic violence caused by political oppression requires a new imagination. The artworks are thus a prerequisite for something new. The freedom to present such works is the result of the ousting of Omar Al Bashir. This was done through collective action rather than legal means, ten years after a warrant for his arrest was issued by the International Criminal Court.

INTIMACIES OF THE UNSAYABLE

In contrast to hypervisible and large-scale collective action, Gloria Kiconco's practice is one of intimacy and imagination. She works with questions of community and love. In her artworks she builds a care infrastructure, one that tends to the historical and contemporary clash between traditional cultures of queerness and current criminalization of love. Sculptural zines are repositories of voice, printed on pages made of *lubugo*, Ugandan barkcloth. The artworks capture conversations with individuals who are navigating queerness, exile, and repair.

The techniques make the work feel multidimensional, moving between typewritten text, painted highlights, inked shadows, and the barkcloth canvas. There is also a fragmenting of the stories whereby the pages are made into individual prints that are pulled out and enlarged to feature one image and one text, offering a tender glimpse into a more complex unfolding. Articulating each zine in a different way is a metaphor for the ways in which queer Ugandans fold in, open up, enclose, and enmesh.

Each artwork holds the language of intimacy, revealing a soft and subtle way of responding to heartbreak. In some instances, this heartbreak is interpersonal; in others, it is society that has failed to notice their community. Throughout the series there is a negotiation of love that is poetically navigated between the self, the lover, and the community.

Kiconco's artistic practice resists a kind of oblivion in legislation and violence. They offer a quiet calling in, an intimate moment to embrace the individual. These are small-scale artworks, made in the tradition of zines, meant to be political, accessible, and founded in DIY approaches to storytelling. Showing this work in Uganda invites audiences to feel a sense of love and tenderness that are held in the communities that the artworks reflect.

NATURE AND THE ONGOING RESTORATION CYCLE

Janka's and Kiconco's works are positioned as collective work that speaks back to state-driven and religiously motivated violence. Piloya Irene pushes the boundary of restorying into a reparative practice that works directly with nature. She blends her own biography of displacement with that of trees that are being uprooted by urban change and deforestation. In her works Irene evokes experiences of being held by nature during her childhood in Northern Uganda. The artworks are symbolic of times when she was fleeing the Lord's Resistance Army rebels and her grandmother would lay down a *kikoyi* for them to sleep on in the bushes. In a bid to express these memories of familiar spaces, the tree bark is a symbol of protection and perseverance.

Irene prepares the barkcloth textiles and then offers them back to the forest in an act of reparative synergy. There is a restorative intimacy when working with *lubugo* and *kyenkyen*, East African and Ghanaian barkcloths. Like humans, trees also undergo transplant shock. The wind, sunlight, and decay add another layer of

"Two Bonnets on a Bedpost" by Gloria Kiconco. Sculptural Zine with *lubugo* barkcloth and vellum paper, typewriter and printer inks. Photo: Martin Kharumwa for Borderlands Art.





temporality, thus raising questions about what preservation truly means when time, nature, and memory are all in flux. Labor is employed as a creative device to enliven the bark and pay tribute to the loss of tradition and forests in Ghana and Uganda. Certain artworks use chemical reactions as a gesture to how humans and nature respond to rupture and displacement. Our brains are constantly adapting to new experiences and environments, and this can affect how we locate ourselves across time and place.

In this way, the artworks offer an opportunity for healing through neuroplasticity, the brain's capacity to undergo reorganization through the

"Raw" by Piloya Irene; Makindye, Uganda, 2023. Kyenken textile. Installation view, *Between the Trees* Photo: Martin Kharumwa for Borderlands Art.

establishment of novel connections over the course of an individual's lifespan. This work offers an insight into healing as a kind of treatment using chemicals and natural processes to dislodge the mind from a stuck place of trauma. It sees repair as transformation rather than a return to the past.

ECOSYSTEM—RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE ARTWORK AND THE PUBLIC

Displaying these artworks provides a curatorial infrastructure of care whereby the exhibition can act as witness. The audience is invited to participate in an intersubjective connection between the aims of liberation, love, and repair. Without overprescribing what is possible, the exhibition is a kind of offering, a directional gesture. When deploying arts for healing, we must be clear about the outcomes we want to foster, and we must hold audiences with the same support we would offer the artists and their artworks. This assumes that people entering the exhibition may have had traumatic experiences similar to those of the artists and the communities the artworks represent. It is thus important not to reproduce the violence or to re-create conditions of harm.

There is something to be observed in the imagination and tenderness that the artworks discussed here offer in restorying violent histories. They insist on agency, community, and connection. Following that lead, the curator is an accomplice, taking on the charge of presenting social, environmental, and political art in the public domain. We cannot reduce the curatorial to a mode of production. Rather, the curatorial, as a form of making, compels an alignment to a particular social and political position. The curator stages an intervention with specific provocations. We must also be accountable for this work, forging alliances and building new knowledge networks.

The curatorial is thus a work of creating space for feeling and thinking. Affect becomes an outlet for feelings and embodied sentiments and thus a path to

healing. While the nondiscursive sensory feeling conjured through an engagement with artworks does not itself constitute healing, it can be understood as an access point for those who are unable to narrate their experiences. The through line aims toward aliveness and storytelling. Sustaining a healing process requires a “tending to the dynamic relationships between personal agency and communal solidarity” (AFSC’s Assembly research study 2026).

The intersubjectivity of healing cannot be understated. We must be wary of the symbolic harm that can undermine processes of liberation. Fabulation infuses the journey with joy. Questions of harm are still looming, yet they meet a collective that is more fortified than the individual. The artworks and exhibition space hold such negotiations. The visual agents provide guides for circulation, inviting a passage beyond one’s own condition.

Acknowledgments

The text in this contribution is a result of long-term conversations and collaborations with Likikiri Collective, Elsadig Janka, Gloria Kiconco, and Piloya Irene. Some text is paraphrased from exhibition text that was coproduced with the artists. Special thanks to Helga Rainer for being a sounding board and constant collaborator in this work.

References

Blackmore, Kara, and Bathsheba Okwenje. “Repairing representational wounds: Artistic and curatorial approaches to transition after war.” *Critical Arts* 35, no. 4 (2021): 103–22.

Horn, Jessica. “The Creative as a Reservoir for Repair: Thinking through the Nexus of Arts in (East) African contexts.” In AFSC’s Assembly research study. *Arts and Culture for Healing in East Africa and Horn of Africa* (2026).

Söderbäck, Fanny. “Narration as a practice of care in the wake of violence: Adriana Cavarero’s narrative theory and Saidiya Hartman’s critical fabulation.” In Federica Castelli, Marco Piasentier, and Sara Raimondi, eds., “Bodies, voices, relations: Thinking with Adriana Cavarero.” Special issue, *Journal of Italian philosophy* 7 (2024): 88.



"The Bloods of Martyrs" by Elsadi Janka, 2019.
Multiple exposure photography and digital collage
Photo: Elsadi Janka and Borderlands Art.

