Memory as vulnerability: Reinhabiting sites of violence and the politics of triumphalist amnesia in Kenya’s war on terror

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Abstract
Rectification as the return of sites of violence to prior use is little studied even as governments often defiantly reconstruct such sites and urge citizens to visit them as a way to combat ‘terror’. Using the case study of the 2013 Westgate shopping mall attack in Kenya and the subsequent return of the site to prior use, the article reflects on the broader practices of erasure of violence from public space as a unique form of a memory–security nexus. The article reads amnesia and its effects through material and social practices of rectification – renovation, fortification, closure and reopening, and the experiences of survivors and non-survivors in reinhabiting these spaces. The ways in which violence is vacated from space and speech, and the ways in which its absence is encountered by diverse people, produce a rich transcript on memory and its entanglements with security agendas. They also reveal the deleterious effects of politicized ‘triumphalist amnesia’ enlisted as a counter-terror tool, including the emotional tax and public distrust arising from non-recognition when memory is equated with vulnerability and forgetting with defiance. Triumphalist amnesia might produce the opposite effect – a failure to root out violence and insecurity among those asked to confront it.

Keywords
Amnesia, counter-terrorism, Kenya, memory–security nexus, rectification, sites of violence

‘Westgate [attack] has been erased from the public imagination . . . The reopening of Westgate [mall] was a narrative of triumph. That we had won somehow.’
Patrick Gathara (News24, 2017)

Introduction
The question of what it means to reinhabit spaces of violence is not a new one. Yet most research and writing revolve around designated memorial sites, with little critical investigation of what it...
means to reinhabit non-designated sites of mass violence, which due to design or necessity slip back into prior use. These rectified sites – whether malls, schools or marketplaces – mix the mundane and extraordinary and, through the tension between amnesia and the symbolic and political charge they continue to exude, open up important questions about security and conflict transformation. This article investigates these questions in the context of a single, emblematic site of Al-Shabaab violence in Kenya returned to prior use – the Westgate shopping mall in Nairobi, Kenya. Through the lens of the case study, it explores how memory/amnesia is linked with security in Kenya’s ‘war on terror’, and the effects of this on processing violence and addressing its causes. The article thus brings into conversation literatures that rarely speak to each other in the area of ‘everyday international relations’– those on memory and security. Specifically, it explores the nature and ramifications of public amnesia where memory itself is reinscribed as vulnerability.

Heath-Kelly theorizes the terrorist bombsite as unique in exposing ‘the aporia at the heart of sovereignty’ (2016a: 7) and namely that its control over mortality is illusory and triggers a range of ‘retrospective security practices’. The intense efforts at architectural reconstruction are thus simultaneously attempts at ‘death effacement’ (2016a: 6) and erasure of vulnerability. And, as Mirgani (2017: 115) reminds us, ‘venues [of “terrorist” violence] are [often] defiantly reconstructed or injected with renewed fervour and people are encouraged to visit or revisit these spaces as a way to defy “terrorist ideologies”’. The article looks at this politics of effacement and defiance more closely, considering how it translates into material, spatial and social practices around reinhabiting and restructuring actual sites of violence and ‘visceral security failure’ (Heath-Kelly, 2015), and the effects of this in the realm of symbolic politics and commemoration. Though looking at a single case, the article places the case study within the wider remit of rectification and helps further specify, theorize and typologize rectification as a memory practice and a security technology of the state.

Placing Westgate in a wider context of other rectified sites in the country, the article argues that social and material practices around rectification – closure, reopening, reconstruction – produce important symbolic text and forms of memory labour, and their effects might counter intended aims. Specifically, the article looks at renovation and its text on ‘amnesia as triumphalism’, and fortification and its text on ‘memory as vulnerability’. As will be shown, renovation and the attendant complete removal of traces of violence brought on counter-narratives and counter-practice as people were invited inside to face the absence. The fortification of the Westgate mall in turn produced forms of insecurity and acts as its own reminder of violence and vulnerability through the sheer excess of measures.

The article reveals the deleterious effects of politicized triumphalist amnesia enlisted as a counter-terror tool, including the emotional tax, public distrust and disarticulation arising from the non-recognition, lack of reflection and investigation that result when memory is equated with vulnerability and forgetting with defiance. The article reflects on the profound call for ordinary citizens to reinhabit spaces of violence without confronting, recognizing and processing such violence on a collective level, as forgetting itself is equated with duty to prevail. Triumphalist amnesia might produce the opposite effect – a failure to root out violence.

The Westgate mall is a key case but is far from unique. The confrontation with the militant Salafi-jihadist group Al-Shabaab in Kenya and Somalia has over the past decade produced its own landscape of sites of violence, from hotels to schools, shopping malls to intersections. The confrontation does not simply encompass the spectacle of Al-Shabaab’s attacks but equally the violence of disappearance and detention in counter-terror measures. What joins all these instances is a public silence on the past. These sites were returned to prior use without mark or much ceremony after a period of closure and are spaces where people are asked to perform defiance by revisiting them as customers and reinhabiting them as employees.
Though informal and private forms of memory exist in the form of vigils, prayer groups, talks and even privately sponsored offsite memorials, the sites of violence themselves are not officially inscribed, publicly memorialized or investigated. The public silence around the Westgate attack plays into a longer history of silence on violence in Kenya. Yvonne Odhiambo Owuor, Kenya’s Caine Prize-winning author, describes the silence as ‘our national propensity to amnesia for “bad things”’ (cited in news24, 2017), what Muhoma and Nyairo (2011: 412) earlier called ‘dismemory’ of violence, referring to the initial ‘deafening eerie silence’ and prevarication over the 2007–2008 electoral violence in Kenya. The government preferred a ‘populist narrative of peace [. . .] simply denying the past’ (Maingi, 2020). An outspoken critic on memory politics, Patrick Gathara claims that, similarly, sites of Al-Shabaab attacks like ‘Westgate ha[ve] been erased from the public imagination’ (cited in news24, 2017). But while there is a longer political history to public amnesia, the anatomy of silence when it comes to terrorist attacks is also unique. The silence is explained in different ways, from political convenience, and the inconvenience of marking yet another site of attack, a testimony to a state’s inability to prevail (Heath-Kelly, 2016a), to the importance of writing a certain image of Kenya as an essentially peaceful country, ‘as the haven of peace’ in an otherwise turbulent region (Muhoma and Nyairo, 2011: 412).

In terms of methods, the article draws on qualitative methodology and on diverse sources, both primary and secondary, spanning observation, informal discussions, witness accounts and material and symbolic archives in the form of physical sites, memorial designs and informal commemoration both online and offline, video footage and transcripts of speeches. Great care has been taken to include people’s perspectives on reinhabiting spaces of violence. In terms of the latter, the author has taken the decision to work with already published testimonies to try and minimize negative impacts of retelling on survivors and to prevent retraumatization. Multiple people have been (sometimes repeatedly) interviewed to produce witness accounts of the Westgate siege, often printed in great detail in local and international press. The reopening of Westgate, and then annual commemorative occasions, have been other moments where multiple people have been approached to reflect on their plans to visit the space, or their experiences of visiting. This is a rich archive of reflection, mostly in local press, that has thus far not been used for analysis.

The article approaches the archive critically, with a clear view of the potential biases and limitations in the form of i) one-time accounts that might not capture evolving opinion and experience; ii) brief format that does not include full nuance and detail; iii) the political context favouring forgetting and ‘getting past this’; and iv) the focus on those present in the space, rather than those absent. Aware of these limitations, the author has assembled 46 separate accounts on reinhabiting, taking care to bring in voices of both those coming back and those refusing to do so, both survivors and those who were not in the mall at the time of the attack. The author also draws on the speeches of key political figures.

Additionally, original primary material for this article was gathered during a trip to Kenya in August 2018, when the author had the opportunity to visit the Westgate mall on a number of occasions as well as other informal memorial initiatives such as the Amani peace garden in the Karura forest. During this visit, the author also spoke informally with a representative of the Sakuma Twende Group who designed and financed the latter project. The author has also visited a number of other official and informal sites of memory of violence in Kenya to place the aforementioned sites in context, including the site of the 1998 Al-Qaeda bombings in Nairobi and the UN memorial to the same event. Lastly, besides looking at actual memorial practices and people’s experience, the article considers a different archive yet: that of materiality of the site and its physical transformation, including renovation and redesign. These distinct forms of material inscription and practice work as essential text for interpreting the manner in which memory, security and conflict intersect.
Finally, a note on the choice of the Westgate mall as a case study. Al-Shabaab has, over the years, launched more than 270 attacks in a diversity of spaces in Eastern Africa. Why choose Westgate and how is it similar and different to other sites? For one, Westgate represents one of the largest attacks to date by Al-Shabaab on a public space in Kenya, but also Eastern Africa, surpassed only by the Garissa University College attack in 2015, or the K5 intersection (or Zoobe junction) attack in Mogadishu in 2017. Westgate has consequently become iconic both of Al-Shabaab violence, and the issues around state response and official silence. But iconic does not mean exceptional. While Westgate is undoubtedly a space of relative luxury, the response in the form of triumphalist amnesia is similar to other such sites. In addition, while the mall is upscale, those affected by the attack draw from a wide cross-section of society as not only shoppers, but also shopkeepers and sales assistants, and service personnel including cleaners and security guards.

Linking memory and security in the war on terror

Kenya holds a key role in East Africa’s confrontation with the Salafi-jihadist group Al-Shabaab (AS). Since Al-Shabaab emerged in Somalia in the early 2000s, it has gone through various transformations, gradually increasing its regional reach. After a formidable rise and domination of large swathes of southern and central Somalia in late 2000s, Al-Shabaab was pushed back by Ethiopian forces and the Somali government, and later held in check by the regional African Union force AMISOM. The group was nonetheless successful in establishing regional cells and staged hundreds of attacks, most frequently in Somalia and in Kenya where it exploited local grievances. Kenya’s invasion of Somalia in 2011 and counter-terrorism initiatives invited blowback and further Al-Shabaab retaliation. Over time, Kenya has emerged as a key partner in US and UK global counter-terrorist initiatives, both as a base of international operations but also as one of the top recipients of US counter-terrorism funding. Large international resources were invested both in enforcement-centred, hard-security infrastructure at home (Al-Balushi, 2018; Gluck and Low, 2017), increasing the state’s military and surveillance capabilities, and in ‘soft’, population-focused security measures, attempting to engage populations directly in the war on terror via investment in civil society organizations, community policing and infrastructure projects, among other areas of development (see Bachmann and Hönke, 2010). It is hence against this backdrop of multilevel securitization of public space in Kenya that memory of the violence must be seen.

The confrontation with Al-Shabaab in eastern Africa and Horn of Africa has drawn increased scholarly interest, though thus far eschewing the intersections of memory and security. A score of articles explore the roots, dynamics and spread of Al-Shabaab or the counter-terror measures undertaken, attributing the cyclicality of attacks and inability to suppress the insurgency to a hard-hitting response, where securitization and military measures encourage rather than diffuse and resolve the confrontation (Anderson and McKnight, 2014; Botha, 2014; Buchanan-Clarke and Lekalake, 2015; Cannon and Pkalya, 2019). In other words, there is growing scholarship on the fallout of pursuing Al-Shabaab – in terms of broader securitization, surveillance and heavy-handed response, and how these shape political space, identity and social cohesion, and the conflict itself (Anderson and McKnight, 2014; Botha, 2014; Chome, 2016; Kagwanja, 2006; Mutahi et al., 2015). Within this growing scholarship, however, little if anything is written on memory and sites of violence. Yet the link between security transformations and materiality of public space is undeniable. Gluck’s (2017: 297) research shows the important spatial transformations produced by the war on terror across geographical scales: ‘Nairobi’s security urbanism is the material articulation of the War on Terror […] produced through the confluence of state strategies and everyday practices’. This article extends these debates by investigating how such ‘material articulation’ plays out in spaces of memory.
In terms of a broader scholarship on the global ‘war on terror’, focus still predominantly lies on a critical approach to memorialization, rather than its absence. Memory debates revolve around critical deconstruction of memorials and commemorative forms, mostly in the global North (Edkins, 2003; Foote, 2016; Lundborg, 2012; Milošević, 2018; Sturken, 2007) though with important exceptions (Heath-Kelly, 2015, 2016a; Mirgani, 2017). The existing scholarship follows to an extent a bias of practice – one focused on ‘sanctification’ (Foote, 2003) of spaces of violence, the rush to commemorate and the ways in which these might reify dominant narratives or security agendas (see, for example, Edkins, 2003 on the commemoration of 9/11). Some even refer to ‘memorial mania’ (Doss, 2010) when speaking about today’s mass consumption and production of memory and infatuation with memorials. New frontiers of knowledge are forged in new arenas of commemoration such as cyber-memory and online memorials, rather than in spaces of amnesia and rectification.

In terms of broader debates on memory politics in the wake of and amidst war and conflict, the dominant preoccupation is still with ‘present pasts’ (Huyssen, 2003) or what Werbner (1998) calls ‘post-wars of the dead’ – the ways in which violence is brought into a post-conflict present. Available scholarship analyses how memories of violent past shape local and national politics, foreign policies, how they are incorporated into political production and how they might inform renewed violence or peace-building (see Purdekova and Mwambari, 2022; Purdekova, 2020, 2015). There is work looking at specific sites of violence and memorials and how they are used for these purposes (Subotić, 2019a; Volkan, 2001). Research shows how commemoration can be put to regime-serving/party-support building rather than public-serving political work, and be conflict-inducing rather than conflict-diffusing (Bernard, 2017; Browne, 2013; Longman, 2017). Indeed, against official aims of symbolic redress to victims, meaningful recognition and the furthering of understanding, there is emerging work on commemoration in conflict and commemoration as conflict (see Browne, 2013; McDowell and Braniff, 2014).

While this body of literature directly acknowledges the politicized and partial nature of many post-war narratives and hence silencing embedded in the memory process, a separate body of literature is dedicated specifically to silences after war/violence (Selimovic, 2020; Vinitzky-Seroussi and Teeger, 2010; Winter, 2010). Nonetheless, few look at public amnesia beyond the narrative/discursive process, as a material space that is produced and encountered on the level of the everyday and structured via broader political and security processes. Thus far we also understand little about how systematic erasure of violence affects conflict transformation and the roots of insecurity. Looking at material, social and discursive practices within spaces of violence is a unique way to do this.

Finally, in terms of the broader theoretical interface between memory and security, the literature is only just emerging. Heath-Kelly’s *Death and Security* (2016a) posits that terrorist bombing attacks are especially potent in exposing states’ illusion of control over death and hence invite securitization through emergency response, architectural reconstruction and memorialization. There is an attempt to ‘perform destroyed space [of terrorist attacks] as resilient’ (Heath-Kelly, 2015: 70). Heath-Kelly’s focus lies exclusively on memorialization; I show how the theoretical framework can and indeed should be extended to understand amnesia and practices of rectification.

The fast-growing literature on ontological security has also been applied to the arena of commemoration (see Malksoo, 2015; Subotić, 2019b) and explores the ways in which commemorative practice in the wake of war and violence is strategically shaped by broader concerns over maintaining coherent national identity narratives or resolving insecurities around aspects of identity and status. Kenya’s preferences for erasure of violence from public discourse could certainly be seen from this angle, as an attempt to preserve the ‘haven of peace’ narrative so central to its projected identity.
Nonetheless, national-level dynamics of ‘mnemonic security’ and ‘securitisation of memory’ (Malksoo, 2015) – as in particular core narratives on difficult pasts – are a limited way to understand the memory–security interface. As this article argues, especially in situations where these narratives are absent on a national level, framing memory as a security issue proceeds nonetheless in the space of the everyday. To see how, we need to pay attention to sites of memory, both in terms of the material reconstruction accompanying their return to prior use but also the reinhabiting that accompanies it. It is hence crucial to pay attention to mundane encounters between security logics and technologies on the one hand and spaces of violence on the other, looking at the ways in which memory itself is construed as a security issue – as in any transcript, not a particular narrative – and redescribed as ‘vulnerability’. Sites such as Westgate thus emerge as very particular lieux de mémoire (Nora, 1989), as sites of anti-memory. In sum, the article shows that ‘triumphalist amnesia’ and its entanglements with (in)security need to be seen through material and everyday practices in sites of anti-memory as it is here where regime-produced ontological security in the form of public amnesia produces personal insecurities and feeds ongoing violence.

Conceptual framework: Rectification and amnesia

Public amnesia can be usefully studied through a far more concrete concept and practice of ‘rectification’ in sites of violence (Purdekova, 2017, 2019). Even cursory research on rectification reveals just how little studied it is as a broader memory practice, perhaps little surprising in the age of the monument and the rush to commemorate. In his book Shadowed Ground: America’s Landscapes of Tragedy, Foote (2003) introduces a useful typology of sites of violence, differentiated based on the handling of the material space and its ‘“bouncing back” to functionality’ (Heath-Kelly, 2016b: 308). Foote distinguishes between four types of engagement: sanctification, designation, rectification and obliteration. The first two involve the process of separating out spaces of memory, in a minimal form designating their content, in the maximal sense treating them as sacred. Rectification refers to sites’ return to public use without any special marking or dedication. Finally, obliteration is a practice of removing sites of ‘public shame’ from both public use and memory altogether.

Despite the paucity of scholarship, it is important not to exceptionalize either Westgate, Kenya’s response or indeed rectification as a practice more broadly. Rectification is not exceptional today and has a long history (Foote, 2003). Despite its presence in many conflict-affected settings, it certainly does not attract much scholarly attention. In areas of longstanding conflict such as the Great Lakes Region, more sites of violence remain uncommemorated than commemorated (Purdekova, 2022). In Kenya itself, rectification of sites of Al-Shabaab violence sits along, interestingly, increasing (though still selective) sanctifications of other violent episodes in its history, tied to recently completed transitional justice processes—the TJRC (Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission of Kenya) and the UK High Court rulings. The former has resulted in a memorial to the 1984 Wagalla massacre, one of the worst state-perpetrated massacres after independence, and the latter in the UK-funded Mau Mau monument in Nairobi’s Uhuru Park. But paradoxically, the very election violence that gave impetus to the TJRC in the first place has not received this form of memorialization.

But importantly, rectification here is understood as a more systematic regime where a particular type of violence is systematically not being recognized, indexed or addressed at the national level (where it is a rule, not an exception). When translated into space, it is one architectural strategy of ‘governing the traumatic event’ (Lundborg, 2012: 240), here through silence. Rectification also concretizes and helps us abandon certain unhelpful associations, conceptions and binaries such as memory-forgetting. Fixed narratives and static commemoration can in fact be a kind of forgetting (Edkins, 2003). In international relations scholarship, silence is typically ‘rendered synonymous with notions of defeat, lack, absence’ (Dingli and Cook, 2018: 1). Yet
rather than a void and absence of action, silence is very much ‘a form of doing’ (Guillaume, 2018: 476; Guillaume and Schweiger, 2018). As will be shown here, silences produce text in a number of ways. This can happen through open discussion around ‘silence’ on online chats, twitter feeds or in the press. Every year, an editorial is penned on forgetting, a peculiar form of annual commemoration by discussing its gaping absence (see Gathara, 2018; Kuo, 2016b; News24, 2017). Silences can also help consolidate certain national representations. But besides this, as will be shown through the narratives on re-inhabiting spaces of violence, amnesia can also trigger memory when faced up close. The material and social labours involved in producing amnesia can themselves serve as transcripts on memory and violence.

Glanced through rectification as practice, public amnesia is not quite an absence then, as in a lack of something; neither is it simply silence or forgetting. Public amnesia is more of a disavowal, refusal to engage, a form of disarticulation. It sits closer to Stoler’s concept of ‘aphasia’ (Stoler, 2016) as a deficit of comprehension: ‘In aphasia, an occlusion of knowledge is the issue. It is not a matter of ignorance or absence. Aphasia is a dismembering, a difficulty in speaking, a difficulty in generating a vocabulary that associates appropriate words and concepts to appropriate things’ (Stoler, 2016: 128).

But we need to push our conception further – while public amnesia when understood as active disengagement impoverishes recognition and understanding, it still produces text, a meta-narrative on memory. But how exactly does this work? Can ‘non-memorials’ be productive in this way? Are discourses on the past, violence and conflict produced in such spaces? Looking at rectification as an actual practice of emptying spaces of their violent traces helps – it can be broken down to concrete practices and events, productive nodes to pay attention to such as closure, reopening, reconstruction or re-inhabiting. All of these are accompanied by forms of indexing and text and can be read as memory labours and productive of transcripts – if not on the event, certainly on memory itself. These material and social practices also catalyse and further entrench certain readings of violence and produce effects, not least by inviting people to re-inhabit them.

In sum, the current article takes public amnesia seriously as an active form of memory labour with real effects. Memory labour here then means reactivation of the past in the present even if it is indirect, even if it is only invoked to be talked or worked away. Even if violence itself is not allowed to leave a mark, symbol, an index, the material and social interventions on the site constitute concrete residues to be read and considered in understanding amnesia and its effects. Amnesia is not an absence or lack; it is a form of memory work, and one that is entangled with broader politicized security imperatives and technologies.

Renovation: Vacating violence, amnesia as triumphalism and defiance

“It is weird”, said Maureen, a beautician whose stall faces the main entrance from which the gunmen, armed with machine rifles and grenades, stormed in: “It looks like nothing happened here.”’ (cited in Stewart, 2015). Indeed, the Westgate mall has not only reopened, it has been thoroughly renovated and all traces of violence have been erased. The walls have been plastered, bullet holes filled, shattered glass replaced, new escalators put in, the collapsed part of the building reconstructed. There is absolutely no sign of a violence amidst the glitzy interiors, and no memorial inscriptions. The ‘as if nothing’ effect is certainly intended, and while for some this is amnesia as triumphalism, for others it is an active suppression with deleterious effects on survivors, public processing of a traumatic past and conflict resolution. In what follows, I show how emptying of violence from the space happens, how amnesia manifests and is talked about, and what effects ensue from the encounter.

In Nairobi, the mall business thrives, and Westgate itself continues to attract investment. Following the 2013 attack and a four-day siege, the Westgate mall was closed for two years, and then reopened to the public in 2015. The reopened mall reasserted its upmarket status. The atrium
is populated by glass window lifts and brand-new escalators, a fountain, plants and the Dorman’s café, and is surrounded by top-brand shops including Giorgio Armani, Converse, Lacoste, Samsung, Yves Rocher and Barclays Bank. A printed kanga dress hanging in an open atrium shop costs a hefty $90. The air is filled with the sound of falling water and soft acoustic music.

The reopening of the Westgate mall itself has been accompanied by an absence of public commemoration and demarcation of the 2013 attack. Nevertheless, a narrative on memory emerged, even if comprised of justifications for its absence. On the day of the opening, Nairobi Governor Evans Kidero and the Inspector General of the Police, Joseph Boinnet delivered speeches on the mall premises, hailing Westgate as a ‘new symbol of courage and resilience, strength and fortitude’ (Business Daily, 2015). ‘I’m glad it’s [Westgate] reopened’, said Boinnet; ‘it shows we will not be intimidated by these criminals and terrorists. We will fight back. We will lead normal lives’ (Business Daily, 2015). Both dignitaries set the tone, normalizing the absence of a memorial. Amnesia itself was to be sanctified as a monument of sorts. The lack of trace, index, mention or indeed investigation came to be openly equated with defiance and triumphalism.

Rectification was thus deployed as an everyday tool of counter-terrorism. The Director of Sony Holdings, the owner of the mall, made the link directly when commenting on the return to business as usual: ‘This shows the faith [traders] have in this place and their solidarity to fight [terrorism]’ (Mulupi, 2015). Some Kenyan visitors also narrated their decision to return to the mall in those terms: ‘[The reopening] is a bit sad but it is for the best’, suggests one survivor; ‘It shows the terrorists that we defeated them. No matter what they did to us, we can still stand up on our feet’ (CBC Radio, 2015). Another survivor suggests: ‘Life has to go on. If we don’t go back [. . .] then these people will think we are weak or cowards, we have to show them we have courage.’ (Kriel, 2015)

But even those speaking of reopening and revisiting as resilience and defiance do not equate this with the imperative to vacate memory of violence from the space, and instead highlight the simultaneous need for acknowledgment. One survivor who visited the mall on reopening day with his wife and son, suggests ‘it was important to come. We really can’t allow acts of terrorism to control how we live [. . . but] we should not push what happened under the carpet. We should always have something [a memorial] that can remind us of what happened [here]’ (Stewart, 2015). A shop owner of a men’s clothing store interviewed on the same day agreed: ‘There should have been a memorial. It’s pretty bad, isn’t it? People lost their children, their businesses here.’ (Stewart, 2015)

Opposed to them are Kenyans who believe the space cannot be revisited and ‘reborn as new’ because of its very status as a place where people lost their lives. Violence cannot be erased, the mall cannot be turned back in time and hence must stand in a very different form precisely to account for that violent past: ‘It just, it doesn’t feel right’, suggests one man. ‘It should be a memorial, a memorial place.’ (EuroNews, 2015a) ‘If I had my way,’ writes Carole Kimutai, ‘I would convert the building into an international Museum of Terrorism [. . .] The first of its kind in Africa.’ (Kimutai, 2015)

Overall, survivors are reluctant to return. Some survivors return simply because of the need for closure. One survivor suggests she wants ‘to see the inside of the mall to remember. I will go back. Once. Just for closure. But I never step into that mall to have a good time. Never’ (Lee, 2015). Another survivor was offered her old job at Westgate but declined it. While she was ‘able to visit the place of the attack once [as a way to move forward], that was enough’ (CBC Radio, 2015).

But many survivors refuse to visit the mall altogether because of the trauma suffered and are offended by the casualness with which amnesia asserts itself in the space, finding the reopening insensitive and disrespectful. A survivor suggests that ‘as a mark of respect for the ones who died there, I would not be able to walk in there’ (Kriel, 2015). ‘The images are still fresh in my brain – it is like visiting a morgue’, suggests another man, ‘I cannot just walk into that place knowing that so many people died in that building’ (Ross, 2015). Another survivor who ran a practice too suggested it was impossible for him to return: ‘Going back to Westgate – in my opinion, you know, to me it
is a graveyard. So many people met their death there’ (BBC News, 2015). ‘The reopening of Westgate was a shock. I will never be able to return to that place, and I’m not sure the kids will either’ (EuroNews, 2015b). The reopening itself is thus, paradoxically, an opening to a counter-narrative to triumphalist amnesia by showing the emotional tax on survivors, triggering stories of continuous emotional toll and refusal to visit the space.

Importantly, triumphalist amnesia and its counter-narratives propagate over time. The stories of ‘rebirth’ applied to Westgate repeat over time and reappeared in relation to the DusitD2 hotel attack in Nairobi six years later: ‘That Dusit [goes] back to business shows our ability to reincarnate [. . .] the ability of the nation to rise from defeat’ (Mwanza, 2019). For many, it is nonetheless a costly reincarnation without reckoning. The words of an IT consultant who was working in the DusitD2 hotel on the day of the attack show just how eerily similar the response is: ‘I cannot go back to Dusit – just driving by leads me to panic [. . .] Everyone says “you can’t let the terrorists win” but the grief and trauma are so exhausting’ (Sawlani, 2020). The stories of survivors speak of layers of trauma that repeat over time, from 1998 to 2013 to 2019, one attack layered on to the next, repetition that belies the unwillingness to process violence and learn from a violent past, an amnesia that promotes disarticulation: ‘I feel like the government hasn’t learned’, says one survivor of DusitD2; ‘My mum is a survivor of the 1998 US Embassy bombings in Nairobi, I’m a survivor of this – more needs to be done’ (Sawlani, 2020).

Others yet highlight the political expediency of the amnesia, the usefulness of silence which, far from signifying triumph, is a sign of political suppression. This derives from the fact that the Westgate mall doubles not only as a site of Al-Shabaab violence, but also a space of state response. For many, the four-day siege, the prolonged attempt to free hostages and capture the attackers, is a testament to the inability of the state to secure its citizens. As one of the residents of the area reminisced in an informal conversation with me (Interview 1), the sounds of explosions and fighting in the mall pierced the air for days, raising questions which to this day remain unanswered. Other questions revolved around the conspicuous absence of state actors in the rescue management. It was the nearby Oshwal Community Centre and the local Jain community that organized and offered first response and shelter to victims (Lesley, 2013).

Furthermore, video footage emerged of how ‘soldiers looted shops and blasted open safes’ (News24, 2017). Those cleaning the mall in the wake of violence found a space littered with traces of looting. Triumphalist amnesia is then read by many as a cover, an expedient way to delay and derail investigation of state actors’ own failures. President Kibaki promised an official investigation, but this was never carried out. ‘It bothers me for the families, the people who were lost there’, suggests a survivor of the attack, ‘that our questions [about the attack] are not answered and nothing has been brought to the surface’ (Kriel, 2015).

Triumphalist amnesia at the Westgate mall thus must be read not only against the story of a space of attack and national trauma, but one of government response and state shame. Westgate is a ‘visceral site of security failure’ (Heath-Kelly, 2015: 69) in more than one sense. Resurrecting and narrating the attack through various memory labours thus means resurrecting and narrating the actions of the state. Transcript on Westgate is in fact a much more far-reaching transcript on the social contract and the (in)ability to secure. The Westgate mall is a reminder of the weakness of privatized security and puts on show the way in which public agents exploited insecurity for private gain. The siege ended with a large explosion in a section of the mall that allegedly buried the Al-Shabaab militants under the rubble. The thorough renovation that followed thus not only vacated any trace of violence, but with this all traces of a bungled government response.

But of course, just as amnesia came to mark political resilience, it also marked capitalist resilience. Just ahead of the reopening, in a televised video, the General Manager of the Nakumatt supermarket spoke about the reopening without a single mention of the attack and violence that
took place there, describing it as a ‘new dawn, a new beginning’ (France24 News, 2015) in line with the wider marketing campaign in the city. On the day itself, there was indeed ‘no sign of sadness or fear’ and little sense that this was a moment dedicated to the victims: ‘It was a party, a memorial to the resilience of Kenyan capitalism perhaps more so than to those who lost their lives. Westgate is back, shoppers said with their shillings [. . .] in Nakumatt, the supermarket chain, shoppers went into frenzy over “buy three, get one free” deals, scooping dozens of toothpaste and ramen. Others stood hypnotized in the TV section, downed gourmet cheese samples, and cheerfully tried to win a free TV in a dart contest’ (Zirulnik, 2015). A score of incentives – from discounts to job openings – sealed in the rectification process and brought the bodies and business back to the mall, the everyday footfall and busyness sealing the ‘memory deal’ through mundane actions of re inhabiting.

As discussed earlier, despite the accent on amnesia, a transcript on memory was generated on the day of reopening and onwards. The media elicited explicit reflections on the past on the day, and people privately processed the past as they went about their business, but there was no public acknowledgment, no honouring of victims by official demarcation, and indeed no systematic inquest or narrative processing of a violent past. Amnesia was publicly enlisted as a way to counter terror.

Fortification: Defusing the past; memory as vulnerability

‘As a country, we are safer than ever’,1 asserted Nairobi governor Kidero in his speech at the Westgate mall reopening. The ‘fortitude’ mentioned in the officials’ speeches at the reopening was imprinted into the very material structure of the mall. A visible fortification took place, with force supplanting narrative and a surplus of security measures covering the vulnerability and insecurity produced at the site. Westgate implemented new security features and purchased state-of-the-art security technology, including explosive detectors, luggage X-rays, scanners to check under cars, bollards to prevent car bombs and bullet-proof guard towers. A private Israeli security firm IRG has been put in charge of security, hiring 25 specialist staff and 55 guards, comprising both uniformed and plain-clothes officers. A big red sign warns oncoming traffic that there is ‘no stopping at any time’ and there is a guard on the road checking traffic. On the inside of the high fence, additional security officers wait with sniffer dogs. All of this before scaling the steps to the entrance with the X-ray machine. The space of the Westgate mall itself is tightly surveilled, with CCTV cameras and security personnel walking through the halls.

The show of ‘total security’ is certainly intended: ‘IRG [. . .] insists that with its overhaul, Westgate is the safest mall in Nairobi today. Managing Director Haim Cohen’s team of ex-Israeli commandos has trained the mall’s security personnel assiduously’ (Murgani, 2017: 116). Indeed, on a quiet day, there seem to be as many security personnel strolling around as shoppers themselves. Charles Nyangira, a security guard at the mall, suggests that the security strategy has been refined: ‘Right now at Westgate, they try to read people, to use their behaviour to tell whether they are a criminal or not. Right now there is security everywhere. Once you are in the mall, there is security everywhere, you feel comfortable’ (Ombuor, 2015).

Though fortification might not seem immediately connected to issues of memory, it goes with and is a key component of triumphalist amnesia. The fortification of the space was understood as a key precondition to rectification and return of the site to everyday use, even as the security’s ostentatiousness paradoxically stirs memory of what happened through the very need for enhanced security. But the intended narrative here reaches further. On a symbolic level, fortification lays claim to rectifying the past: By framing what happened as a security issue, rather than violence with deeper roots and broader ramifications, fortification positions itself as resolving the issue at the heart of the attack. ‘All the [security] loopholes have been sealed’, commented a manager as a
way to entice return to business (Xinhua, 2015). In this reading, memory was not only ‘of’ vulnerability, but vulnerability itself, and needed to be defused. Westgate’s reopening as a fortified structure symbolically reversed time, the mall has ‘risen from the ashes’ (Xinhua, 2015) and this made the search for and the reminder of violence and vulnerability immaterial.

Importantly, the security implications of the Westgate attack reached much beyond the mall itself, giving rise to a whole security industry. It is much more difficult to get into malls, they are more surveilled, and while the mall business seemed to have suffered in the immediate aftermath (Mutiga, 2014), it has more than rebounded, with multiple new, bigger malls having materialized since 2013. ‘In addition are a variety of other mixed-use complexes springing up all over Nairobi, including Garden City and The HUB, a few miles down the road from Westgate mall, the Two Rivers Development is billed as “the largest lifestyle centre within Sub-Saharan Africa, outside of South Africa”, and features $10m in security technology. The new incarnations rising from Westgate mall’s ashes are self-enclosed mega developments guarded ever more closely by an all pervasive – and invasive – security apparatus’ (Mirgani, 2017: 117).

The boost in privatized security at the mall mirrored wider dynamics: ‘Since Al-Shabaab’s 2013 Westgate Mall attack, the number of private security guards in Kenya has swelled “and there are now about 300,000 employed by some 429 private security firms – vastly outnumbering Kenya’s police force of 60,000”’ (Owuor and Mbatia, 2011: 137, cited in Mirgani, 2017: 116). These security features have been extended from the shopping mall into other areas of public life, and the Kenyan government has successfully implemented ‘a [new] national surveillance programme, including the installation of tamper-proof CCTV cameras in most major streets in Nairobi and Mombasa’ (Mirgani, 2017: 116). From the ‘Very Big Brother’ sign spelled in capital letters at the Village Market mall to clicking CCTVs all around major intersections, the new surveillance boost is readily visible on the city. A new nyumba kumi (or ten house) administrative system has been established since then, aimed at tracking movement and logging ‘strangers’ in local areas.

Fortification and related memory dynamics can be observed at other sites of Al-Shabaab violence such as the Garissa University College. The university is located in the city of Garissa in the north of Kenya and was the place of a horrific attack in 2015 directly on the premises and the dormitories of the school, claiming 148 student lives. After nine months of closure and large student transfers to other universities, Garissa University College was ‘quietly’ reopened by the government without ceremony or a memorial (Kuo, 2016a). Similarly to Westgate, the space was renovated and fortified. Even the Mt Elgon dormitory – the site of direct violence – was reopened, under a new name of Ewaso Ng’iro. Security on the premises underwent an overhaul, with the main gate closed and manned by armed police, ID checks at the entrance, a new administrative police post headed by a chief inspector, a perimeter wall fitted with razor wire, three manned watchtowers and 24-hour CCTV.

Just as in the case of the Westgate mall, fortification paved the way for rectification, both physical and symbolic. Fortification defused the need to ask deeper questions about the roots of violence and its impact, but also about the response to the attack, seen as slow and inadequate. In a historically marginalized region of Kenya, with a long history of both state neglect matched with intense securitization, the triumphalist amnesia did not find much purchase. It was simply a reminder, a trigger, paradoxically, of longer strands of memory. But similarly to Westgate hundreds of miles away, the public amnesia sanctioned in the wake of violence pushed it to families and relatives to bear the burden of commemoration. From all these activities, ‘the state was noticeably absent’ (News24, 2017).

But while the aftermath of the Westgate attack boosted revenues of the security industry and led to a palpable enhancement of security measures in public spaces, it has not necessarily created more security. The fortification has led to some unintended, and even paradoxical outcomes. In
different ways it became a factor of increased fear and insecurity. For some, the excessive security made them feel uneasy and even afraid. As one visitor suggested, ‘I feel people are even afraid to enter Westgate because of the tight security’ (Ombuor, 2015). For others, insecurity lingers beyond the veneer of excessive fortification as they don’t believe a mall security detail can ever be ‘strong’ enough to deter militants. As an aid worker reflects, ‘I’m not sure whether armed guards and better security checkpoints would have done much good against coordinated teams of probably battle-hardened fighters with heavy weapons’ (Pflanz, 2013). Even security guards in the business agree. In fact, private security officers in Kenya were only allowed to be issued guns in 2019, after yet another Al-Shabaab attack on the DusitD2 hotel in Nairobi (Al-Jazeera, 2019). More broadly, the fortification is read as a ‘show’ of security that is only surface deep, a measure meant to persuade and assure when the reality is that of continued attacks.

In a twist, security technology itself acts as a bank of memory, a perpetual reminder of the vulnerability it aims to defuse. A unique feature of the Westgate tragedy is its capture on CCTV and the ready availability of the recordings online, forming a perpetual reel of memory that can be played and replayed, and interacted with on YouTube. Clips from CCTV footage also regularly feature on news websites. CCTV cameras thus play an interesting role – a surveillance technology, a mechanism of broadcasting violence and accentuation of spectacle intended by the attackers, and an archive of sorts. The building itself thus held memory, and even if CCTV was an incomplete gaze, the notion that all violence could be ‘vacated’ from the structure is complicated by this accessible media repository. The replay of the crude act, with no transcripts, no broader questions and answers, and hence no accounting or recognition, is a haunting type of traumatic memory that is properly described as disarticulation or aphasia – rather than a triumph of forgetting, it points to the troubling insistence of an unprocessed past.

Finally, the fortification of the mall and later other sites of attack accompanied a broader securitization drive and directly led to the broadening of maps of fear and insecurity. The boosted apparatus of surveillance and policing was directed against whole groups of people presented as potential threats – Muslim, Somali and refugee – and their spaces of residence such as the Somali-dominated Eastleigh district of Nairobi. Counter-terror round-up campaigns such as the 2014 Usalama Watch (Security Watch) grew directly as a response to the Westgate attack and scapegoated Somali residents in Kenya, resulting in thousands being detained in Nairobi’s Kasarani stadium. Insecurity was produced directly in the name of security, with an already marginalized and vulnerable population being ‘punished’ in a blanket fashion. A set of extraordinary attacks has thus opened the door to a more systematic, mundane form of insecurity, the violence of searches, detentions, threats of deportation, targeted killings and disappearances by security forces.

Counter-terror has thus expanded maps of violence and with them created deeper rectification yet, of whole areas of victimization and specific spaces of disappearance that are dominated by a deeper silence. Where Westgate and Garissa produce a degree of debate on public amnesia, these far more encompassing spaces of everyday violence of counter-terror resist narrativization and memory-making in a more profound way. The rectification dynamics at the Westgate mall thus open to view a far broader process and broader map of interactions between violence, security and amnesia. Westgate’s fortification is both a reflection of wider strategies of dealing with the past, but also a trigger to further securitization and rectification, as seen both on other sites of Al-Shabaab violence and in wider arenas of counter-terror. The analysis of fortification underlines the significance of deciphering absence at Westgate against other concurrent absences elsewhere but also against longer histories of public amnesia on a violent past (Maingi, 2020; Muhoma and Nyairo, 2011; Russell, 2019).
Conclusion

This article tries to make the case that triumphalist amnesia, as glanced through rectification practice, is not a gap or absence but a form of memory labour, and one that is very much linked to security in East Africa’s war on terror. More broadly, rectification deserves our attention not only because it is all too prevalent, despite the current preoccupations with various forms of indexing – monumentation, commemoration or what Foote calls ‘sanctification’– but also because it produces a subtext on memory, directly elicits memory when confronted, and has tangible effects that reach beyond the space of the site, becoming a cog in the dynamics of both conflict and (in)security. In this way, the article contributes to emerging literature on ‘regimes of silence’ in conflict-affected states (Russell, 2019), but more specifically to the latest literature on ‘silence as doing’ (Guillaume, 2018; Guillaume and Schweiger, 2018). Reaching beyond the typical conception of silence as absence of voice and beyond investigations around its intentionality and meaning (Fujii, 2010; Selimovic, 2020), the current study explores what silence – here materialized through rectification – does and produces, its often counter-intuitive effects.

Through the case study of one concrete site of violence and its rectification, we can grasp more easily how public amnesia is a productive type of absence. Even as traces of violence are vacated through careful renovation, reconstruction and fortification, and people are invited to rehabit the space and resume prior activity, these acts of rectification and accompanying speeches do implicitly and explicitly reify texts on memory and violence. Memory of the past is equated with weakness, and absence of memory with defiance. Triumphalist amnesia is cultivated as an everyday anti-terror tool. Memory – and especially the dynamic of rectification – has seldomly been linked to security and yet this article shows the importance of seeing the former through the lens of the latter.

But rectification is productive in yet another way. By reopening and inviting people to revisit spaces of violence, it directly encourages confrontations with absence. The article shows that erasure of the past is not only an active process of overlay, of removal and reconstruction, but also a process of facing and responding to it, whereby people are asked to rehabit spaces of violence, their bodies, minds and memories enlisted in the fight against terrorism. Rectification is not complete without the latter, and thus always paradoxically kindles memory and triggers (counter)-narratives on the past and its role in the present.

Rectification thus might produce counter-intuitive results – feelings of insecurity through fortification and broader securitization of public space, distrust in the state’s ability to ‘triumph’ when faced with repetition of violence over time, stirrings of longer grievances and memories of marginalization. Rectification also produces an emotional tax as survivors struggle with the erasure, their voices and experience overlayed by political and capitalist incentive, their commemoration pushed to private spaces elsewhere. Triumphalist amnesia is indeed an active, tangible form of memory labour imprinted into space in a variety of ways, but it is a labour resulting in public disarticulation or aphasia, a lack of collective narrative processing and recognition of the roots, dimensions and implications of violence.

Going forward, there is much opportunity to launch a systematic conceptual and empirical study of rectification as a practice. As already highlighted with brief comparisons between sites, even within a single-country case, rectification might proceed in a broadly similar way but with subtly different outcomes. On a broader plane, different political regimes and different forms of violence might produce different forms of rectification. Some forms of public amnesia might be officially sanctioned, while others proceed due to the inability or unwillingness of those in power to address the past. Often, sanctification and rectification coexist. Far more detailed study is needed to assess the scope, nature and ramifications of rectification and the way in which it intersects with broader political, security and conflict dynamics around the world.
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Note
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Interview 1: informal discussion with a Sukuma Twende member, Westlands, Nairobi, 22 August 2018.

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