

Arts and
Culture
for Healing

East Africa
and the Horn
of Africa



VOLUME 2

AFSC AN ASSEMBLY REPORT





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AFSC RESEARCH PAPER



Cover photo: Mahad Mohamed 2022; "Observe," an experimental photography project exploring pure shape, texture and one's interest in challenging normality. In the frame: Sharmaarke Aden.

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

CONTENTS

- 04 Thanks & Recognition
05 Preface

1

- 06 Why Trauma Healing Is a Prerequisite for Peace: Somalia and South Sudan
Zaina Kisongoa,
with Megan Quitkin

2

- 14 Arts and Culture for Healing: East Africa and the Horn
Andani.Africa: Molemo Moiloa,
Phumzile Nombuso Twala

3

- 50 The Creative as a Reservoir for Repair: Thinking through the Nexus of Arts and Healing in (East) African Contexts
Jessica Horn

4

- 64 Koyo Kouoh's Final Lesson on Pan-African Solidarity
Rashida Bumbray

5

- 70 Nairobi Retreat 2025

6

- 74 Interview on Healing and Arts
Michelle Coffey,
with Megan Quitkin

7

- 78 A Vibration of Spaces
Suzanne Miekko

8

- 84 Disarming Violence: A Restorying of East African Histories Through Creative Action and Curatorial Care
Dr. Kara A. Blackmore

9

- 92 Ukuphontsa
Itshe Esivivaneni
Phumzile Nombuso Twala
94 Biographies

THANKS & RECOGNITION

In May 2025 the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) hosted “The Power of Arts and Culture for Healing: A Dialogue and Exchange for Artists, Culture Makers, and Activists” in Nairobi. With a focus on East Africa and the Horn of Africa, this immersive four-day event was the third convening in our Assembly arts and culture series, following successful convenings in Casablanca and Amman in 2022 and 2023, respectively.

It is now well understood that while art is ever evolving and often defies definition, it is often transformative and so much more than something that stays still on museum walls. We know that art is sacred storytelling and ritual and that it honors history, introduces important ideas, and evokes both emotion and empathy.

At the events in Morocco and Jordan, we explored the myriad ways in which the arts and culture are powerful tools; they connect communities, create camaraderie among people who were once divided, and help reinforce practices of peaceful existence. We also acknowledged that while artists play numerous roles in society—amplifying historically marginalized voices, urging new narratives, and catalyzing conversation on urgent societal issues—there are challenges. Artists and creatives are often isolated from one another and may not see themselves as integral to and inseparable from social justice movements. Given this reality, dialogue and exchange programs are especially important as they connect artists and creatives with advocates and activists, providing opportunities to build relationships, bolster networks, and catalyze change.

We acknowledged these realities in Nairobi but spent significant time spotlighting that in Somalia, South Sudan, and Ethiopia—the countries where we support trauma healing initiatives—the arts have long been intertwined with and inseparable from efforts to transform pain and grief into resilience and recovery. We spotlighted this work in morning circles, panel discussions, and workshops. We screened short films that explore the intersection of arts, healing, and social justice. And we visited powerful partners who are showing what is possible when arts spaces become sites of healing and resistance. This publication memorializes the recent convening with content—essays, insights, and imagery—that celebrates creativity and centers it in healing work.

None of this would be possible without the generosity of two Berlin-based foundations, Brot für die Welt and Quäker Hilfe-Stiftung, and AFSC’s individual supporters. We also want to thank researchers Molemo Moiloa and Phumzile Nombuso Twala from Andani.

Africa, who provided our lead research, guidance, and counsel throughout this process. Our facilitator, Rashida Bumbray, expertly led the conversation in Nairobi. We are grateful for their contributions.

Additionally, we would be remiss not to mention AFSC partners and consultants who helped create and steer an ambitious program, moving it from idea to inception. This team includes Molemo Moiloa and Phumzile Nombuso Twala (South Africa); Rashida Bumbray and Michelle Coffey (United States); Kemi Ilesanmi (United States, Nigeria); Joy Mboya (Kenya); Bilal Qureshi (Pakistan, Ghana); and Marisa Katz (United States). The participants at the Nairobi convening brought our ideas to life through discussion and artistry, and some of them (Jessica Horn, Liboi, and Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja) brought our lively conversation to the Global Artivism convening in Salvador, Brazil, in November 2025. Thanks to the authors of this volume; our expert editor, Karen Jacobson; and our designer, Andrew Breitenberg

Finally, I want to thank my colleagues in the Africa Regional Office in Nairobi, especially Kennedy Akolo and Zaina Kisongoa, for their partnership and support.

Jason P. Drucker
Associate General Secretary, Advancement
American Friends Service Committee



PREFACE

Concurrent crises and conflict in the Horn of Africa region have devastated communities in recent years. In Sudan, a three-year-old civil war has displaced more than 11 million people and overwhelmed refugee camps in neighboring countries. In Ethiopia, the two-year Tigray war ended, but tensions continue to flare, threatening renewed conflict. In Somalia, the government is fighting Al-Shabaab militants for control of key regions, including Mogadishu. In South Sudan, the world's youngest country, the aftermath of the five-year civil war is palpable, another large-scale crisis looms on the horizon, and women and girls experience extreme and unprecedented levels of gender-based violence.

Climate change exacerbates these challenges. Intense droughts and floods destroy land, crops, and livestock, depleting communities of key resources. When hunger and food insecurity escalate, there are profound ripple effects. Warring clans resort to violence. Militants pull powerless, desperate people into protracted fighting. Polarization grows, making peace seem impossible.

No two conflicts or crises are ever the same. But what we have seen, time and time again, is that across countries and cultures, trauma is an inevitable outcome of violence, fighting, and famine. Left untreated, it causes irreparable physical and emotional damage. Traumatized people view themselves as broken, have difficulty forming and sustaining relationships, and struggle with depression and anxiety. At the community level, trauma takes a tremendous toll. It manifests as collective distress. It erodes trust. It hinders reconciliation and development. And it prevents lasting, durable peace.

Trauma causes myriad challenges, but it is not insurmountable. Individuals, communities, and even countries can heal. Culture and the arts are integral to this process and have long been powerful tools for recovery, creating empathy, and promoting transformation.

Ugandan poet Okot P'Bitek wrote, *"The healing of a community begins when its songs remember not only the glory, but also the pain that shaped its journey."*

Across the African continent, songs, paintings, peace murals, and *milayas* (embroidered bedsheets) are not an afterthought. They are sacred treasures embedded into everyday life. Artists and culture bearers do critical work, acknowledging and addressing trauma—including their own—while also imagining what is possible. Their work builds new paths. It illustrates

humanity. And it offers narratives that center compassion and caretaking.

The question before us is not whether artists are critical to building a peaceful, equitable, and just Africa. We know that they are. But we must figure out how to weave them into larger movements for social justice. That requires collaboration, creativity, and innovation. Artists are already leading healing work. Recognizing their contributions and providing them with additional opportunities—for careers and advancement, funding, and growth—is a critical next step. We are hopeful the dialogue and exchange and related research have brought us closer to this goal.

Kennedy Akolo
Regional Director, Africa
American Friends Service Committee



1

PART ONE

WHY TRAUMA HEALING IS A PREREQUISITE FOR PEACE: SOMALIA AND SOUTH SUDAN

Zaina Kisongoa, with Megan Quitkin



Dar Al Naim, "In my garden" 2024, mixed media on canvas. Courtesy of LouiSimone Guirandou Gallery, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire.

In the summer of 2015, a young woman traveled from Juba, South Sudan's capital, to Mundri to spend time with family before returning to school. What should have been a joyful visit home turned into an unimaginable nightmare. One day, when she was in her mother's hut, a group of rebels loyal to an opposition group that called itself MTN burst through the door. They were angry, shouting and searching for her uncle, who was accused of conspiring with government forces. They beat the young woman's aunt and grandfather and took her prisoner. Dragged into the bush, the young woman was charged with her uncle's crimes and, for 16 months, forced to live in muddy, snake-infested pits where she was sometimes chained to other prisoners and frequently raped. Her hair fell out. Her body weight plummeted. She became pregnant with a baby she named Barack Obama, the ultimate symbol of hope. When she became ill, the rebels released her.

Fifteen years ago the young woman's story would have been shocking. Mundri, a small city in South Sudan's Western Equatoria state, was once celebrated as a pocket of peace and a breadbasket blessed with fertile land and agricultural productivity. But when civil war erupted in 2013, the once stable home to some 47,000 people became an epicenter of sexual and gender-based violence, which rose a staggering 60% from 2016 to 2017 to reach "epic proportions," according to the U.N. independent Commission on Human Rights.

Today violence pervades Mundri and much of South Sudan. Attempts at peace agreements and ceasefires in 2015, 2017, and 2018 have done little to quell fighting and conflict. Communities remain starkly divided along tribal lines—South Sudan has 64 distinct ethnic groups—and intense fighting ensues over everything, from surging cattle raids to land and water. A host of other factors—inflation, rising food costs that put the country at risk of famine, devastating floods and droughts, and an influx of refugees and returnees—foment fragility. Tensions between government-aligned forces, militia groups, and the opposition have escalated in the past year. And the March 2025 house arrest of former vice president Riek Machar and his wife, Angelina Teny, who was then the interior minister, has flared fears of another civil war.

South Sudan is the world's youngest country and one where 84% of the population urgently needs humanitarian support. Nearly everyone has experienced some form of trauma, but widespread, socially acceptable gender-based violence (GBV)—sexual and physical assault, rape, psychological and emotional abuse, denial of resources, and forced marriage—presents unique challenges for women and girls. An estimated 65% have experienced GBV, with the majority enduring it before the age of 18. "I was married very young," said *Mary Semira*, a peacebuilder from one of AFSC's local partners in Juba. "I stayed my whole life and often thought about suicide."

Though viewed as disposable—they can be expelled from their homes by husbands who grow tired of them and are frequently mistreated or abused by in-laws and extended family when widowed—women remain resilient, resourceful, and ready to lead their country toward peace. But first they need to heal—from the trauma they experience personally and from the secondary trauma that results from their peacebuilding roles.

This is no simple feat. Mental health services are an anomaly in the government-run health system, and South Sudan has one of the world's highest suicide rates; in 2020 it ranked 13 out of 172 countries surveyed globally. There is tremendous stigma around mental health. As a result, those suffering are left to languish or confined to prisons and hospitals, where they may be chained.

"People cope in a very negative manner," explained Basila Ciakuthi, a counseling psychologist who works with AFSC's peacebuilding program. "They will be very aggressive, or they numb their pain and don't want to talk about it."

PROVIDING PEACEBUILDERS WITH SOLACE, SKILLS, AND STRATEGY IN SOUTH SUDAN

AFSC launched our South Sudan work in 2019 with a two-year project focused on trauma healing. Drawing on more than a decade of experience working with trauma-affected refugees in Kenya's Dadaab refugee camp, this pilot was also informed



**AFSC Somalia program focused on
Alternatives to Violence.
Photo: Christopher Okudo, AFSC, 2019.**

by our signature Dialogue and Exchange Program (DEP). The DEP convenes Global South grassroots, civil society, and government leaders to discuss shared problems and strategize solutions in a judgment-free safe space.

In 2021 we launched a second, three-year trauma-healing project that helps remedy some hard facts. Despite enormous need, South Sudan has a dearth of trained professional counselors and counseling psychologists who can diagnose and treat mental health conditions like PTSD, depression, stress, and anxiety. Left untreated, these threaten recovery and rebuilding efforts and fuel cycles of revenge attacks. By working to address deep psychological wounds from decades of conflict, the project fosters reconciliation and social cohesion, providing a crucial pathway to sustainable peace.

Our partners, two local organizations—ACROSS and Sudan Evangelical Mission—help identify young people, people with disabilities, faith leaders, and peace committee leaders who are equipped with skills and knowledge on trauma healing and various peacebuilding tools that include AVP and Healing and Rebuilding of Our Communities (HROC). These community members learn skills to create more equitable and safe spaces and begin to process their own trauma. Women are at the center of this work. “People have seen their loved ones killed in front of them,” explained Charity Micah, a peacebuilder in Juba. A fellow peacebuilder, Towong Kenyi,

added that while many South Sudanese people witness horrific acts of violence, women also face heightened responsibility. “Because of the war, most of the men aren’t working. The burden is brought to the women because they are the ones looking after the families.”

To date, trauma healing has reached more than 2,000 peacebuilders in South Sudan. The work is ongoing, and a third project runs from October 2024 to September 2028 in selected *payams* (locations) in Juba, Mvolo, Mundri, and Jur River Counties. All three counties have long been affected by cyclical conflicts and climate shocks; these include prolonged droughts, which result in mass displacements and loss of life and livelihood, which worsen trauma distress and hinder peace. Recently, intense flooding has displaced families, threatened livelihoods, and caused spikes in diseases like malaria and acute watery diarrhea.

Despite the difficult subject matter, there is no resistance to joining our trauma healing and peacebuilding programs. In fact, there is strong demand for programs that build critical capacity among the people who have experienced and are most affected by trauma.

“When we visit, we hear that the best thing AFSC has done is to not bring foreigners to do the project,” said Ciakuthi. “People tell us, ‘You’ve trained our own so if I have a problem I know where to rush to.’”





Expressive Art Therapy for Trauma Healing, under HEAR Project of American Friends Service Committee, Ethiopia.

Photography: Mesfin Bekele, 2025; commissioned by Arts Culture and Health Collaboratives.

Participants explain that there is tremendous value in being able to identify and name what has happened to them—and the aftershock, which includes intense anxiety and panic attacks. Their self-esteem improves dramatically. There are other tangible benefits, too. While peacebuilders do not receive any monetary compensation for participating in the program, it is adaptable and responsive to their desire to make money after beginning their healing journey and acquire self-care skills, strengthening communities' resilience. This is especially important for widows and women who must provide for their families.

“Through the women’s healing group and the saving initiative, I am independent and taking care of my children,” said Monika Stephen, a peacebuilder and mother of five whose husband divorced her. “They brought us bedsheets which we embroider and sell. The money pays our children’s school fees and lets us feed them.”

CENTERING YOUNG PEOPLE IN SOMALIA

Nearly 1,000 miles east of South Sudan, Somalia has endured decades of conflict. Following the collapse of an authoritarian regime in 1991, the country spent more than twenty years without a central government. In 2012 a formal parliament was sworn in, and a presidential election was held for the first time since 1967. Twelve years later, in 2024, the parliament approved amendments for a provisional



AFSC intergenerational dialogues in Somalia.
Photo: Ibrahim Mohammed of Juba Foundation Mogadishu, 2022.

“Few have known peace, but the vast majority are deeply committed to it despite—or perhaps precisely because—they have endured significant trauma.”

constitution, but intense political divisions remain between the federal government and member state leaders.

Somalia’s stability is further threatened by other significant challenges. A three-year drought—from 2020 to 2023—pushed the country dangerously close to famine and was followed by El Niño-driven heavy rains and flash flooding; these displaced nearly 750,000 people and caused tremendous damage to farms, roads, and homes. By 2025 a perfect storm of climate shocks, crop failures, and the withdrawal of USAID caused rampant displacement and resulted in 4.6 million people facing high levels of acute food insecurity. That year, Somalia was ranked the world’s hungriest country—the absolute lowest among 123 countries assessed for the Global Hunger Index.

Young people make up the majority of Somalia’s population—approximately 70% are under the age of 24. They face marginalization, exclusion from political and other decision-making processes, and high rates of unemployment—over 60% in 2025, according to a study by the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA) Somalia. Few have known peace, but the vast majority are deeply committed to it despite—or perhaps precisely because—they have endured significant trauma. In three major Somali cities—Bosaso, Mogadishu, and Kismayo—and in northeast Kenya’s Dadaab Refugee Complex, they are living proof that people can heal and become powerful agents of change



Work with refugee and IDP returnees in Somalia. Photo: Quaker Hilfe Stiftung, 2021.

invested in solving problems, refuting rising clan violence, and replacing hate with hope.

Established in 1991 and home to hundreds of thousands of people who have fled war, famine, conflict, and persecution, Dadaab is one of the world's largest refugee camps. Its present population is 96% Somali and includes young women like Amina.* After witnessing her brother being violently abducted by a militia member, Amina had recurring nightmares and flashbacks, experienced profound sadness and isolation, and struggled to trust others. AFSC's partner Refugee Consortium of Kenya provided her with life-changing counseling. In therapy, she learned to understand and address her grief and trauma, develop coping skills, and create meaningful connection with others in the camp. "Nobody had helped me talk

about this incident before," Amina said. "I feel so relieved."

AFSC and partners have provided more than 2,300 refugees and asylum seekers in Dadaab with counseling services since 2013. We also work with internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Somalia, providing them with critical conflict resolution skills. In Mogadishu, we train young peace agents, who then partner with school administrators to resolve school-based disputes. These young leaders recently facilitated a productive meeting between students and lecturers at Zamzam University, preventing a planned strike that would have caused serious disruption.

Other programs—Alternatives to Violence Program (AVP), Turning the Tide, and Healing and Rebuilding of Our Communities (HROC)—are also having an impact. Both AVP and HROC involve art therapy and leverage Somalia's rich cultural traditions—poetry, storytelling, crafts, theater, and dance—as a form of therapy to help people heal. While AVP trains young people to be ambassadors of peace, HROC focuses on changing community dynamics, transforming them into safe spaces where survivors can rebuild trust with neighbors and recover from past wounds together. Turning the Tide mobilizes people to advocate for change, encouraging them to hold elected officials accountable—not with violence but with petitions and other formal documents. The Public Achievement Model is similarly focused on civic engagement and convenes young people to identify problems—

everything from overcrowding to drug abuse to misinformation on social media. Once trained, these young people work without assistance from NGOs or government but in partnership with elders and other community members.

While the path to peace in South Sudan and Somalia is not linear and is often obscured by obstacles, women, young people, and other historically marginalized groups are making important inroads. These bold leaders hold on to hope while confronting their trauma by engaging in dialogue, learning critical coping skills, and mobilizing to improve their communities. They are also committing to coexistence. In doing this important work and embracing nonviolence, they are helping to ensure that the mistakes of the past are not repeated and that future generations will revere, respect, and experience prolonged periods of safety and stability.



Youth-led and community initiative in Somalia. Photo: Rashid Ali of WASDA Dohbley, 2021.

2

PART TWO

ARTS AND CULTURE FOR HEALING: EAST AFRICA AND THE HORN

Andani.Africa: Molemo Moiloa, Phumzile Nombuso Twala

**"In the Absence" (installation view) by
Shabu Mwangi and Ngugi Waweru,
Wajukuu Art Project, Nairobi, July 2024.
Courtesy of the artists.**



INTRODUCTION

The East and Horn of Africa region extends to the Indian Ocean, encompassing countries such as Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea, Djibouti, Kenya, Sudan, South Sudan, and Uganda. The region has a combined population exceeding 300 million, led by Ethiopia (116 million), Kenya (54 million), and Sudan (44 million).¹ Despite its strategic geopolitical importance and economic potential, it faces severe peace and security challenges. As such, it has been designated as one of Africa's primary flashpoints. Its unique socio-economic dynamics and escalating crises demand comprehensive policy attention and sustained peacebuilding efforts to address interconnected conflicts threatening regional stability.²

In April 2023, Sudan erupted into civil war, forcing millions to flee and destabilizing the area.³ This crisis is the latest flashpoint in a region facing armed conflicts, ethnic violence, climate-driven resource scarcity, and governance failures. Ethiopia grapples with the Tigray War's⁴ aftermath, Somalia battles Al-Shabaab extremism,⁵ eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) remains trapped in violence, and South Sudan struggles with peace implementation. Driven by these protracted conflicts, the region hosts a significant number of refugees and displaced persons, with Sudan's civil war alone displacing millions of people. This massive forced movement occurs amid rising poverty, climate-driven food insecurity, and severely strained essential services. Additionally, the region contends with ethnic violence, governance failures, and the legacy of decades of human rights abuses.⁶ As social tensions rise, traditional peacebuilding⁷ approaches have proven insufficient. State-led processes often fail without genuine, inclusive dialogue reaching every level of society.

Across the region, innovative peacebuilding initiatives are emerging that prioritize local ownership and community-led healing. Grassroots movements are bridging ethnic

divides through dialogue, while women and youth leaders drive reconciliation efforts often excluded from formal peace processes. Climate-adaptive approaches address resource conflicts before they escalate, and trauma-informed programs build collective resilience. These bottom-up efforts, combined with inclusive transitional justice mechanisms, offer pathways toward sustainable peace that formal state-led processes alone cannot achieve.⁸ This moment demands new frameworks, deeper collaboration, and people-centered strategies that address root causes while building resilient pathways to justice and reconciliation.⁹

Overview

Founded in 1917, the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) operates as an organization rooted in social change principles. The AFSC's mission, inspired by the Quaker belief in everyone's inner light, is to challenge injustice and build a peaceful world. AFSC's current mission centers on advancing just and sustainable peace, promoting economic justice, and developing equitable responses to migration issues. Strategies primarily used by AFSC to achieve strategic goals are based on four pillars, namely: convening, grassroots and civil society organizing, advocacy, and research.

The creation of organizing platforms, such as those that unite creative voices, has emerged in recent years in the form of convenings held by AFSC in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, namely in Morocco (2022), Jordan (2023), and Nairobi (2025). These Dialogue and Exchange Program (DEP) convenings have served as key platforms for dialogue and exchange around the role of arts and culture in fostering social change.

Building on previous convenings and dialogues in the MENA region, AFSC initiated an inquiry into methods of advancing social change within the East and Horn of Africa region specifically. This research initiative stems from recognition of the complex and interconnected social challenges that affect this area, including environmental impacts

as well as healing and reconciliation needs in post-conflict and post-colonial societies.

Recognizing arts and culture as powerful tools for connecting people, fostering empathy, mobilizing communities, and making complex issues accessible, this research study examines cultural strategies that contribute to healing, wellbeing, and resilience-building.

Background to this study

Andani.Africa was commissioned to lead the research component of this initiative because of its expertise in the creative sector. As a specialist research organization focused on the cultural and creative industries (CCIs) across the African continent, the Andani.Africa team combined strong visual arts expertise with expansive research and exceptional facilitation skills. Based on the AFSC's programmatic goals, they provided valuable insights on the research and development of the 2025 gathering. Andani.Africa's approach for this project has been grounded in relationship-centered ethics that aim to foster an atmosphere of openness, collaboration, and meaningful cultural exchange.

This research initiative addresses East and Horn of Africa's emerging challenges—particularly those related to environmental change and healing both during and after conflict—by examining arts and culture as underutilized tools for social cohesion and problem-solving. The study seeks to determine whether artistic and cultural practices function as healing modalities by investigating how knowledge sharing and collaborative engagement illuminate connections between creative expression and therapeutic approaches to resilience and wellbeing. The research also examines possibilities and challenges related to cultural strategy, community arts, and cultural integration in East and Horn of Africa.

The methodology in this study involved desktop research, a literature review, semi-structured interviews, and thematic analysis to identify key patterns. Desktop research was conducted

to gather preliminary data on contemporary discourse on cultural practices, artistic interventions, and healing opportunities. Findings from this research informed the literature review, which established foundational knowledge on regional arts and healing practices. Key themes from this review informed the participant selection criteria and convening structure.

A list of criteria was developed to identify artistic practitioners within the focal region. This process involved a desktop study as well as consultation of existing AFSC Kenya network contacts. This comprehensive process (including long- and short-listing) resulted in the selection of 23 diverse participants from 11 African countries. A partial list of all the individuals involved in this study can be found in part five. This appendix details the participants, partners, consultants, and staff members, organized by their respective roles and nationalities.

Semi-structured interviews conducted with selected practitioners were used to gather nuanced details about artistic practices used as healing modalities. Thematic analysis was used to examine the emergent patterns and interconnected themes within the collected data.

The structure of the convening¹⁰ session framework was designed to create collaborative spaces in which the selected artists and activists could meaningfully exchange. This framework sought to foster collaboration through group dialogue, artistic expression, and reflective exercises centered on emergent themes.

The study employed a collaborative partnership approach—with Andani.Africa working with staff from Lambent Foundation, the AFSC regional committee, KGI Projects, and regional practitioners—to gather diverse perspectives and knowledge from across the East and Horn of Africa region. This process involved carefully selected participants who represent diverse artistic disciplines, varying levels of experience, and different biographical backgrounds to create a balanced cohort of artists, cultural workers, and



Wajukuu Art Project,
Photo: Shabu Mwangi.

social activists. This enabled exploration of the intersection between arts, culture, and healing within specific regional contexts through direct engagement with practitioners positioned at this nexus.

Building on AFSC's DEP model, which provides a platform for cultural exchange, this research explores how such collaborative frameworks enable participants to develop strategies, build capacity, form networks, and contribute diverse perspectives that enhance cultural practices as mechanisms for meaningful social change. A detailed description of the methodology used for this study can be found in Appendix I.

This report comprises four main sections. *Section 1* introduces foundational concepts of culture, healing, and trauma recovery within East and Horn of Africa contexts. *Section 2* examines emerging patterns, including individual-communal healing dynamics, nature-based practices, ongoing restoration cycles, and artistic methods such as music integration, body mapping, and radical listening. *Section 3* presents three detailed case studies from Rwanda, South Sudan, and Kenya that demonstrate cultural strategy, community arts, and cultural integration approaches. *Section 4* concludes with insights on culturally rooted healing ecosystems, operational challenges, and sustainable pathways for community resilience-building.

CULTURE AND HEALING

The desire for a shift in our current situation is what fundamentally drives the need for change. However, meaningful change requires understanding our present circumstances first. AFSC has undertaken a deliberate approach to assess the current role of arts and culture in this region through evidence-based research. To comprehend how practitioners, artists, activists, and changemakers operate locally, the organization is examining some of the social conditions that shape artistic responses and practices.

While an initial inquiry indicates that political legacies have had (and continue to have) a powerful impact on East Africa and the Horn, there are other underlying factors equally worthy of consideration. Some potential strategies for exploring these factors are expanded upon in this report, such as nature-based healing and environmental stewardship; intergenerational trauma transmission; colonial land injustice affecting informal settlements; and reclamation of indigenous knowledge systems. What is particularly important, however, is the identification of issues pertinent to the region. Some countries in this region have experienced involuntary change through factors beyond communities' direct control (such as ongoing regional conflict), creating trauma that necessitates unique or specific healing-centered approaches to transformation and social change.

Culture as an enabler of social change

Culture—the shared system of values, beliefs, and worldviews that shapes how people perceive reality—is a particularly powerful driver of social change, because it provides the invisible framework that guides interpretations and interactions. As both a stabilizing force and a vehicle for transformation, culture can facilitate individual and collective healing processes. Culture permeates everyday life in countless subtle yet profound ways. Language patterns, casual conversations, and humor reflect cultural values, for example. Even seemingly personal decisions are guided by cultural norms that have been internalized. Culture provides the foundation through which people interpret experiences, assign meaning, and understand their place in the world. Often, individuals are so deeply embedded in their cultural norms that they are rarely questioned until different perspectives are encountered.¹¹

Social change refers to significant alterations in cultural patterns, social institutions, human behaviors, and governing structures. These can occur gradually or rapidly through factors such as

technological innovation, social movements, shifts in collective consciousness, and transformations in legislative frameworks as well as societal norms. This encompasses changes in laws, policies, and regulations that shape community life and individual rights.¹² Within this context, the role of the artist, practitioner, or activist often becomes that of the cultural broker. In this way, they can reshape collective consciousness, creating conditions that can influence both informal cultural shifts and formal institutional changes in rules, laws, and governance systems.

International development specialist Duncan Green¹³ emphasizes the notion that change-seeking strategies must recognize the interplay of diverse factors within complex systems, taking into account how cultural shifts create conditions for broader social transformation. Understanding how this happens through the lens of a theoretical framework—including cultural strategy, community arts, and cultural integration approaches—enables a broadened view into how culture can drive social change. These various approaches have been explored by AFSC through previous research and convenings.

Rather than conducting an exhaustive review of these strategic frameworks, which can be explored in previous AFSC reports (<https://afsc.org/assembly>), this study centers on the foundational concept of healing itself, examining what arts practitioners understand about healing, if and how it manifests through their artistic practice, and the conditions that either nurture or obstruct its unfolding.

1

Cultural Strategy

The cultural strategy approach uses artistic products to shift public discourse around social issues, typically pairing working artists with professional organizers in purposeful collaborations that create spaces for community healing. This framework operates on the premise that behavior change stems from shifts in perception, requiring people to reimagine their

worldview before altering their actions. In addition to fostering dialogue, artistic expression serves as an approach that illuminates diverse perspectives, facilitates emotional processing of systemic harm, and inspires collective mobilization toward social change.¹⁴

2

Community Arts

The community arts approach centers on the process of artistic creation (rather than finished products), engaging community members who may not identify as artists and utilizing local cultural resources as a foundation for engagement. These connections build social capital, foster relationships, and develop leadership skills through creative expression, which can help process trauma and strengthen community bonds. The approach catalyzes collective action, as communities establish shared goals while creating supportive spaces.¹⁵

3

Cultural Integration

This approach integrates local cultural practices, expressions, and worldviews into community organizing. By leaning into effective and sustainable organizing, rooted in local culture and its inherent approaches or practices, cultural integration fosters inclusiveness while creating spaces where identity becomes a source of strength, allowing communities to draw on their own knowledge as foundations for personal growth in the context of collective action and repair.¹⁶

Healing

A collective conception of healing that has emerged from the research frames it as a process that is represented by a complex, non-linear journey of restoration and recovery that spans multiple dimensions: physical, psychological, social, and spiritual. It has been described by expressive arts therapy experts Stephen K. Levine

and Ellen G. Levine as a continuous process of transformation that encompasses the recovery of dignity, wholeness, and agency following harm, loss, or trauma.¹⁷

True healing, rooted in emotional awareness, fosters transformation, enabling growth through engagement with challenges, discovery of new meanings, reclamation of humanity, and development of resilience. While inherently relational, it requires both inner work and community transformation. Healing is not merely the absence of harm; rather, it cultivates positive connections, engages with difficult experiences, discovers new meaning, and cultivates resilience.

Palliative care experts Balfour Mount and Kappy Flanders¹⁸ describe healing as a journey toward wholeness that can occur even when cure is not possible—an area further explored by physician Michael Kearney,¹⁹ who has proposed a model that addresses both the alleviation of symptoms and the deeper transformation of the whole person. Healing is, therefore, a holistic process that provides a space for emotional release, catharsis, balance, and spiritual connection.

Healing can be understood from biomedical or contextual perspectives. Biomedical approaches—combining biological, medical, and physical science—primarily focus on symptom reduction and physiological restoration. However, Jessica Horn's work demonstrates the limitations of uncritically applying orthodox Western psychology to African contexts, given its highly individualized understandings of the self and its tendency toward medicalization and depoliticization of trauma. Contextual approaches emphasize cultural beliefs, social support systems, and structural factors as shaping healing experiences.

African feminist approaches to healing challenge Western psychology's individualized frameworks, recognizing that healing must engage the structural roots of distress. Horn's work with the African Institute for Integrated Responses (AIR) demonstrates how practitioners are re-politicizing understandings of trauma, acknowledging that

power relations—including patriarchal power and economic marginalization—underpin individual and collective distress. At the center of trauma are issues of power: power as defined by context, culture, and tradition.

For communities born into war, economic marginalization, and discrimination, the world itself becomes the stressor. Activism to change structural conditions, thus, is necessary alongside therapeutic interventions. As Horn argues, any framework for reconceptualizing trauma must recognize that, in many societies, bad things happen to good people all the time because, somewhere in the global halls of power, they are purposefully made to happen. Since trauma is largely human-made, healing must be transformative both in the intimacy of caring relationships and in the pursuit of social justice.

Healing in African contexts often involves interdependent notions of self, rooted in the philosophical concept of ubuntu. Where a person's distress impacts and is held by others in the community, healing becomes a collective responsibility. Therapeutic approaches extend beyond talk therapies to include culturally familiar methods such as music, dance, and collective song. Women survivors, in particular, consciously use these methodologies with therapeutic intent, creating positive states of deep social and spiritual connection. AIR practitioners also developed the concept of "livelihoods therapy," recognizing that, for many women affected by conflict and violence, the humiliation of not being able to provide for oneself or loved ones is intimately linked to emotional imbalance. Regaining economic agency through access to land, tools, and skills for trade becomes key to regaining emotional agency and may also translate into political agency.

Healing cultivates positive capacities and connections, engages with difficult experiences, discovers new meaning, and cultivates greater resilience. While inherently relational, it requires both inner work and community or social-level transformation.



South Sudan Theatre Organization,
Photo: Magi Kowrto.

Participants at the 2025 convening grappled with articulating what healing means in practice, revealing diverse and sometimes uncertain understandings. Some admitted, “I don’t know what healing is,” while others recognized manifestations in unexpected forms, identifying that “crying is healing,” for example. A fundamental insight emerged: “Healing is not a destination; healing is a constant process of transformation.”

The healing process is often non-linear and includes numerous stages of manifestation, which have been explored by various scholars.²⁰ Viewing healing as a multi-stage transformation²¹ connects directly to trauma healing: the particular restoration processes required when individuals and communities face distressing experiences.

Trauma healing

Trauma can be described as a deeply disturbing experience that leads to distress, with psychiatrist and researcher Judith Lewis Herman calling it an experience that “overwhelms the ordinary human adaptation to life.”²² Central to contemporary trauma understanding is the recognition that trauma is stored somatically within the body’s nervous system and cellular memory, often manifesting as physical symptoms (such as chronic tension) and dysregulated emotional responses. It is a disruptive force that creates lasting physiological and psychological harm.

Consequently, trauma healing represents a specialized area within the broader field of healing practices to address its specific impacts on individuals and communities. It is a multifaceted process that addresses the profound impacts of overwhelming distress across psychological, emotional, spiritual, social, and physical realms, aiming to restore equilibrium and wholeness. Ultimately, trauma healing empowers survivors to regain a sense of self.

There are multiple stages encompassed within this specifically, along with numerous interventions that have been studied for facilitating recovery

from trauma, such as art-based trauma healing. This may include embodied practices such as movement, breathwork, and creative expression through the body, which have the ability to bypass cognitive defenses. Aligned with this approach, psychotherapist Maria Takaendisa²³ draws on ubuntu-informed²⁴ storytelling to reframe trauma healing from an African perspective. Through a process of challenging existing Western conceptualizations, she cautions against a reductionist approach to understanding how trauma can be framed. She highlights how such an approach could strip away historical and socio-cultural context, which may, in fact, contribute towards creating trauma. As a pathway to trauma healing, processing, and integration, Takaendisa uses proverbs to describe personal trauma endured within academic spaces. For instance, the Shona proverb, “Chinokanganwa idemo asi muti haukanganwe,” which directly translates to, “It is the axe that forgets, but the tree that was harmed will always remember,” is used by the scholar to expand on harm that leaves traces of trauma.

Clinical psychologist Michael Njeru²⁵ offers a similar perspective, adding to broader theories²⁶ of decolonial perspectives on trauma. Njeru posits, through the lens of decolonizing trauma in Kenya, that there is a need for a cross-cultural understanding of the subject. A thread that connects these notions of trauma healing is the concept of “re-membering,” coined by philosopher, author, and social theorist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o,²⁷ which essentially calls for a re-piecing of the past to overcome a condition of present fragmentation. This concept can be seen in how trauma healing manifests.

Horn has examined African approaches to trauma and wellbeing, challenging Western psychological frameworks in development work. Through dialogue with African practitioners, Horn’s work through the African Institute for Integrated Responses to Violence Against Women and HIV/AIDS re-politicizes trauma understanding, recognizes structural distress roots, and values collective self-concepts over individualism. Horn’s scholarship in this area of work highlights music,

song, and dance as therapeutic tools. She also advocates for non-clinical healing practitioners and stresses contextual interventions. The work aligns with decolonial scholarship by interrogating power dynamics around expertise and documenting methodologies from African feminist organizations that address emotional wellbeing and violence prevention.²⁸

Against this backdrop of decolonial wellbeing frameworks, the intersection of healing practices with artistic practices, as explored through this research, presents potential avenues for expansion within this geographic region. Current practices that inform this statement provide further insight.

Current practices

In this study, the landscape of healing has revealed itself as a dynamic ecosystem. Arts practitioners from this region describe their work not as isolated interventions, but as interconnected relationships between people, place, and practice. Key findings have emerged that offer an entry point into understanding the experiences of arts practitioners within this region and how they relate to healing.

This research indicates that healing work is a complex, living ecosystem where individual journeys interweave with collective transformation, personal roots run deep, community networks spread wide, and multiple forces converge to enable conditions for growth. A series of interconnected themes emerged, illuminating how healing through artistic practice functions.

Trauma healing emerged through practitioners' accounts as one strand in the web of relationships that characterize this healing ecosystem. While not the central focus of this research, trauma healing remains an important consideration given its interconnected role within broader healing practices and community wellbeing initiatives.

1

Trauma healing and everyday wellbeing: part of the natural terrain

The experiences shared throughout this study have revealed that trauma and everyday wellbeing flow together in an intimate, symbiotic relationship, rather than exist as separate territories in the healing landscape. There is literature that broadly explores the conceptual framework of trauma healing and everyday wellbeing as integrated aspects of human experience. Post-traumatic growth theory, within the framework of Positive Psychology, exemplifies this idea, examining growth processes that contribute to enhanced wellbeing across multiple domains. Through their work with bereaved parents, Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun²⁹ first discussed this topic in literature, arguing that it is an ongoing process rather than a static outcome.

Conceptions of healing-centered peacebuilding have also gained more prominence. According to scholar and healing-centred practitioner Angi Yoder-Maina,³⁰ this approach views mental health as a shared concern, connecting individual challenges to wider social factors that may compromise or enable collective stability. Some of this regional evidence can be seen in the core interventions of the AFSC and its partners in Makamba and Bujumbura City, Burundi.³¹ Psychosocial support provided by AFSC to populations traumatized by Burundi's cycles of violence have enabled some to accept painful memories and achieve socio-economic reintegration. Key activities such as the formation of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and the conducting of Intergenerational Dialogues have helped to progress recovery, restoration, and active communal participation. In this context, the AFSC's healing interventions³² reveal a vital interconnection with wellbeing: a recovery of abilities and achievement of peace of mind. In this case, trauma survivors became active participants in community and economic life, illustrating how psychological healing and quality of life are fundamentally intertwined.³³

While numerous examples can be drawn from theoretical frameworks based on trauma healing, many of the emerging patterns in this study reveal a more direct engagement with ideas of healing in a broader sense, without centering trauma necessarily.

2

Healing as an individual and communal practice: The root

There are numerous examples of existing literature that emphasize communal approaches to healing within African contexts. Practitioners involved in this study, however, have revealed a more nuanced understanding that honors both individual and collective healing journeys. This inward-looking approach does not contradict communal healing, but rather suggests a complementary relationship, where personal and shared experiences nourish one another. Such integrated healing approaches are rooted in Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), frameworks of understanding that communities have developed over generations to transmit knowledge about holistic wellbeing and cultural values.

Within African contexts, such collective wisdom has formed the bedrock for more holistic approaches towards healing practices. For example, a study of traditional healers in South Africa found that many of them attributed mental health to spiritual, socio-cultural, psychosocial, and physical factors. In this study, researchers Sinethemba Shange and Eleanor Ross³⁴ found that, based on indigenous knowledge, a collectivist perspective mainly informed conceptions of healing; this highlights a key theme in contemporary African healing literature. Notably, indigenous knowledge posits that mental illness is not the only reason for communal healing; various other experiences also trigger it. There are some notable examples of cultural practices that expand on this throughout this AFSC study.

Contemporary multimedia artist Rehema Chachage's exploration of healing through her

childbirth recovery exemplifies an interconnected approach.³⁵ While childbirth created individual trauma (on the body) requiring personal physical restoration, it simultaneously revealed and activated an awareness about a circle of women within her family and community who provided support through this phase of her life. Rehema's experience demonstrates how individual healing journeys can serve as gateways to discover existing communal networks, where the vulnerability of personal recovery becomes the catalyst for accessing deeper community connections and intergenerational wisdom that sustains both individual and collective wellbeing.

Additionally, the AFSC's 10-year Horn of Africa strategy,³⁶ developed with Brot für die Welt, aligns peacebuilding efforts across eight countries in this region—Sudan, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea, Djibouti, Uganda, and Kenya—to address shared challenges of conflict, governance, and underdevelopment to promote regional peace and stability. The AFSC's peacebuilding approach embodies this integrated healing approach through its Transitional Justice & Healing pillar, which recognizes that addressing the region's chronic trauma requires healing programs that honor both individual recovery and collective restoration.

Indigenous healing practices have long understood what contemporary peacebuilding is now rediscovering: that the natural environment is not merely a backdrop for healing, but an active participant in it.

3

Nature as part of healing: The soil

Nature is foundational to healing: land-based practices like gardening and connecting with natural environments create essential connections between personal restoration and environmental stewardship, integrating daily activities with deeper spiritual work within a broader ecological relationship.

A notable example of artistic and cultural practices that expand on this idea is Togolese heavy metal



Kairos Futura, Lamu Space Station, 2022. Courtesy of Kairos Futura. Photo: Ajax Axe.

band Arka'n Asrafokor. As shared by guitarist and vocalist Rock at the 2025 convening, the band's songwriting and lyricism draws from African traditions and wisdom, often referencing calls to protect the environment. The power of creation is highlighted as something that can be harnessed in communion with nature. The band's messaging breaks new ground by making sense of lived reality through lyrical content that is shaped by mysticism, cosmology, and environmentalism.

Nature- and land-based healing practices are increasingly recognized as evidence-based therapeutic approaches. Studies such as the AFSC's Horn of Africa strategy³⁷ have shown the integration of physical, spiritual, and emotional wellbeing through direct environmental engagement. Insights from this study³⁸ reveal that indigenous healing frameworks recognize humans as ecological beings who require harmonious relationships with nature for wholeness. Nature-based practices—including forest bathing, wilderness experiences, and walking clubs—provide therapeutic benefits for mental health, anxiety management, and emotional regulation. These approaches connect violence against land with violence against people, viewing ecological healing as essential to peacebuilding. The strategy includes a Climate and Environmental Justice Pillar, which recognizes that climate change causes displacement and conflict, directly impacting human security and regional stability. The pillar aims to reduce the effects of environmental change on human security and strengthen conservation initiatives.

Nature as a foundational support system for healing can also be seen in the work of environmental researcher and writer Panu Pihkala,³⁹ which explores the benefits of being outdoors as a health-promotion tool. Concepts such as “ecological emotion” and “affect” are also explored by the scholar, some of which have come to the fore in this research study.

Research in this study, combined with insights from the 2025 convening, indicates that healing is most effective when it connects individual and

collective wellbeing through practices that support both human health and care for the environment. This ecological understanding reveals that healing, like nature itself, moves in rhythms rather than straight lines.

Ongoing restoration cycle

Evidence from existing literature, in addition to this study, shows that healing follows the natural rhythm of growth, decay, and renewal; in other words, healing is not a destination, but an ongoing cycle. The healing-centered framework central to AFSC's peacebuilding⁴⁰ models, for instance, views recovery as a continuous effort to disrupt cycles of harm. The models utilized by the AFSC acknowledge and address trauma through healing-centered, culturally sensitive interventions, which are essential for building resilience, repairing relationships, and achieving effective peacebuilding at all levels of society.

AFSC initiatives in the region advance healing through five interconnected practices: social reintegration, religious and spiritual support, cultural events, peacebuilding models, and psychosocial support. By weaving together community gathering, cultural traditions, and trauma-informed approaches, their work creates sustainable pathways for care across the region.

At the 2025 convening, AFSC country representative for Somalia and South Sudan Zaina Kisongoa expanded on several peacebuilding models utilized. Kisongoa's expertise with leading multi-country peacebuilding, development, and humanitarian programs across East Africa has incorporated models such as Alternatives to Violence (AVP), which offers workshops that teach nonviolent conflict resolution and personal growth skills. Based on the belief that everyone can practice nonviolence, AVP trains participants to become facilitators through Training for Trainers (TTT), enabling them to lead workshops in their communities. Another model expanded on at the convening is the Healing and Rebuilding Our Communities (HROC), which is a

trauma-informed peacebuilding model that helps communities heal from violence and trauma.

Perspectives from the 2025 convening

Just as ecosystems require the breaking down of dead matter to create fertile soil for the emergence of new growth, research participants and practitioners have described their healing journeys as ongoing cycles in which moments of breakdown serve the larger restoration process. As articulated by performer and cultural worker Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja at the 2025 convening, having the will to “tell the story as it is” is an act of courage. Having confidence in the restoration process means that “it will hurt, but it will heal.”

A unique perspective shared by Tanzanian therapeutic practitioner Rehema “Remi” Busch espouses this framing. As a multifaceted practitioner who has made a shift from the formal education space—lending her skills as a youth counselor and education specialist—into what she describes as an ongoing process of “shedding” and “creating self anew,” Busch’s experience highlights holistic healing approaches. By being intentional about “continuing to ask, and continuing to be curious, and just being the annoying little miss, I’m not going to stop asking questions,” Busch continues to expand her worldview on approaches to healing.

Busch’s practice currently represents a unique synthesis of formal therapeutic training, indigenous wisdom, artistic collaboration, and intentional community living—all grounded in the belief that healing is an ongoing, community-supported process of returning to wholeness. Furthermore, on the constant work that healing takes, Busch remarks: “People call me... you’re always love and light... and I’m like, but do you know how much work it takes?” This self-awareness of her capabilities and limits as a practitioner is extended to ambitions she has for her own development in this area: “I want to have the tools to heal and hold space. I want to have the tools to always show up for my community

and my friends and myself, but it takes a lot of compassion.” Busch’s journey from educator to healing practitioner exemplifies restoration as a process of perpetual becoming.

An interview with Sagal Ali, founder of the Somali Arts Foundation (SAF), captures a powerful act of reclamation during moments of restoration: “None of our artists have ever focused on conflict or trauma. Interestingly... they explore friendship, womanhood, restoration, self-reflection, solitude, like a myriad of topics, never the ones that people often see in the news.” While Busch’s practice centers on individual transformation, Ali’s work with SAF demonstrates how collective healing emerges when communities reclaim their right to define their own narratives beyond trauma.

At the 2025 convening, participants grappled with healing as both intimate practice and collective necessity, beginning with honest acknowledgment: some admitted uncertainty about what healing truly means, while others recognized its manifestations in unexpected forms—even crying itself as a healing act. Nevertheless, a central theme emerged: healing is not a destination, but a constant process of transformation, one that demands acceptance as its starting point. Critically, the conversation shifted from deficit to possibility: rather than focusing solely on generational trauma, participants called for attention to generational healing—the deliberate cultivation of wellness across time. This reframing prompted a question that bridges individual and collective restoration: How do we build new foundations that honor memory while creating pathways toward wholeness?

Practitioners at the 2025 convening demonstrated healing’s multifaceted nature through their distinct artistic forms. Sudanese musician Ibrahim Bi Al-Badia shared musical expressions and collaborative performances throughout the gathering, illustrating music’s capacity to bridge divides and create collective experiences. Dance practitioners Tosin Oyeibisi and Adam Chienjo emphasized that “art is already medicine,” while acknowledging significant barriers: permit

requirements, self-censorship, and defunding that constrain artistic freedom and healing work's sustainability. Ugandan comedian Moses Jr Kiboneka (Uncle Mo) revealed comedy's unique healing potential through social commentary that allows communities to process difficult realities through laughter. His work demonstrates how humor creates safe spaces for confronting challenging truths while maintaining hope.

Together, these practitioners illustrated that healing can emerge through varied artistic languages—music, movement, and comedy—each offering pathways for individual expression and collective restoration. Their experiences underscore both art's inherent therapeutic power and the structural challenges practitioners navigate to sustain culturally grounded healing work.

Is artistic practice inherently a healing practice?

As discussed above, the convening's initial discussions cautiously questioned the relationship between artistic practice and healing. Through discussion, however, the participants began to venture various conceptions of healing for many forms of artistic practices, with participants employing the metaphor of “putting out the trash” to describe healing as “necessary maintenance” rather than crisis intervention. This practical framing prompted critical questions about prevention and restoration: What can be done so we don't need crisis or trauma healing? What is the whole, healthy state we're moving toward, and how do we look beyond simply returning to “that state before we got sick”?⁴¹

Central to these discussions was the recognition that healing requires participatory practices and culturally grounded language. Effective restoration demands speaking to communities in terms they understand, acknowledging that healing represents “some kind of restoration... a movement towards a desired state... what got broken... that we want restored.” This reframing positions healing not as an abstract concept, but as concrete, community-defined work toward wholeness. Participants then turned to examine

the approaches to this work, primarily through artistic practice as one part of holistic healing processes.

Despite the ongoing conflict and challenging conditions in Mogadishu, Somalia, photographer and archivist Mahad Mohamed continues to capture resilience within everyday life through his lens, seeking connection with the city's heritage through the remnants of destroyed buildings. His engagement with the city's built environment, particularly its ruins, has become a pathway for collective healing, positioning his work at the intersections of architecture, memory, and community.

By photographing these destroyed sites, Mahad unwittingly created opportunities for community members and elders to share stories of what once stood, transforming physical remnants into vessels of memory and connection.⁴² In other words, his lens documents not only Mogadishu's current physical landscape, but also allows people to reconnect with their heritage, bridging past and present through the very structures that bear witness to both destruction and survival.

His practice invites us to consider a deeper question: is artistic practice itself a form of healing?

Participants explored storytelling as both ancient practice and urgent necessity, with many tracing their work to deeply personal origins. One participant asked, “Why am I a storyteller? I was looking for a purpose. The journey started with healing myself first.” This understanding—that practitioners frequently transform personal pain into purposeful work—reinforced the earlier insight that “the helper needs a helper.”

This convening established community as an essential foundation for healing and recovery, positioning art as a powerful medium for this work. Key strategies emphasize direct, participatory engagement—such as bringing theatre to the people, installing community murals, and using body mapping—to foster physical, emotional, and social connection.

The discussions highlighted both the necessity and the challenges of this work. Notably, practitioners must navigate logistical barriers like permits, self-censorship, and the defunding of arts programs. A significant theme was the need to de-stigmatize mental health and ensure inclusivity for differently abled individuals.

Ultimately, the sessions called for protecting the artist's role as a truth-teller. This requires advocating for the work, carefully navigating philanthropic influence, and alchemizing challenges into sustainable practices that allow communities to heal themselves.

Not all practitioners mapped their creative work within a "healing" framework, however, and some resisted it. While some described artistic methods that require deliberate cultivation of restorative practices, others located their work in the broader ecosystem of ordinary human expression, viewing creativity as a natural habit rather than therapeutic intervention. For filmmaker Rafa Renas, who expressed a deep connection to her artistic practice as a form of resistance, creative expression and personal restoration flow as one continuous system: "My work is me and I am always part of my work."

Similarly, during a visit to GoDown Arts Centre in Nairobi, Kenya, founding executive director and cultural activist Joy Mboya described her work as an intangible terrain that resists clear boundaries, existing in a liminal space that defies simple classification as either "healing" or "not healing." Mboya's experiences working with artists in the space recognize that transformative creative practice often unfolds without explicit healing frameworks—the work simply happens, even as it facilitates profound personal and communal shifts.

This reveals that the healing ecosystem accommodates multiple understandings: some artists inhabit the overlap (where creativity and restoration are indistinguishable), while others work in adjacent territories (where artistic practice serves as essential life-giving expression, that is, without explicitly claiming healing as

its primary function). Rather than offering prescriptive solutions, this approach recognizes that sustainable healing emerges through tending to the dynamic relationships between personal agency and communal solidarity, environmental connection and creative expression, with artistic practice serving as a pathway in the ongoing work of restoration and resilience-building.

Culture functions as both foundation and catalyst for healing, providing the invisible framework through which communities interpret experiences, assign meaning, and pursue restoration. In East and Horn of Africa, practitioners demonstrate that effective healing emerges when artistic practice connects individual wellbeing with collective transformation, drawing on culturally specific traditions to address trauma, foster resilience, and create conditions for sustainable social change through creative expression.

These emerging patterns of healing reveal how the three cultural strategies function as interconnected healing approaches. *Cultural strategy* creates spaces where communities process shared experiences and shift perspectives through artistic dialogue. *Community arts* builds relationships and processes trauma through creative engagement, strengthening community bonds. *Cultural integration* draws on indigenous knowledge and local practices as foundations for collective action. Together, these strategies demonstrate healing as a living ecosystem that nurtures both individual restoration and collective transformation through culturally grounded artistic practice.

More comprehensive illustrations of how these dynamics take shape in practice can be found in the detailed case studies that follow later in this report.

Approaches

Understanding the specific approaches that practitioners use is crucial to grasping how artistic practices facilitate healing and transformation within communities. These approaches reveal not only the practical tools that enable healing

Isivivane memorial at Robben Island, South Africa — site where Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners were imprisoned and organized, 2014. Photo: fry_theonly.



work but also the underlying philosophies that shape how artists engage with trauma, resilience, healing, and restoration.

Previous studies,⁴³ as demonstrated by a review of the literature explored for this study, have demonstrated the therapeutic potential of various healing approaches as clinical interventions. These approaches have been associated with cathartic emotional releases and measurable shifts in psychological states, generating increased interest in their application within recovery frameworks. For the purposes of this study, further inquiry has connected these healing approaches to artistic practice to better understand the impact they may offer in the East and Horn of Africa region.

Artistic approaches engaged throughout this study span visual, performance, and somatic practices. Methods include body mapping, murals, filmmaking, recycled art costumes, and photography, while performance-based and embodied practices encompass sound, movement, storytelling, comedy, music, dance, *Forum theater*, and drumming circles, with breathwork grounding these approaches in physiological restoration. Together, these approaches create safe spaces, reduce stress, and regulate nervous systems—functioning as both artistic expression and what can arguably be regarded as healing technologies. These technologies combine traditional healing methods—drum, breathwork, trance, and embodied movement—with contemporary methodologies and, occasionally, partnerships with health institutions and universities.

These practices embody the interconnection between individual and collective healing: they function as platforms to process personal experiences as well as community resistance against oppression in contexts where freedom of expression faces restrictions. Importantly, some cultural practices aren't presented as essentially "African," but as specific traditions that have been passed down and are now being integrated into contemporary healing work.

At the 2025 convening, dance professional Tosin Oyeibisi shared approaches that inform his conception of holistic healing practice, through indigenous cosmologies. Drawing on Yoruba traditions, Oyeibisi described how "sound and spirit are not separated; everything is together," with performance itself functioning as remembering: "We are the embodiment of our ancestors... information put into works by our ancestors."

Furthermore, an element that is central to both healing practices and everyday life was prompted by this discussion. Breath surfaced as both portal and practice—a healing technology accessible to all. "Beginning with breath, breathing tells us a lot about what is happening in the body" and "helps us to stop and concentrate on the present," shared Oyeibisi.

While some practitioners have approached their practices from deeply introspective perspectives, others have generously explored how artistic methods can cultivate healing properties. This is a key finding that has emerged: artistic practice is not universally regarded as healing work, yet it is recognized as a powerful catalyst for consciousness transformation.

1

Music integration

Music integration as a healing approach creates pathways for connection and creative expression that honor indigenous practices, rather than imposing Western therapeutic frameworks. More importantly, music fosters shared identity that transcends ethnic or political divides. From the Trust for Indigenous Culture and Health (TICAH)'s drumming circles in Kenya and The Art of Healing (TAOH)'s music-based mental health interventions in Nigerian psychiatric wards, to embodied archival practices through song and dance (kina⁴⁴) that support genocide healing in Namibian communities, musical approaches consistently demonstrate their power to draw people together, dissolve social tensions, and break down existing barriers.

This approach's effectiveness lies in its ability to bypass cognitive defenses and create shared experiences that transcend individual differences, offering culturally resonant alternatives to clinical interventions while fostering the collective solidarity essential for both personal and communal restoration.

In the early 2010s, Ugandan grassroots initiative Music for Peace⁴⁵ was founded as a network that organized annual competitions and continental exchanges that highlighted music's role in education, voice, memory, and healing. Case studies such as *Beyond Intractability*⁴⁶ and *Documenting Peace*⁴⁷ (from 2016 and 2023, respectively) also note that music has played a pivotal role in regional peacebuilding initiatives.

Across East Africa—following Rwanda's 1994 genocide, Northern Uganda's instability, and Kenya's 2007/2008 electoral violence—artistic practices, including music, have supported peacebuilding efforts. These creative interventions span the entire conflict cycle, from prevention through post-conflict recovery, operating at local and national scales. Initiatives emerge from diverse sources: state programs, cultural relations organizations, and community-driven responses supported by non-governmental organizations. East and Horn of Africa's experience with arts-based peacebuilding demonstrates this approach's effectiveness in addressing complex conflicts, offering applicable models for other regions.

More recently, this study's interview with Eric Many and Suzanne Mieko of TICAHA revealed that some of their interventions employ communal music practices (particularly drum circles) as methods for fostering healing and reconciliation. These approaches create safe spaces where individuals engage in self-expression and community building; they are proving to be quite popular in Kenya, where TICAHA primarily operates.

Ultimately, the region's growing use of music-based peacebuilding demonstrates a culturally rooted approach that works alongside formal

mechanisms, addressing emotional and social dimensions of conflict that institutional processes often cannot reach.

2

Body mapping

Body mapping is an artistic technique where participants trace life-size outlines of their bodies on paper or canvas, then use this human silhouette as a canvas for creative expression and self-exploration.⁴⁸ Participants are encouraged to draw, paint, or write within and around their body outline as a way to reflect on significant life events, understand their experiences, and envision their future aspirations. The approach offers a non-verbal way for participants to express complex emotions that might be difficult to articulate. According to mental health experts and researchers de Jager et al., "body mapping serves as both a research method and therapeutic intervention, with applications ranging from visual storytelling to direct therapeutic practice."⁴⁹

The 2025 convening featured TICAHA's presentation⁵⁰ on body mapping as a core component of their healing work. TICAHA uses a cyclical healing approach that honors both individual and collective recovery through art-based interventions. *Release* creates safe spaces where survivors externalize trauma through body mapping and artistic expression, making the invisible visible. Working with torture survivors and LGBTI+⁵¹ community members, TICAHA provides non-threatening avenues for expressing what cannot always be spoken. *Receive* involves communal witnessing through Peace Path labyrinths, drum circles, and long-table meals where stories are validated without judgment, ensuring no one heals in isolation. *Return* acknowledges that healing requires coming back to community, to self, and to practice. Intergenerational artist residencies and public art installations rebuild connections that trauma has severed, reintegrating individuals with restored dignity. *Remember* completes and renews the cycle: public murals and installations transform healing into collective memory – not as a trauma

monument, but as a testament to resilience, acknowledging what happened while refusing to be defined solely by violence.

This systematic review of body mapping suggests that the emphasis on social justice, knowledge translation, research, and therapeutic outcomes varies considerably across body-mapping applications, as do the underlying intent and implementation of the method. While body-mapping shows promise, more research is needed to determine its effectiveness across different settings.

3 Radical presence and listening

Radical presence and listening create transformative healing spaces by prioritizing authentic connection over predetermined interventions, allowing practitioners to fully attune to individuals and communities as they express their lived experiences. This approach emphasizes deep community listening that emerges from genuine curiosity about authentic needs, rather than imposing external agendas, enabling practitioners to remain reflexive and responsive to what actually emerges in each unique context. As demonstrated by practitioners like Busch,⁵² who discovered that simply “sitting with people and holding space consistently” proves more effective than traditional clinical approaches, and Sagal Ali’s⁵³ emphasis on “deep community listening” through the Somali Arts Foundation, this method recognizes that the most profound healing interventions often arise from the radical act of bearing witness to others’ experiences, without judgment or the pressure to immediately fix anything.

This research study reveals that effective healing work emerges when practitioners trust intuitive responses over rigid academic protocols, grounded in ethical frameworks of care, love, and respect. Artists, particularly younger practitioners unconstrained by formal educational systems, naturally embody these healing qualities through compassion, patience, and authentic self-

expression, without pressure to teach or correct. This organic approach allows art to transcend traditional boundaries, creating meaningful inclusive environments that bridge generational divides, while establishing neutral grounds for reconciliation across communities divided by conflict, clan differences, or social barriers.

Throughout this study, acknowledging the limits of individual practice emerged as crucial to healing work. Collaborations between artists and clinicians—exemplified by Nigeria’s The Art of Healing (TAOH) and Ethiopia’s Meron Sisay Abey—ensure interventions balance artistic expression with therapeutic effectiveness, including medical approval of materials and designs. The core insight: community healing succeeds when practitioners engage people within their specific physical, emotional, and cultural contexts while upholding artistic integrity, ethical standards, and creative autonomy.

The study demonstrates that profound healing interventions often arise from authentic presence, rather than complex therapeutic frameworks, recognizing that artistic practice follows natural cycles; in other words, creativity serves different purposes depending on timing and circumstances. This understanding reveals how different creative practices flourish under varied conditions and serve multiple functions simultaneously, challenging narrow therapeutic views of art. Traditional art therapy approaches may sometimes reduce artistic expression to a diagnostic tool, viewing artistic practices primarily as windows into psychological states that trained professionals must interpret for clients. This clinical framework treats art-making as a tool for extracting insights rather than recognizing that creative expression itself can be healing.

The evidence from this region reveals that effective healing work emerges when cultural strategies operate in concert: shifting narratives, building relationships, and rooting interventions in local knowledge. East Africa’s experience offers vital lessons for other contexts, namely: resilience-building requires culturally grounded approaches;

healing moves in rhythms rather than straight lines; and communities possess within their own cultural practices the wisdom necessary for restoration. The question is not whether artistic practice heals, but rather how we can better support the cultural ecosystems where healing, wellbeing, and resilience naturally flourish.

CONCLUSION

The AFSC’s commitment to the DEP has led to an extension of inquiry into cultural strategies for social change to the East and Horn of Africa region. While recognizing the complex conditions in this area, the aim for this research is to identify innovative approaches to healing, community resilience, and wellbeing in this context.

The research has revealed how trauma and everyday wellbeing flow together symbiotically, how individual healing work creates strong roots that nourish broader community networks, and how nature-based practices provide essential grounding for restoration processes. The three case studies that follow illustrate how the conceptual frameworks—encompassing cultural strategy, community arts, and cultural integration approaches—translate in practice.

The study reveals that artistic practices form and strengthen interconnected healing ecosystems where individual restoration and collective transformation mutually reinforce each other within the specific contexts of ongoing and post-conflict recovery, environmental change adaptation, and decolonial healing processes across East Africa and the Horn.

Ultimately, the study demonstrates that artistic practice within this region has the potential to create sustainable change. Culturally rooted approaches recognize healing as an intersectional, cyclical process requiring patience, authentic presence, and deep community listening rather than prescriptive therapeutic interventions. The three cultural strategies (cultural strategy, community arts, and cultural integration)

function as interconnected approaches: shifting narratives through artistic dialogue, building relationships through creative engagement, and drawing on indigenous knowledge as foundation for transformation. The evidence confirms that communities possess within their cultural practices the wisdom necessary for healing. The question is, how we support these vital ecosystems to flourish?

Abbreviations / Acronyms

AFSC	American Friends Service Committee
AVP	Alternatives to Violence Project
CCIs	Cultural and Creative Industries
DEP	Dialogue and Exchange Program
HROC	Healing and Rebuilding Our Communities
IKS	Indigenous Knowledge Systems
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
SAF	Somali Arts Foundation
SHGs	Self-Help Groups
TAOH	The Art of Healing
TICAH	Trust for Indigenous Culture and Health
TTT	Training for Trainers
US(A)	United States (of America)



Ubumuntu Arts Festival,
Photo: Hope Azeda.

CASE STUDIES

Cultural strategy case study: Ubumuntu Arts Festival

The cultural strategy approach leverages art and artist collaborations to influence public discourse and enable social change around specific issues.⁵⁴

The Ubumuntu Arts Festival emerged from Uganda-raised Hope Azeda's personal journey as a Rwandan refugee who returned to her homeland after the 1994 genocide. Founded in 2015, the initiative began as a festival but has since evolved into a comprehensive organization addressing intergenerational trauma through storytelling and drama. Azeda, a leading figure in contemporary Rwandan theatre who was trained at Makerere University, harnesses the power of art for healing and reconciliation through her practice.

The annual festival is primarily held at the Kigali Genocide Memorial in Rwanda, with further plans in place to relocate to Nyamata Genocide Memorial in the Bugesera district. Both sites are of historical significance, serving as central sites of genocide remembrance and education, which is an important aspect of the festival's position within its community. The festival has arts and healing programs throughout the year, and its primary participants are young people (who make up the majority of Rwanda's population), women, and children. There is an intentional focus on ensuring the inclusion of the post-genocide generation (such as the Generation 25 initiative expanded on later), including children of perpetrators, survivors, and those born from rape during the genocide.

The Ubumuntu Arts Festival fosters supportive spaces for challenging discussions about identity,

honest storytelling, and intergenerational trauma processing, enabling youth to recognize their agency in crafting personal narratives beyond inherited family experiences. The initiative drives change through transparent conversation, collaborative art that confronts difficult histories, and the strategic use of silence and deep listening. Participants enter spaces that seek to transform suffering into authentic healing.

The artistic process begins with creating safe spaces where participants can explore their “roses and thorns,” acknowledging both pain and beauty in their experiences. Through collaborative work involving musicians, poets, dancers, and other artists, stories are transformed into embodied expressions that move organically from individual testimony to collective artistic creation. This includes storytelling through scriptwriting. The resulting production’s visual and auditory world becomes a symbiotic process that is based on the sites at which performances are held. This process reveals hidden truths and allows participants to connect with experiences beyond their own, developing empathy and understanding across different backgrounds.

Azeda’s use of a flexible methodology that responds to the energy present in each space is important for a process that flows between written material and performance. Another central practice includes the “iron ball exercise,” which allows participants to feel the physical burden of carrying one another’s experiences, as well as activities that support individuals in navigating through their traumatic experiences. These approaches consistently integrate silence as a transformative mechanism for deep listening and inner connection, acknowledging that participants need to address their own healing journey before effectively supporting others.

The impact extends beyond the immediate participants to influence broader community conversations about difficult histories. The Generation 25 project, for example, has revealed that young people in this context were experiencing identity crises because they had

never been told complete truths about their families’ roles during the genocide. Spaces for such conversations help to break cycles of silence and shame, empowering young people to understand that they can choose their own paths rather than being defined by inherited trauma.

Doing this kind of work is not without challenges. Some of the issues that emerge include the difficulty of securing appropriate funding for work conducted in sacred and sensitive spaces like genocide memorials. Corporate sponsors often want to promote their brands in ways that are inappropriate for memorial sites, creating tension between the financial needs and the precarious nature of the work. Additionally, the organization struggles with administrative capacity, as the growing scope of the initiative requires more sophisticated organizational support.

Infrastructure presents another significant challenge, as Rwanda lacks adequate arts facilities and educational institutions for creative disciplines. This forces the organization to work in non-traditional spaces and constantly adapt to available resources. The festival’s location at the genocide memorial does, however, indicate institutional support. Azeda elaborates: “It’s a space where the rich and the poor are supposed to have access.” The festival has become an established presence in Rwanda’s healing landscape. Remarking on trust built through consistency, Azeda states: “Now, after 10 years, I think that people have gained trust because of our consistency and our relentless way of saying, we must do this regardless, money or no money, we would thrive, and we still did the festival online.”

The emotional intensity of the work also creates ongoing challenges for sustainability, as both facilitators and participants carry heavy emotional loads when engaging with traumatic histories. Azeda emphasizes the need for self-care among practitioners, recognizing that unresolved personal trauma can interfere with the ability to support others effectively.

Nevertheless, this work reveals that confronting difficult histories through art can be a powerful way of creating the conditions necessary for collective transformation and reconciliation. Azeda described how the Generation 25 project revealed a critical gap: “I was shocked to learn that most of them had one common problem. They said nobody ever tells us the truth... What we are learning in school is just the history people want us to learn. But who am I?” This led to transformative conversations where young people could begin to separate their identity from inherited trauma: “Your father’s crimes don’t have to define you. You’re here to answer your own script. You’re here to write your own script.”

Ubumuntu’s transformation from festival to organization signals sustained community demand, requiring institutional infrastructure to support expanding programs beyond a single yearly gathering. The fact that there are plans in

place to move the festival to a new permanent space, with a theater and auditorium, suggests a need for expanded capacity. Ultimately, Azeda offers compelling narratives of individual transformation, including survivors experiencing catharsis and young people gaining new self-understanding, though community-level changes remain documented through testimony rather than metrics.

The Ubumuntu Arts Festival demonstrates that effective cultural strategy in post-genocide contexts requires more than artistic excellence—it demands sacred space, radical listening, and unwavering commitment to truth-telling. By transforming Rwanda’s genocide memorials into sites of active healing rather than passive remembrance, Azeda’s work proves that collaborative artistic practice can break cycles of inherited trauma and empower communities to choose reconciliation.



Ubumuntu Arts Festival,
Photo: Hope Azeda.



South Sudan Theatre Organization,
Photo: Margaret Kowarto.

Community arts case study: South Sudan Theatre Organization

The community arts approach uses collaborative artistic processes with community members to build relationships, develop leaders, and organize collective action around shared issues.⁵⁵

The South Sudan Theater Organization is a non-governmental organization (NGO) established in 2013 that uses theater and drama as tools for community transformation and social change. The initiative operates nationwide across all states of South Sudan, with headquarters in Juba. Founded by Joseph Abuk, Margaret Kowarto, and other practitioners, the organization operates as an arts-based platform that addresses critical social issues affecting communities across South Sudan. The organization has evolved over the years, with staff members across different departments—including programs, finance, logistics, production, and communication—demonstrating its growth into an essential community resource. Primarily, it

conducts trainings for students and community groups, produces radio dramas, and hosts public performances that tackle sensitive topics including governance, corruption, child marriage, and women's rights.

The South Sudan Theatre Organization operates year-round programming that includes annual theater and interstate festivals, ongoing training workshops, street performances, and community interventions across diverse venues, adapting to local contexts and accessibility needs. The initiative serves multiple demographics including students, community drama groups, women facing gender-based challenges, trauma survivors, and community members seeking venues for personal expression. They conduct comprehensive training in script writing and performance techniques that empower participants to develop topics from their own community experiences.

The staff and volunteers employ Augusto Boal's *forum theater* methodology to create

performances wherein community members transform from passive observers into active participants who directly engage with actors, propose solutions, and even step into scenes to demonstrate alternative approaches to challenging situations. The training process itself becomes transformative, as participants learn to articulate their experiences, develop creative solutions, and gain confidence in public expression. This approach proves particularly powerful in South Sudan's restrictive political context, where limited freedom of expression makes forum theater a vital safe space for voicing concerns and exploring community solutions through art. As co-founder Kowarto explains: "Through forum theater or through arts, we can speak everything out loudly." An intentional practice by the founders is ensuring the communities that are engaged with are free to express themselves in their own languages.



The impact of the South Sudan Theatre Organization extends far beyond individual performances, creating ripple effects throughout communities and families. Such lasting effects

of the interventions can be seen in the story of Rebecca, a girl who was destined for child marriage. Through the organization's intervention, by inviting her to participate in a theater production, her family changed their viewpoints, and she was able to continue her education and go on to graduate from university. This individual transformation demonstrates how artistic practice can influence life trajectories while simultaneously challenging community norms around gender roles and educational access.

Additionally, the organization invites government officials and community leaders to attend performances. This helps ensure safety for participants while also exposing decision-makers to community concerns, creating potential pathways for broader systemic change. As a theater-based organization, the ability to facilitate freedom of expression in this way offers a meaningful representation of the power of performing arts as a driver of social change.

The South Sudan Theatre Organization faces severe operational constraints from the restrictive political climate and bureaucratic obstacles, with authorities frequently denying permits despite proper documentation, while international donor presence creates government suspicions, forcing supporters to remain less visible. Religious scheduling considerations and dramatic funding collapse over two years (including withdrawal of USAID and private foundation support) represent further challenges. Staff now work without salaries, relying on established school drama clubs as a continuity strategy, while struggling to maintain programs amid unsustainable conditions.

The South Sudan Theater Organization exemplifies how community arts create vital spaces for expressions in restrictive environments. Their participatory approach demonstrates how collaborative artistic processes break down performer-audience barriers, while establishing community-invested ways to shift social and cultural norms.

Left: South Sudan Theatre Organization, Photo: Margaret Kowarto;
Right: Wajukuu Art Project, Photo: Shabu Mwangi.



Cultural integration case study: Wajukuu Art Project

This approach integrates local cultural practices, expressions, and worldviews into organizing to strengthen community health.⁵⁶

The Wajukuu Art Project is a community-based collective that emerged from necessity in the Mukuru informal settlement in Kenya. As Shabu Mwangi, one of the founding directors, explains: “The collective was started as an intervention of change or need for change... there was no place that a young person or youth within our neighborhood would go for any kind of support or a way to express or overcome vices that we faced during that time.” The organization operates as both a social intervention tool and a means of economic empowerment for local artists, developing art-based modules that are rooted in lived experience rather than academic frameworks.

Programming operates continuously throughout the year, with the collective serving two primary age groups: children from 6 to 15 years through its kids’ club and youth from 18 to 30 years through empowerment programs. However, during open social interventions, the project welcomes participants of all ages without restrictions.

Wajukuu’s art programs for youth nurture hands-on artistic expression. Fundamentals of artistic skills development (including drawing, painting, sculpting, and craft techniques) are introduced, and the activities encourage an emphasis on process over product. By guiding children through such exploration, Wajukuu facilitates connections through art-making. Moreover, the youth empowerment initiatives, such as the Maker Space and Mentorship, provide access to arts industry professionals. Participants are equipped with technical skills such as craftsmanship, design thinking, and digital media, among others.

Beyond technical skills, these programs develop critical thinking, problem-solving abilities, and fine motor skills, while providing a safe space for self-expression and emotional processing. The benefits of art-making in this context help participants process complex emotions and experiences, particularly during critical formative years when youth are particularly vulnerable. The conditions of the Mukuru slums are often challenging but, through the programmes offered by the collective, children are nurtured and encouraged to hone various skills. A key driver of Wajukuu's programming is to provide a safe haven for children affected by various social ills within their immediate environment.

The impact of Wajukuu is intended to extend beyond individual transformation to broader community healing. Participants are encouraged to develop hopeful, positive approaches to life and the ability to "dream without fear." The project prioritizes judgment-free environments where young people can be vulnerable and receive support. This extends beyond physical space to include mental and emotional safety, with emphasis on collective care rather than individual solutions. The initiative explores themes of identity, belonging, cultural restoration, and environmental healing, with land ownership being central to their philosophy of freedom and authentic self-expression. As Mwangi notes: "Land is freedom... land is the genesis of everything... for us, owning land is a sign or essence of belonging." Land ownership is viewed as essential for healing and belonging, addressing ongoing colonial injustices faced by informal settlement residents.

Thus, the organization has plans to expand to an area of rural land approximately 60 kilometers away from Mukuru, which would serve as a learning center and farm where participants could spend alternating weeks during school holidays. This aspect would allow participants to experience different environments and learn agricultural practices. The center will also facilitate intergenerational programs wherein participants will learn from elders through various cultural practices with a focus on the care and restoration of nature.

The collective employs various artistic methodologies, primarily body mapping and identity exploration exercises that complement this approach. These methods foster self-expression, environmental awareness, and self-esteem while creating culturally relevant alternatives to approaches that may be structured in more formal academic ways. Wajukuu's methodology centers on gathering collective energy within trusted community circles. Mwangi emphasizes that a "safe space is not only a physical space, but also a mental space... for us, to create a safe space is a space where no one will judge you. There is no judgment but it is a space where you can be weak and be supported."

Mwangi describes the current situation of people residing in informal settlements in this region as a reflection of ongoing colonial injustices and sees acquiring land as crucial for creating authentic spaces where people can feel grounded and develop their identities.

Fundamental shifts have been observed by the collective in how young people approach life, with Wajukuu program participants developing insight, information, hope, and positive outlooks that differ markedly from their peers in the community. Through long-term investment in change, the collective perpetuates an ethos that prioritizes "serving life" above commercial pursuits across generational lines. In this way, it grounds the collective's work within a framework of connection and community, rather than individual-centered approaches to life. This service-over-profit approach recognizes that healing must begin with inner transformation before it can ignite positive change in the surrounding environment and community.

The Wajukuu Art Project confronts several operational challenges that hinder its community service capacity. Space constraints constitute a primary obstacle, as demand consistently exceeds the project's ability to accommodate participants, forcing the team to turn away interested children and youth. Resource limitations create additional difficulties through unsustainable funding mechanisms that rely on unpredictable donations,

preventing consistent programming. Capacity gaps emerge when serving community members with disabilities or specialized needs beyond the team's current expertise, highlighting the need for expanded partnership networks and referral systems. Furthermore, as the collective grows, Mwangi expresses concern about preserving the foundational philosophy of prioritizing service over commerce, noting that internal conflicts sometimes arise when new members do not fully embrace the principle of serving humanity rather than pursuing commercial gain, threatening the organization's core values and mission: "I don't want to hope or see one day in future when [someone] out of Wajukuu [is] commercializing the collective because it's not a commercial collective; it's for social service, it's to serve humanity." He recognizes this philosophy affects growth: "We might grow very slow because we don't think commercially a lot, but that doesn't mean what we do is not impactful."

The initiative demonstrates how culture-based organizing can create transformative healing spaces by integrating artistic practice with methods like body mapping and collective care as foundations for community empowerment. Through culturally rooted artistic methodologies that emerge from lived experience rather than academic frameworks, the collective draws on community-centered values, showing how authentic cultural integration can sustain artistic interventions that help young people reclaim their identities and address broader issues of belonging, while connecting personal restoration to environmental and community healing.

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Far left and immediate left:
Wajukuu Art Project at Slum Art
Festival, Wajukuu, Nairobi, 2018.
Photography: Shabu Mwangi.

APPENDIX I: METHODOLOGY

Unpacking the methodology utilized in this study is crucial to establish the credibility and transparency of how knowledge was co-created with practitioners across diverse cultural contexts, enabling authentic insights into healing practices within East and Horn of Africa communities.

The methodology devised for this study was two-fold. The first component enabled the collection of contemporary discourse and literature on the subject matter, while also ensuring that the selection of relevant practitioners for engagement was informed by a rigorous process. The second aspect involved direct engagement with selected participants throughout the course of the study and the convening.

The methodology used for this study included the following steps:

Desktop research and literature review

Desktop research served as the foundational component for exploring existing knowledge on arts, culture, and healing within the East and Horn of Africa region. This involved systematic online searches and reviews of available digital resources to map the current landscape of cultural practices, healing modalities, and artistic interventions in the region as well as examination of academic and practitioner-based sources related to healing practices, artistic interventions, trauma recovery, and cultural approaches to wellbeing. This phase synthesized existing knowledge on concepts such as trauma healing, post-traumatic growth theory, indigenous knowledge systems, nature-based healing practices, and community arts approaches. It informed the initial understanding of key concepts, identified knowledge gaps, provided context for the research framework, informed the theoretical framework for subsequent study phases, and provided scholarly context for interpreting findings. This preliminary exploration also supported the identification of potential participants.

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with carefully selected practitioners from this region to

gather in-depth insights into their artistic practices, healing methodologies, and experiences working at the intersection of arts and wellbeing. These interviews followed a semi-structured format that allowed for organic conversations while ensuring key research questions were addressed. This flexible approach enabled the Andani.Africa team to explore unexpected ideas that emerged during conversations while maintaining consistency across all the interviews. These dialogues provided nuanced understanding of how practitioners conceptualize healing, implement artistic methods, and navigate challenges within their specific contexts. A key focus element that was explored in these interviews involved methods utilized by practitioners.

Participant selection

The participant selection process followed a systematic, multi-stage approach designed to ensure diverse regional representation and expertise across the specified region. Beginning with consultation of established CCI networks both within the African continent and the diaspora, the process involved longlisting potential participants and segmentation based on artistic disciplines, levels of industry experience, and biographical backgrounds. Explicit priority was given to practitioners primarily based within the regional focus area. The final cohort design accounted for a balance of artistic disciplines, experience levels, country and regional representation, gender balance, English language proficiency, travel accessibility, schedule availability, and program compatibility. This comprehensive approach resulted in the final selection of 23 practitioners from 11 African countries who represented the priorities outlined above, which was essential for exploring the intended arts-culture-healing intersection. Explicit priority was given to practitioners primarily based within and working on the African continent, with the majority of the final cohort living and actively practicing in their home countries. This continental grounding was essential to ensure perspectives were rooted in lived African realities rather than diaspora interpretations.

While the assembly's primary focus was East Africa, a deliberate decision was made to include practitioners from other regions of the African continent, specifically West Africa, Central Africa, and Southern Africa. North

Africa was excluded because a previous assembly had taken place in Morocco, and the intention was to avoid regional duplication while expanding the geographic scope of these convenings. Practitioners from these additional regions were considered as a way of offering different and perhaps new insights or approaches to the intersection of healing and artistic practice, enriching the East and Horn of Africa perspectives with comparative continental viewpoints.

Facilitation design and implementation

The facilitation design and implementation process involved comprehensive planning of the convening structure to create optimal conditions for authentic knowledge sharing and collaborative learning. Planning included developing session frameworks that balanced structured dialogue with organic emergence, designing activities that honored diverse cultural practices, and creating safe spaces for vulnerable sharing about healing experiences. The implementation process drew on Andani.Africa's expertise in visual arts and its exceptional facilitation skills, employing relationship-centered ethics to foster openness, collaboration, and meaningful cultural exchange. The inclusion of seasoned experts from within AFSC's network—including Rashida Bumbray, Michelle Coffey, and Jessica Horn—added considerable value to the facilitation process by bringing deep institutional knowledge, cross-regional expertise, and established facilitation methodologies.

Facilitation approaches created collaborative spaces where artists and activists could develop shared knowledge, vocabulary, and relationships while remaining responsive to the energy and needs present in each session. The process integrated various engagement methods—including storytelling, artistic expression, reflective exercises, and group dialogue—ensuring that facilitation remained flexible and culturally responsive throughout the convening.

Convening

The convening represented the primary collaborative data collection phase, bringing together 23 selected practitioners for intensive dialogue and knowledge exchange. This multi-day gathering created collaborative spaces where artists and practitioners could deeply explore arts-culture-healing connections.

The convening employed AFSC's DEP model to facilitate cross-border and cross-sector collaboration. Through structured sessions, workshops, and informal exchanges, participants engaged in collective knowledge creation, shared practices, and explored regional challenges through cultural organizing strategies. The convening served as both a data collection mechanism and a capacity-building platform. A reflection narrative shared during one of the final convening sessions is included in part nine.

Data analysis

Data analysis involved iterative examination of collected materials to identify emerging patterns, themes, and insights related to healing practices and artistic methodologies. The analysis process employed both deductive approaches (applying existing theoretical frameworks) and inductive methods (allowing themes to emerge from participant experiences). Key analytical focus areas included understanding healing as an ecosystem, examining the relationship between individual and communal healing practices, identifying specific artistic methods and their impacts, and exploring challenges and opportunities within regional contexts. The analysis synthesized findings across all data sources to develop a comprehensive understanding of how artistic practices function within healing ecosystems, culminating in the identification of interconnected themes and the development of case studies that illustrate different cultural strategy approaches in practice.

Ultimately, the methodological process encompassed the systematic gathering and documentation of insights from all research phases, including desktop research findings, interview transcripts, literature review syntheses, and convening observations. Data collection tools included structured note-taking templates; audio recordings of interviews and convening sessions; visual documentation of artistic processes and outcomes; and participant reflections. The approach prioritized relationship-centered ethics and collaborative knowledge creation, ensuring that data collection honored participants' experiences while maintaining rigor. Multiple formats were employed to capture diverse forms of knowledge sharing, including verbal testimonies, artistic expressions, and embodied practices.

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3

*Ukungu moyoni
Uoga yanjaa
Ninazama nikiwa kimya
Jua Jua inanyesha
Mvua mvua inawaka
Jua jua inanyesha
Mvua mvua inawaka
Kila wingu lina safu ya fedha
Kila siku jualipya linatua
Sasa ninapaa niko mawinguni*

Fog in the heart
Fear fills me
I sink into silence
Sun Sun is raining
The rain is burning
The sun is shining
The rain is burning
Every cloud has a silver lining
Every day the new sun sets
Now I'm soaring in the clouds

—Lyrics from “Voices in my head” by the Kenyan musician Liboi¹

PART THREE

THE CREATIVE AS A RESERVOIR FOR REPAIR: THINKING THROUGH THE NEXUS OF ARTS AND HEALING IN (EAST) AFRICAN CONTEXTS

Jessica Horn



Women's saving circle,
Musongati, Rutana, Burundi.
Photo: Tony Heriza / AFSC

ARTS AND HEALING IN EAST AFRICAN CONTEXTS

The 21st century continues to be framed by a series of political, economic, social, and environmental tensions. Abundant wealth for a few is growing amidst the poverty and economic pressures of a majority.² Our aspirations for a peaceful life exist alongside renewing conflicts and armed violence. New technologies and the platforms they enable expand into all domains of life, with design less often shaped by the concerns of or the potential negative impacts on their users.³ The climate crisis literally washes and burns away the material dreams of communities. All this echoes through East Africa and the Horn, a region deeply interwoven into the broader history of the world through centuries of ocean and land trade, cultural and knowledge exchange, colonization and liberation movements, the global dynamics of resource extraction, national and civil wars and peacekeeping, the development economy, digital and innovation economies, and popular culture. Countries such as Kenya, the wealthiest and one of the more politically stable in the region, have widening disparities of income and opportunity.⁴ Armed conflict pulses through Sudan, South Sudan, and Ethiopia, in turn producing mass displacement and the arrival of refugees in neighboring countries.⁵ These are East Africa's realities, rich in heritage, diverse and dynamic, fiercely creative, majority young, but also deeply unequal and enmeshed in global environmental, social and structural crises.

Inequalities are not just statistics; they are embodied phenomena. Economic marginalization and other key social determinants directly shape whether children live past the age of five and whether

women die in childbirth.⁶ Gendered inequalities underpin epidemic levels of violence against women and girls.⁷ Political repression manifests in the anguish of disappearances, torture, persecution, job loss, and social silencing. All of this has repercussions for our emotional wellbeing and mental health. As I have argued elsewhere: "Structural violence is experienced as a landscape of feeling. Poverty is emotional, armed conflict is emotional, displacement is emotional, police violence is emotional, the erasure of one's existence through sexist, ableist or homophobic laws or policies is emotional. In this way we see how emotional distress is constituted by the structural devastation of oppressive power."⁸

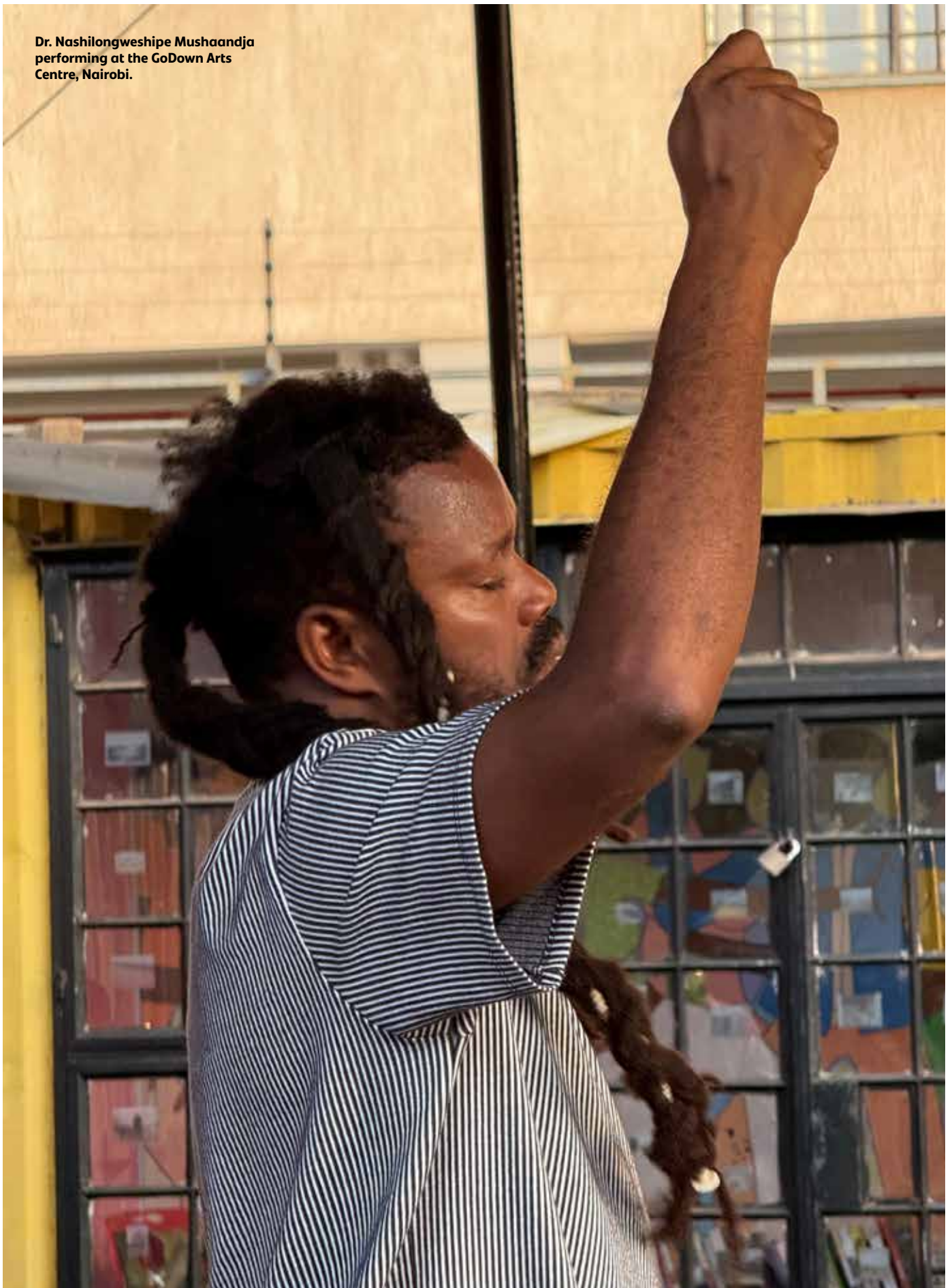
Of course not all social suffering presents or must be understood through the prism of clinical mental health conditions. Indeed the sheer scale at which suffering exists invites a far more holistic reading, one that accounts for the structural enablers of such suffering and the collective implications for the lived experience of our embodied selves. It also means that calls for healing exist at equally generalized scale as people seek alternatives to the constant disruption of their lives and the despair and frustration that emerges. Responding to this call is clearly not the work of the arts or artists alone. From the vantage point of the arts, however, this moment does pose a number of fertile questions: What is the place of the arts and the creative imagination in understanding these matrices of distress? And how can the arts and artistic practice contribute to the conversation and to the processes of repair? The discussion that follows seeks to explore a number of the conceptual and practical elements that these questions raise.

DIAGNOSING DISTRESS, CONCEPTUALIZING WELLBEING

In order to explore the "prescription" for emotional distress and social suffering and the role that artists play, we need to explore the conditions themselves and make explicit our understandings of the self (i.e., who/what is unwell) and the etiologies (or causes) of these disorders. Mainstream Western psychology and psychiatry are anchored in the concept of an individual self and the idea that it is fully within the power of individuals to change their own feelings for the "better." In response, practitioners and academics working in critical traditions such as liberation, decolonial, and feminist psychology call for ecological approaches that understand the self as inherently relational—that is, linked to others in community and embedded in our environments. **In this view, healing the self is also then a collective task.** These thinkers also acknowledge the role of structural power both in creating suffering and as a domain that needs to be worked on for fuller repair to take place.⁹ This offers the idea that being well or unwell is never just a question of individual actions or individual will; it is always part of a broader set of dynamics.

The global standard in defining health also contains this more ecological view. The Constitution of the World Health Organization, adopted in 1946 in the aftermath of World War II, asserts an affirmative definition of health as "a state of complete physical, mental, and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." It goes on to frame this as a fundamental human right and as fundamental to the attainment of peace.¹⁰ This conceptualization places emphasis on preventing disease and not simply on treating or

Dr. Nashilongweshipe Mushaandja
performing at the GoDown Arts
Centre, Nairobi.



curing it. It also implies the need to enable conditions to realize this state of complete wellbeing. This more holistic framing suggests a need for multiple strategies to ensure wellbeing and indeed positions the work of sustaining health as central to the sustaining of peaceful societies. Importantly, it presumes that health can never be solely a question of dispensing care to individuals, given that a state of social wellbeing necessarily entails a collective condition of balance and shared welfare.

African thinking in critical and activist traditions has added a further layer, asking questions about the European colonial nature of much of the received wisdom and training around health, wellbeing, and ideas of trauma and distress. They point out that epistemicide,¹¹ or the discrediting and erasure of the knowledge systems of colonized societies, lay at the heart of the colonial project. In the domain of health knowledges, this resulted in the near flattening of highly complex and evolving understandings of the self, health, and wellness into a single set of accepted diagnoses and cures as defined by European colonizers themselves. Emotional distress in particular became a medicalized concept, defined by biomedical psychology and psychiatry training and formal disease classifications.¹² Today the language of trauma has become ubiquitous, along with concepts such as the clinical diagnosis post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These frameworks have been critiqued by many African practitioners and academics for being overly narrow in their focus on individual suffering and overly apolitical in their analysis of causes and the responses required.¹³

Against this grain there has been an expansion in thinking around decolonizing wellbeing, with African practitioners and academics exploring ways to tune their work more accurately with the lifeworlds and lived experiences of the individuals and communities that they are working in service of.¹⁴ This has invited the birth and growth of approaches that blend methods from European psychology traditions with various African-rooted knowledges and practices in the service of healing. Anele Siswana, a South African clinical psychologist and Igqirha (Xhosa divine healer), describes this work of remixing and challenging as “dirty work.” He sees this dirt as:

The dirt of the earth, of ritual, of embodied knowing. This is the dirty work, the unpolished and unacademic and unsanitized dimensions of healing that psychology has often refused to see as knowledge. This dirt is not the absence of professionalism. It is the refusal to bleach Africanness, to be palatable, to be barefoot in my office, to have drums echoing ancestral memory in a space designed for silence, is to insist that healing must not be sterilized, but must not be sterilized to be seen as legitimate. I’ve learned that both being an insider and an outsider is not a contradiction but a powerful liminal space, a space of radical possibility. My work disrupts. It unsettles. It scratches at the shiny surface of Western psychology order. In many ways, I’m the counternarrative, the voice of the voiceless, the bridge between worlds, the haunting presence that psychology cannot silence nor fully absorb.¹⁵

Decolonial frameworks invite exploration of how we balance the human as well as nonhuman elements in our ecologies. In African-rooted worldviews and spiritual praxis across the continent, there is deep thought around the human-nature relationship as central to cosmologies as well as to understanding how to sustain balance in the world. As the Kenyan



Kenyan singer Liboi.



researcher and regeneration practitioner Wangũi wa Kamonji has written: “Preventing death implies maintaining the communion amongst humans, ecologies and spirits and ensuring basic needs are met so that life is maintained. Healing dis-ease implies intervening for repair in moments of deflection from the goals of continuity and thriving life wherever these may occur. Adding life implies increasing the quantity and quality of interrelationships amongst humans, ecologies, and spirits. All indigenous communities had practices for each of these processes and practices that accomplished more than one of these goals as well.”¹⁶

The reclamation of agency is another element of decolonial and other liberatory approaches. Drawing out a framework around African feminist approaches to trauma, for example, the psychologist Taiwo Afuape invites us to consider “the agency of survivors who are not objects that are passively affected by trauma, but rather creatively respond, resist and grow. Equally, a transformative, feminist approach is centred on the notion that there are impacts from trauma other than damage and injury, such as commitment, care, activism and at times post traumatic *growth*. This growth is the strengthening, development, and learning that may occur when people experience trauma.”¹⁷

AN ECOLOGY OF REPAIR

Viewed through this ecological perspective, we can see repair as a set of intentions and processes aimed at acknowledging the presence of harm, illness, and/or distress, but then responding in ways that help perpetuate the broader capacity for life and for living over time. The point, from an ecological perspective, is not simply to send a paramedic to

help rescue or resuscitate someone. Rather it is to offer a set of processes aimed at building the conditions to create and sustain a fulfilling existence. Drawing on these insights, it is helpful to consider questions of wellness and healing and repair in three interrelated domains: The first is the individual, the inner life and the embodied, lived, and felt experience of the world. The second is community, through which people are organized in different constellations of shared life, experiences, needs, and questions. The third is the structural or organizing systems of power—the norms, narratives, and material conditions that shape and reinforce lived, embodied experience and animate harm and/or repair.

All these domains are embedded in and in relationship with the earth and nonhuman forms of life in our environments. It is important to note that distinctions between all these elements are porous. For example, the societal shapes the communal and the individual. The individual and the communal are in intense dialogue, and there may be conflict or inspiration there in terms of how individuals relate to the immediate contexts that make meaning of their presence. The structural has direct implications for the environmental (for example, whether we have access to clean water or are exposed to environmental pollutants), which in turn can directly impact the individual. It is helpful, however, to disaggregate the domains to aid in identifying what work needs to be done. This also helps to calibrate our understandings of how different creative actions intervene and what they aim to achieve.

Viewing wellness through this ecological lens, repair can be defined then as the work of restoring and sustaining the agency and capacity to

live and sustain a life that we deem dignified and meaningful. It entails addressing the immediate symptoms but also tending to the root causes of wounding. Importantly, if distress results from the loss of agency—for example, the loss of the ability to maintain a boundary between your own body and a person who is harming you, the loss of the ability to protect your children as a parent or to provide for the basics that allow you a dignified life, then **transformative repair must, at its heart, enable the reclamation of agency.**

ARTISTS AND THE WORK OF REPAIR

To fully embrace the mechanisms of healing through the creative and the artistic requires shifting our vantage point to embrace an ecological model of the self. This model understands the self as inherently both part of itself and part of the collective—linked to earth, to land, to memory, to the power dynamics that shape the presence or absence of opportunity, of peace, of contentment. In mainstream development practice on the African continent, there is a tendency to frame the arts and creative practice either as a facet of the creative economy, where it is valued for its commercial power, or as a programming element to incorporate for entertainment value. Both these framings obscure the long-standing roles artists in Africa have played as echoes and conduits of shared feeling, and as instigators of and intervenors in social and political change.¹⁸ The reality is that in response to distress people will make art anyway, regardless of whether institutions believe it to be efficacious or “useful.”

Across the African continent, art and the aesthetic have always been integral to the shaping of society and social worlds and woven into



KaBrazen Podcast Season 2 graphic featuring Field Marshal Muthoni wa Kirima, 2024. Courtesy of KaBrazen Podcast.



Arka'n Asrafokor at Paleo Festival (Switzerland), 2022. Photography by amdophoto.

individual and collective ways of inhabiting and restoring presence in the world. There is power in this. The creative domain is rich with the capacity to engage spaces that are hard to reach otherwise, such as our individual and collective consciousness and our spirits. In fact, even the state itself recognizes this power by seeking to silence artists who raise questions about injustice and unfair policies and actions. There has been long-standing censorship of artists and artistic production in the East African region.¹⁹ In recent years, Defend Defenders, a platform supporting human rights defenders in East and the Horn of Africa, has tracked contemporary suppression of artists in the region, including raids on galleries and disappearances and murders of vocal artists asking questions about politics or ruling governments.²⁰

SUTURES AND TINCTURES: TOOLS IN THE CREATIVE PHARMACY

Artists and creative practitioners engage in an individual and societal praxis of repair with a rich, varied, and expanding set of knowledges about healing. They also engage community in creating space for repair. This section explores three common creative tools in East Africa and the Horn that suture social and political wounds and serve as tinctures for distress: story, drum, and space.

Story

Across humanity, storytelling is one of the most powerful ways to shape ideas about society and about ourselves. The therapeutic power of storytelling is acknowledged in diverse African contexts and in practices such as talk therapy and the more radical forms of narrative therapy practiced in Western

psychological traditions as well.²¹ As the Ugandan psychology professor Peace Kiguwa has stated, “The act of naming what has happened to us is an act of recovery.”²² In artistic community there is deep acknowledgment of the power of story as a medium of emotional conversation and conduit of repair: be it sung; performed in theater, poetry, or film; or shared in the personal narratives that are invited in the more intimate therapeutic space.

KaBrazen (Kenya): Rectifying absences in our gendered narratives of change

KaBrazen is a children’s storytelling podcast series produced by Kenyan creatives the LAM Sisterhood. In their words, it “mythologises our heroes so that every child can imagine themselves as active agents in the world.”²³ As a feminist effort, the series foregrounds African women changemakers. It includes the stories of the legendary anticolonial organizer Mekatilili wa Menza from coastal Kenya, the Burundian poet and human rights activist Ketty Nivyabandi, and the Kenyan pro-democracy activist Zarina Patel. The group also performs these stories live in events for children. Through interactive storytelling, it nurtures dialogue around the lessons that each woman’s life offers for the world that young people are growing into, encouraging children’s critical thinking and affirming their own desires to contribute to shaping better worlds.

Buja Sans Tabou (Burundi): Opening space for public conversations about silences

Buja Sans Tabou is a theater festival held in Bujumbura, Burundi’s capital. Held biennially since 2014, it invites artists from Burundi, East Africa, and around the globe to

explore the question of “taboo” and the possibilities of and boundaries around freedom of expression.²⁴ This has taken place against a context of fluctuating political space for open conversation and aims to create terrain where the general public can engage in dialogue about the issues affecting their lives. In the words of festival director Freddy Sabimbona, “Theatre has the space for being a permanent space for discussion: about life, about what is happening around us, about us, our wants, our fears, our angsts—our desires above all.”²⁵ The festival is staged in diverse sites, including in neighborhoods of Bujumbura where local community is actively invited to take part.

Drum

The drum is central to musical as well as spiritual life across the African continent. Drums are rarely played alone but rather exist in the context of what is known in eastern and southern African Bantu languages as *ngoma*, a term that may mean both a drum itself and related traditions of rhythm, song, movement, storytelling, and spiritual connection. As the Namibian performer and educator Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja has explained, “The meaning of the term Ngoma varies in different siNtu [southern Bantu] languages and cultures. In Nguni languages, the word ingoma refers to a song or music, while in Oshiwambo the word ongoma refers to a drum. In Kiswahili, Ngoma refers to musical practices such as traditional drumming and dancing, taarab (sung Kiswahili poetry), and dansi (urban jazz). Ngoma is also related to the Nguni word ubungoma, which is understood as divination.”²⁶ In this way we see how the drum is also always relational, connecting individuals to one another, to



A Sudanese artist holds a Kenyan drum sharing rhythms across cultures.

“The drum is central to musical as well as spiritual life across the African continent.”

broader networks of community, to history, and to the divine. There is healing technology in rhythmic patterns, in tones of voice and song, in the way that words are placed together and repeated, and the impact that has on and with the body.

Ingoma Nshya (Rwanda): Women (re)claiming the drum and sharing joy

Ingoma Nshya is a women’s drumming group founded a decade after the 2004 genocide in Rwanda by the theater practitioner Odile Gakire Katese. Living up to its name (which means “new drum”), the group has pushed gendered stereotypes around who can assert the power of the drum, a role typically reserved for men in Rwandese communities. They play various rhythms—whether traditional, new, or drawn from other African contexts. The group itself has become a symbol of the ability to move through past atrocity and carry renewed life, gathering across ethnic lines and focusing instead on forming spirited community among themselves, along with new modes of expression and stellar performance.²⁷ For Katese the work is about building new worlds, creating the “traditions of tomorrow” by harnessing the power that women have to continually re-create reality, to imagine and experiment.²⁸

Drum circle (Nairobi): Experiments with urban community healing

The Nairobi Drum Circle is a monthly event hosted by DreamKona, an initiative of the Trust for Indigenous Culture and Health (TICAH). The monthly drum circle takes place at Hilton Square Park in downtown Nairobi, in a space popularly known as Jobless Corner, where unemployed graduates gather in search of work.

The core of the drum circle is a team of professional drummers who invite passersby to join in. The initiative is framed as a form of cultural therapy and tactical urbanism, claiming public space for artistic expression, building community among strangers, and helping build safer urban space.

Space

Space making is a vibrant thread in the practice of repair. It offers venue, location, ground, and relationship, elements of life that may have been forcibly taken away (for example, through enforced displacement, conflict, economic violence, and social ostracism) as well as a context for safety, new dialogues, and new forms of community. The arts provide this in physical form through galleries, studio space, and performance space—and in the actual art itself, offering and expanding space for alternative sonic, visual, and intellectual movement and other social and sensory space making. Space builds consciousness and enables the creation and continuity of community.

32 Degrees East (Uganda) & The Rest Residency at The GoDown Arts Centre (Kenya)

Community arts centers have been an important welcome ground for Sudanese artists displaced by the outbreak of war in 2023. Two East African arts hubs—32 Degrees East in Kampala, Uganda, and the GoDown Arts Centre in Nairobi, Kenya—both built out residency space for artists to continue their art practices, process their experiences, form community, bear witness to events, and rebuild elements of their lives and livelihoods.²⁹ In Kenya, the GoDown was home to the Rest Residency, welcoming Sudanese artists working

in various mediums, including visual art and film. This helped the artists themselves to reconstruct community in exile and to continue their art practices—but also to create space to discuss the conflict in Sudan, its real-life impacts, and the need for support and solidarity.

Somali Arts Foundation (Somalia)

The Somali Arts Foundation (SAF) was founded in 2020 by Sagal Ali, a Somali cultural practitioner who had grown up in Europe due to conflict in her home country. SAF is dedicated to expanding space for the arts and offering training and support for a new generation of creatives. It is working in a context of ongoing armed conflict and with the presence of Al-Shabaab, an Islamist paramilitary organization that deems art itself sinful. Alive to these complexities, SAF offers a space to cultivate joy and exploration. Sagal Ali explains, “Within our community, joy is one of our guiding stars and we have found that joy and struggle are not mutually exclusive; rather, it is a practice that offers much respite and resilience in an otherwise turbulent environment... The future of Somalia could very well be in the imagination of artists.”³⁰

BUILDING WORLDS THAT SUSTAIN WELLNESS

The work of repair centers the idea that it is possible to shape new ways of being and to build worlds that nourish the desire and the right for everyone to thrive. As organizations investing in this through the medium of the arts and with artistic and creative practitioners, it is important to consider not just the outcomes we want to achieve but the process by which we get there. Put differently, not just the

politics of the outcomes but the politics of the practice.³¹ Support organizations and infrastructure—be they donors, convenors, institutional hosts, or event planners—need to be thoughtful about the ethics of their approaches and to foster enabling conditions for good practice. Foundational to this are a number of principles drawn from transformative service delivery and activist practice:

1

Do no harm: In any work it is critical to ensure that *at minimum* our interventions do no harm. This means ensuring that we have done our needs assessments, including emotional needs, personal safety needs, and any security concerns of the communities and direct participants involved. There needs to be attention to gender, disability, and other difference, and to any possible antagonisms in the space based on community tensions. Interventions should have adequate support and response mechanisms in place. This can be done with a positive posture, considering what would create the safest, most supportive and creative environment and not only focusing on ways to avoid negative outcomes. This can be built out in dialogue with everyone involved in the intervention to cultivate a shared ethical compass.

2

Practitioner-led: Linked to the principle of “do no harm” is ensuring that there are experienced people designing, facilitating, and supporting interventions around the arts and repair. If artists are to facilitate processes or space making, they should be fully integrated in designing and developing methodology. It is equally critical to ensure that trained practitioners are brought in to inform suitable design of healing spaces from a therapeutic perspective.



Jessica Horn presenting in the Nairobi gathering.

3

Survivor-centered/led and healing-centered: If healing involves the restoration of agency, methodologies to encourage repair should also hold agency at their core. Principles of survivor-centered, survivor-led,³² and healing-centered practice have been established and modeled in counseling and by organizations that address violence against women.³³ These can serve as references in the design and thinking around creative repair practice.

4

Caring for practitioners: Bearing witness and carrying stories of distress have an impact on the practitioners holding space and making art. This is not always negative—indeed there is a growing understanding that practitioners may not only suffer vicarious trauma but may also build vicarious resilience.³⁴ Artists themselves can also face threats and direct harm for their work in voicing critique, speaking up for people, or exploring questions that may be considered socially and politically taboo. Attention to this should be integrated into programming and budgets, including means of debriefing and emotional support as well as preparedness for emergency response. Institutions and networks supporting human rights defenders across the East African region, Africa as a whole, and globally can be engaged for guidance and direct services where needed.³⁵

5

A patient time frame: While the timescale of harm can be short, the time horizon of healing is far longer—months, years, at times even generations. It is therefore important to consider how we think about pace in interventions. How much time do we factor in for building trust and creating a space of mutual holding? What kind of time horizon is needed to support a durable shift? If, given the demands of project budgets, for example, an intervention is obliged to be shorter, what are ways to build in follow-up mechanisms that allow the work of repair to be better embedded in community and in people's praxis over time?

6

Staying curious: The arts invite curiosity. Maximizing the contributions of artists and artistic mediums requires a spirit of experimentation and willingness to allow artists to create spaces and creative processes that allow for unfolding, new journeys, and new forms of expression. Curiosity as a principle is useful in multidisciplinary collaborations and valuable in supporting the journey of institutions and practitioners who are less acquainted with creative praxis.

ENDNOTES

1. Liboi 2022.
2. Riddell et al. 2024.
3. See Benjamin 2019; Gebru and Torres 2024.
4. See Kamande and Musili 2025.
5. Human Rights Watch 2025.
6. World Health Organization 2025.
7. World Health Organization 2021; Muluneh et al. 2020.
8. J. Horn 2025, 64.
9. See Bryant 2024.
10. Constitution of the World Health Organization (1946), <https://apps.who.int/gb/bd/PDF/bd47/EN/constitution-en.pdf?ua=1>.
11. See Santos 2015.
12. Afuape 2011.
13. See Kistner 2015.
14. See Boonzaier and Van Niekerk 2019, 683; J. Horn 2020.
15. Siswana and Musida 2025.
16. wa Kamonji 2024.
17. Afuape 2022, 40.
18. See Mwangola 2015.
19. A. Horn 1980.
20. Oduto et al. 2023.
21. Afuape 2022.
22. Kiguwa 2022.
23. See <https://www.kabrazen.com/aboutus>.
24. See <https://www.bujasanstabou.com>.
25. Cited in Denyer 2024.
26. Sakaria 2023.
27. Bainier 2013.
28. Odom 2021.
29. See Dehghan 2024.
30. Ali 2023, 166–167.
31. J. Horn 2009.
32. See Michelis, Makepeace, and Reis 2024.
33. See The Girl Generation 2025; Raising Voices and the African Women's Development Fund 2019.
34. See Hernández, Gangsei, and Engstrom 2007; J. Horn 2020.
35. See, for example, the initiatives profiled in Blackmore 2021.

Retracing
**KENYA'S SONGS
OF PROTEST**



Music as a Force for Change in Kenya: 1963 - 2013

Publication by Ketebeul Music.

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4

After the curator's death in May, an artists' gathering in Nairobi proved that transnational solidarity today must be built on a commitment to an interdependent future.

PART FOUR

KOYO KOUOH'S FINAL LESSON ON PAN-AFRICAN SOLIDARITY

Rashida Bumbray

Reprinted from *Hyperallergic*, October 27, 2025

*"The Power of Arts and Culture for Healing" conference in Nairobi, Kenya
All photos by Bilal Qureshi, courtesy American Friends Service Committee*



Last spring, 30 African artists from diverse disciplines and regions gathered for several days to engage in the difficult but necessary work of discussing generational collective healing, specifically in relation to trauma, war, and genocide. Titled “The Power of Arts and Culture for Healing” and held in Nairobi, Kenya, the convening was curated by Molemo Moiloa and Phumzile Nombuso Twala of Andani.Africa, and organized by the Quaker American Friends Service Committee (AFSC). AFSC provides financial and technical support to trauma healers across East Africa and the Horn, especially in Somalia, Ethiopia, and South Sudan. Our gathering was an all-too-rare opportunity to build these capacities among artists.





Each morning, I opened the day with an invocation—one that would set the right tone for the vulnerability needed to share personal experiences and collective perspectives on trauma and repair. Through artist talks, musical performances, film screenings, a drum circle, and many shared meals, we quickly became a close-knit group. The experience put into sharp focus my belief that the institutional art world—even as a market-driven endeavor—still holds possibilities for radical exchange where the poetic, experimental, political, and even healing values of art still resonate.

At first, I thought that this trip to Kenya would be a way to breathe new air and calm my own spirit from the challenges facing my own community in the United States. But the day

before my flight, the devastating news of Cameroonian curator Koyo Kouoh's sudden death from cancer sent me and many colleagues into shock and mourning.

The late great curator Bisi Silva introduced me to Koyo Kouoh in Dakar, Senegal, in May 2014, alongside my friend Simone Leigh. Kouoh, who directed the Zeitz Museum in Cape Town and founded Raw Material Company in Dakar, was slated to curate the 61st Venice Biennale in 2026. Over the years, we have had ongoing, heightened conversations about the state of the global art world, what it means to work in the parallel African and Black American art worlds, and the Pan-African crossroads where we meet. Kouoh's title for the Biennale, *In Minor Keys*, considers artistic

practice as “refuge and radical proposition,” invoking the means by which artists who work at the boundaries of form operate in more subtle registers. Her curatorial team will carry this work forth in her absence. The moment I learned of Kouoh's death immediately altered my perspective on my own subjectivity in Nairobi—one of South-South interdependence, an ethos I have also been privileged to inherit as a child of the Black radical tradition.

This lineage of connection between Black Atlantic diasporas has deep roots. In 1948, Trinidadian-American choreographer Pearl Primus was awarded the final Rosenwald Foundation fellowship to make new choreography on the Blues. Instead, she used the \$4,000 grant, the foundation's largest



at the time, to travel to West and Central Africa, where she studied dance and spiritual forms in Congo, Liberia, and Nigeria. She arrived in Africa not only as a recipient of cultural transfer but also as a link in a chain of transmission, contributing to personal edification and development as well as a shared stake in future artworks—dances she would create with and for her community in the Black American dance world.

Nearly 50 years later, one of the very first dances I learned as an undergraduate student at Oberlin College in Ohio, from Professor Adenike Sharpley, was Fanga Alafia of the Vai people of Liberia. It was the first dance that connected me to the African continent in a tangible way. If you've studied African dance in the US, you likely learned Fanga first, too, and that's thanks to Primus. Following her path, I imagined how I might gain critical perspectives from my

East African art colleagues about ways forward through our interconnected and distinct circumstances.

Our need for connection feels especially urgent today. Recent “diaspora wars” on social media involving the policing of Blackness weaponized by misinformation about cultural difference have been disheartening, to say the least. Not because we don't already understand our cultural and political distinctions, but because we cannot prepare for what's to come by policing each other's Blackness with blinders on. The convening in Nairobi countered much of this by bringing together artists from across the continent around a shared purpose—a means of building our collective power. Our survival will depend on our points of intentional connection and solidarity.

For two years, I have been immersed in research on the

legacy of the Pan-African and Negritude-inspired cultural gatherings of the '60s and '70s: the First World Festival of Black Arts (Dakar, 1966), Carifesta (Guyana, 1972), and FESTAC 77 (Lagos, 1977), among others. The biannual Carifesta event was initiated by the late Barbadian poet and theorist Kamau Brathwaite and his fellow writers in the Caribbean Artists Movement. When I studied under Brathwaite at New York University, he grounded his conception of magical realism in the interconnected catastrophes of the Middle Passage and colonialism on the African continent.

I believe the current resurgence of investment in such gatherings now reflects the spirited energy of a new, revived form of global Pan-Africanism. For example, Loophole of Retreat, a convening I organized in 2022 with Simone Leigh as part of her American Pavilion at the 59th

Venice Biennale, and Deborah Willis's Black Portraits are a matter of necessity in the current environment. Barbadian Prime Minister Mia Mottley, one of the strongest global voices on sovereignty, strategic interdependence, and climate justice, hosted the 15th Carifesta in August and spoke about the cultural and political necessities of solidarity in the region before traveling to Africa to meet with political leaders.

As I packed my bags for Nairobi in May, I tried to quiet my uneasiness about the immense challenges facing Black Americans, keeping in mind the wisdom of these convenings, which underscore the need for face-to-face gatherings. While I was unsuccessful in leaving my worry behind, listening to artists from Kenya, Sudan, Somalia, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Namibia, and Nigeria at the gathering provided much-needed perspective. I was struck by how making art with the intention of healing can be both a burden and a mode of surrender.

Theatre director Hope Azeda, who organized the 20th anniversary commemoration of the Rwandan Genocide in 2014, spoke at our gathering about being named "Hope" by her mother as part of a generation born outside of the country during the genocide. Her mother wanted her to "run, play, and be free." But Azeda decided to return to do the important work of healing older generations who experienced the genocide and younger ones who live in the future it created, carrying the trauma of their parents and grandparents.

Azeda's story exemplifies what Senegalese scholar Felwine Sarr asserts—that primarily Western conceptions of progress depend only on forward movement as



success. "To reopen the future first requires a reinvented relationship with their past and their traditions," Sarr said at a talk at New York's Cooper Union in 2018. To heal and progress, we must first consider our forebears and ancestors.

Kouoh's death, five years after the passing of Nigerian curators Bisi Silva and Okwui Enwezor, illuminates the costs of cultural work for Black practitioners. Why should the work of restructuring colonial canons and systems cost us our very lives? Why has the concept of "healing" within art become passé when it is anything but? And how could the realities of diverse global movements guide our lives as artists, curators, cultural workers, and scholars?

Kouoh's curatorial text for the next Venice Biennale explicitly refers to the work of Patrick Chamoiseau, Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, and Édouard Glissant—Caribbean and Black American giants of literature and theory. One 1993 poem by Glissant, translated by Eric Prieto, looms large:

Look at the creole garden, you put all species on such a little lick of land: avocados, lemons, yams, sugarcane... plus thirty or forty other species on this bit of land that doesn't go more than fifty feet up the side of the hill, they protect each other. In the great Circle, everything is in everything else.

My time in Nairobi taught me that individual healing is fundamental to collective resistance. I participated not only as a facilitator and a witness, but as an interlocutor whose very survival is also hinged on our shared interdependence.

Transnational solidarity today cannot be built on nostalgia for the movements of the '60s and '70s, but with a commitment to an interdependent future. As Kouoh's spirit implores, we must continue to work in "minor keys"—operating in subtle registers that offer refuge and propose radical alternatives to the systems that seek to destroy us.

5

Participants:

Meron Sisay Abey (Ethiopia)
Rock (Kodzo) AHAVI (Togo)
Brian Otieno Akoth (Kenya)
Hope Azeda (Rwanda)
Rehema Chachage (Tanzania)
Adam Chienjo (Kenya)
Jessica Horn (Uganda, Kenya)
Moses Kiboneka (Uganda)
Sharon Ong'ayo Liboi (Kenya)
Mahad Mohamed (Somalia)
Margret Kowarto Odong Mario (South Sudan)
Ibrahim Ahmed Mahmoud (Sudan)
Bowandundu Musafiri Master (DRC)
Rafa Altayeb Alfatih Mohieldeen (Sudan)
Fadumo Mohamoud Muse (Somalia)
Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja (Namibia)
Shabu Mwangi (Kenya)
Ebere Onyekachi (Nigeria)
Tosin Oyeibisi (Nigeria)
Freddy Sabimbona (Burundi)
Michael Tsegaye (Ethiopia)
Suzanne Mieko Thomson Wambua (Kenya)

AFSC Partners and Consultants:

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Phumzile Nombuso Twala (South Africa)
Rashida Bumbray (United States)
Kemi Ilesanmi (United States, Nigeria)
Michelle Coffey (United States)
Joy Mboya (Kenya)
Bilal Qureshi (Pakistan - Ghana)

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Zaina Kisongo (Kenya)
Moses Chasieh (Cameroon, Ethiopia)
Pauline Kamau (Kenya)
Mercy Maneno (Kenya)
Jason P. Drucker (United States)

PART FIVE

NAIROBI RETREAT

All Photography by Bilal Qureshi







6

We spoke to Michelle Coffey, the executive director of Lambent Foundation, about the foundation's focus; why creativity is the key to hope, healing, and healthy communities; and why she encouraged us to move past morning meetings to meditate on the rich music, movies, and movement that pulsate across one of her favorite cities and the cradle of humankind.

PART SIX

INTERVIEW ON HEALING AND ARTS

Michelle Coffey, with Megan Quitkin



MICHELLE COFFEY

*Co-founder and Executive Director,
Lambent Foundation*

“Not everything that is faced can be changed,” wrote James Baldwin in his 1972 book *No Name in the Street*. “But nothing can be changed until it is faced.”

At AFSC we are deeply invested in this idea and believe that art is a powerful tool—a way to face things, as Baldwin wrote, and possibly to change them—and is not just about aesthetics. Art examines, names, and illuminates inequality and injustice. It is also transformative and helps individuals and communities heal. Guided by this philosophy, our May 2025 dialogue and exchange program convened a diverse group of partners in Nairobi for

“What artists do is offer inspiration, hope, and an alternative.”

discourse on arts, culture, and healing in East Africa and the Horn of Africa.

We are grateful that Michelle Coffey, the executive director of Lambent Foundation, joined us for the program. Michelle cofounded Lambent nearly two decades ago and has led the foundation’s grantmaking to support bold artists, arts organizations, and creatives who build resilience, bolster democracy, and foster connection between people, places, and practices.

We spoke to Michelle about the foundation’s focus; why creativity is the key to hope, healing, and healthy communities; and why she encouraged us to move past morning meetings to meditate on the rich music, movies, and movement that pulsate across one of her favorite cities and the cradle of humankind.

Lambent supports partner organizations in New York, Nairobi, and New Orleans. Why are these three cities the foundation’s focal point?

We came of age in 2008, during the fiscal crisis, and the mantra was “think globally, act locally.” It made sense to focus in New York, the center of so many different art forms—especially contemporary art—and the birthplace of so many social justice movements. New York is also where the foundation is located.

At the same time, it felt wrong—almost arrogant—not to widen the aperture. Especially if we wanted to participate and have credibility in bigger conversations about the intersection of art and justice. Historically, fewer progressive philanthropic dollars are directed to the American South, and we wanted to help rectify that. That brought us to New Orleans, where art and culture are an accepted practice—infused into the daily fabric of the land. Once we decided on New York and New Orleans, we could think about the national conversation and how that discourse demands a global context. We turned to Africa and chose East Africa. Why did the region speak to us? There is some familiarity with

western Africa because of its proximity. South Africa dictates southern Africa in terms of an artistic aesthetic. East Africa is more of an enigma to folks in the U.S. yet is an important migratory hub for people from the Middle East, India, and China. Nairobi, which sits just above the Rift Valley and is considered the cradle of humankind, called to us. It made sense at a cellular level.

The foundation operates at the intersection of art, culture, and social justice. What's the relationship between those fields?

We think about justice as both a practice and a place we want to get closer to. And there cannot be any form of justice unless we acknowledge trauma and commit to healing. At a very simple level, that means we support institutions that are in the business of teaching people how to care. Places that go beyond ensuring that everyone is attuned to the complex issues that surround us. Places that provide people with real capacity for conversation and community building. All of them value artists and cultural workers as essential employees who keep society functioning and help it flourish.

Let's dive into this idea that artists are activists and advocates for change.

We can't dismiss our realities, and even if we could, that would be counterproductive. But what artists do is offer inspiration, hope, and an alternative. They also help us heal by allowing us to be in our reality and simply acknowledge it.

What does this look like in practice? And can you share how Lambent supports artists focused on and facilitating healing?

I have to mention Wajukuu, which participated in AFSC's 2025 convening on Arts and Culture for Healing. It is a longtime partner and a community-based artists' collective based in Mukuru, which is one of Nairobi's largest informal settlements. Mukuru is home to more than half a million people and is a

Michelle Coffey and Joy Mboya at Nairobi Retreat. Photo: Bilal Qureshi, 2025.

“Artists also help us heal by allowing us to be in our reality and simply acknowledge it.”



vibrant, bustling place with a real pulse. But there are challenges, and climate change has exacerbated them.

In 2024, for example, there were heavy floods and demolitions. Displaced people sought shelter at Wajukuu's art project space, and it became immediately clear that they were hungry. The organization launched its Open Kitchen program and provided breakfast and a hot meal. What started small grew quickly, attracting additional community members who hadn't lost their homes but were experiencing food insecurity. Two years later, Wajukuu works in partnership with other community organizations to offer Open Kitchen once a month. The program is an invaluable community linchpin.

You must have hundreds of stories like this—of artists and arts organizations manifesting what the community needs to heal and providing transformative experiences that catalyze that process.

As a Black American from Cincinnati, I have thought a lot about the Underground Railroad and the idea that sometimes what people most need most is a place to find their footing before they take the next step. I'm thinking of The GoDown Arts Centre in Nairobi and how it has become a safe haven for people contending with all kinds of trauma. Artists may be officially hosted within a particular program, but things happen organically, too. Out of necessity and without hesitation.

How does a U.S.-based healing agenda that taps into the arts differ from one coming out of Kenya?

I think the key word here is “agenda.” In the States, there’s always an agenda or a strategy or a plan. It’s written up, and then we focus on fundraising. In Nairobi there is limited philanthropic support, so you just do what you need to do. If there is an immediate need, cultural organizations use the resources they have to best address it.

Here’s an example: During COVID, our grantee partner TICA [Trust for Indigenous Culture and Health] began organizing drum circles, which were held outside so people could come together safely. TICA partners with a wide array of artists and connects them to build community and engage with the public. The drum circles brought strangers together with a common rhythm and offered cultural therapy at a moment when it was urgently needed.

Can you elaborate a bit on this difference and what larger issues it illuminates? Maybe you can speak a bit about why it’s important to think not just about impact but also about inspiration?

We are having important conversations about equity and trust, but there is still a power dynamic between philanthropy and the arts. Our partners have been conditioned to say things a certain way, so they “get it right” for funders, but why is the onus on them? It’s funders who need to do some evolving!

For me, a highlight of the AFSC convening was when we visited our grantee partner The GoDown. We got out there and experienced how art activates healing. We felt it in their drum circles. And I think what folks realized is that there doesn’t have to be a binary choice. We can celebrate the power of percussion and also desire deliverables.

“The drum circles brought strangers together with a common rhythm and offered cultural therapy at a moment when it was urgently needed.”



Any final thoughts or key lessons that you’d like to share?

After the AFSC Nairobi convening, it occurred to me that the Quakers might just be the answer to this really challenging moment—for NGOs and philanthropy and the arts and the social justice sector. And I think that’s because the Quaker philosophy is rooted in a fundamental belief that justice and equity building can happen only in community and that there’s simply no place for ego. This is what guides Lambent—the idea that we need to be mindful of weaving it all together so we can see possibilities and think about solidarity. Not just what that looks like in statements but what it looks like in real practice.

7

The Trust for Indigenous Culture and Health (TICAH) started the Nairobi Drum Circle in 2022 with the simple hypothesis that a low-cost, recognizable cultural practice that engages commuters and communities of Nairobi's city center can help people and help the city itself.

PART SEVEN

A VIBRATION OF SPACES

Suzanne Mieko



This banner hangs at the entrance of every drum circle to set the tone and invite the community into the space. Photo: TICAH, 2022-2026.

Wanjala moves through Nairobi's city center unconsciously, as his daily commute to and from work doesn't add anything new to his life anymore. This is just a simple function of logistics, so even the city center and its physical spaces, the people he passes along the way, and the smells and sounds don't register with him. In a lot of ways and for a lot of people, this is how moving around Nairobi goes, especially for those commuting through the city center.

One day, while moving from one bus stage to the next, Wanjala is pulled out of autopilot by a sound. In the distance but growing closer with every step he takes is the rhythmic sound of drums. He sees a crowd standing around the area known as Jobless Corner and, for the first time in years, notices how big the trees in this small green space have grown.

He pushes past an older mama and sees a big circle of drums. People of all ages are moving into the circle and taking up positions behind the empty drums. They pick up the sticks that were lying on top of the drums and start to follow the lead drummers in the middle of the circle, who are showing them how to make the beats to add to the communal rhythms. They smile as they figure out the drumbeats and look around at the others in the circle. A mzee standing next to Wanjala in the crowd pulls out his phone and starts recording a video, grinning and saying out loud to no one in particular, "This is good." Soon two girls push past Wanjala and enter the middle of the circle to dance, laughing together as others join them.

The Trust for Indigenous Culture and Health (TICAH) started the Nairobi Drum Circle in 2022 with the simple hypothesis that a low-cost, recognizable cultural practice that engages commuters and communities of Nairobi's city center can help people and help the city itself.

Held the first Friday of every month at Jobless Corner, a small public green space in the center of Nairobi's downtown, the Nairobi Drum Circle slowly built a wellness movement and spatial consciousness around public participatory drumming. A regular drum circle community formed around the monthly event, and the small public space gradually transformed from an empty, unsafe area littered with trash to a clean green space used by all.

With no interventions happening in this space other than the Nairobi Drum Circle, this is a beautiful case study of what culture can do just by engaging communities in a once-dormant public space.

BACKGROUND ON SPACES IN NAIROBI

As Wanjala watches more people join the circle of drummers, he suddenly remembers a time a few years ago when he was confronted in this exact space by kanjo (city council enforcement). Wanjala had been on his usual commute on a particularly hot day. He was passing through the city center to get the bus home when he started to feel unwell. He had just sat down on a raised cement area around a tree to regain his strength when kanjo came by. "This is an offense," the official said, pointing at Wanjala. "I can take you in for this; you will be fined."

Historically the city of Nairobi was designed around colonial interests and colonial ideas about who had access to spaces and what kind of spaces should

be available for different communities and for what purposes. The colonial communities lived on one side of the city in lush environments where they created large private estates with gardens and other outdoor spaces. The colonial government designed the rest of the city in ways to enforce and maintain its control. The "industrial" communities that managed manufacturing, small businesses, and city logistics were organized into specific areas, while the "service" communities that worked for the colonialists and businesses lived in other areas.

Spaces, particularly public green spaces, had and continue to have connections to "colonial mentalities of control over people who might conspire to rebel if they were allowed to gather freely in spaces," according to a Kenyan professional working in climate justice. Public green spaces often come with a system of regulations and physical barriers that determine where people can sit or gather and what permits might be needed for different activities within the spaces, which the climate justice professional notes is the "colonial administration of people" instead of policy for "the empowerment of people."

"Public space is a symbol of how much we need to do to change thinking in terms of administration versus empowerment, what designing for the city and its people really means. We can create a culture around these things that are part of our urban fabric, and art and culture are integral to this."

SPACE, CULTURAL PRACTICE, AND WELLNESS

The young drummer leading the circle spots Wanjala and walks up with a set of sticks, beckoning him to join. Wanjala is nervous and feeling shy but also intrigued. He grabs the sticks, and the drummer leads him to a drum that has just been given up by a woman. He stands behind the drum and looks around, an action he watched others do when they joined for the first time. Wanjala's neighbor shows him the sequence for hitting the drum—two beats to the side of the drum, three on the top. Soon he's picked up the rhythm and grins. "This is fun," he thinks.

The idea of "space" within Nairobi is divisive and rooted in historical injustices and a sense of control (and therefore comes with suspicion of intent). Spaces are often contested, "grabbed" illegally, or manipulated by corrupt individuals, so people have a built-in wariness around issues of space. "There are barriers to seemingly innocuous interventions—suspicion over free activities for the public good and community building—and so it takes time for people to understand and be comfortable with activities being unconnected to businesses or politics or advertisements or bottom lines," says the climate justice professional.

Despite this reality, space is also central to the wellness of Nairobi communities through a lens of climate justice, equity, and creative expression. For regulars who have been attending Nairobi Drum Circle events every month



Commuters passing through Nairobi's city center join the drum circle every first Friday of the month. Photo: TICA, 2022-2026.

for years, the impact of this work within the space of Jobless Corner is obvious. Former Nairobi mayor Joe Aketch said: “This drumming work is at the forefront of activities to show that these spaces cannot and will not be taken [away from the public]. It’s been received well by Nairobians and is changing perspectives. On top of this, things can be quite dull for people because it’s always just go to work and go home with few open places and moments to sit and relax. This has offered people activities to do together where they can become stress-free before they head home. Having this as something that the public can participate in is wonderful. People can now plan to attend, bring their children, etc.”

Some regulars who were once wary of Jobless Corner report that the Nairobi Drum Circle, as well as their interaction with the space and the communities there, has improved their mental health. A young woman who regularly attends the circle shared: “Drum Circle has made me understand other people, and it also helps me to relax. Normally when I come there I come stressed from my job, and it’s really helped me a lot; it’s always in my calendar and my schedule. When people come there, you find yourself interacting and engaging with the space in a different way. It’s also helped make that place look neat. People used to not enter because of the street kids and the feeling of that space, but now people enter without fear. It is enriching.

Even if people aren’t beating a drum, they are bobbing their heads to the beat. You can’t help but be a part of it when you are there. It’s immersive.”

FUTURE OF SPACE, CULTURE, AND COMMUNITY

Since the pandemic, unfortunately, access to some public green spaces around Nairobi has been reduced, with entrance fees and ID requirements keeping people from engaging with them. Those working to protect, promote, and grow public green spaces—such as Safer Nairobi Initiative, Naipolitans, the Placemaking Network Nairobi, TICA, and others—continue to advocate for and activate public spaces for





public good and future security.

Expanding on the idea of space beyond green spaces, TICAH is also looking into the construction of commercial buildings and the empty buildings seemingly left behind, especially with respect to the cultural community of artists, artisans, craftspeople, and others who always need space and can never find it.

As an example, in 2025 the TICAH team scouted for half a year to find a space where they could hold an exhibition, despite having a decent budget for the space! They talked to everyone and saw many spaces. The central theme of the search was the mismatch between the system of commercial leases and the many communities (including

cultural practitioners) who work in a different way and can't afford long-term leasing structures.

Just as the Nairobi Drum Circle offers an important and different way for communities to find respite from the usual routine within the city center, TICAH believes that it is possible for the cultural sector and built space systems to find a middle ground for mutual benefit. Nairobi needs more spaces for community, cultural practice, wellness, and expression. The Nairobi Drum Circle has proven how a simple project can contribute meaningfully to people's lives and the use and value of our spaces; now we need to expand this to other spaces.

Left: The drumming draws hundreds of participants of different walks of life. The rhythm they create together is grounding.

Wanjala drums for almost an hour, sharing smiles with other participants (the young street kids across the circle from him, the old woman standing next to him, the girls swaying to the rhythms). When he finally puts down the sticks on top of the drum to head home, he feels lighter. Jobless Corner looks different. As he walks to the bus stage to catch the bus home, he notices the people he passes in ways he hadn't for a long time, and on the ride home he thinks about the drum circle and how he is going to take his daughter to the next one. "She'll love this too," he says to himself.

Above: The Nairobi Drum Circle is often joined by different communities and different cultural practices, such as Burundi drummers shown here. It's almost impossible not to move your body and dance a bit to the music.

Both images: TICAH, 2022-2026.

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.

RESTORYING

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

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





9

PART NINE

UKUPHONTSA ITSHE ESIVIVANENI

Phumzile Nombuso Twala

There is a cultural practice where I come from called “ukuphontsa itshe esivivaneni.”

Isivivane is a sacred pile of stones found in certain African cultures, which serves as a marker of cultural significance or as a place of memory. In traditional practice, travelers passing by isivivane would add a stone to the pile as a sign of respect, to honor ancestors or to ask for blessings and safe passage.

Each stone represents a prayer, an intention, or connection to those who came before.

In a physical sense, sites where izivivane are found are considered places of spiritual significance, places of historical events, of memory or boundaries between territories. Isivivane is regarded as an important cultural symbol in some communities, representing collective memory, heritage, and the connection between past and present generations.

Our initial foray into this convening (as co-hosts) was based on an interest in healing: what it is, what it looks like, why it is needed, what it is called, and what it means within different contexts. Over the past few days, we have had the privilege and honor of being in a space with powerful, thoughtful, insightful, transformative, diverse and, of course, creative people, who have all contributed towards enriching our understanding of these questions.

Together, we have created multiple moments of our own, adding our own stones on our own isivivane.

Our collective offering of energy, resilience, thought, emotion, and spirit has anchored isivivane that we have added onto.

Isivivane we have added onto sits in a complex “in-between” space.

It’s a space that has made it safer to consider what it means to “let out the trash,” while also celebrating the restorative power of repurposing trash. It’s a space that

has honoured the constant process of transformation. It’s a space that has created room for thinking, laughing, and crying together.

It’s a space that has honored those we carry in spirit, offering an outlet for expression of silent rage, loud pondering, deep surfacing, restoration of resilience, and a remembering and re-remembering of self.

It’s a space that has allowed for a physical, mental, and emotional breath to give life to the embers of new foundations spreading like wildfire.

It’s a space where surrendering to the rhythm and beats of the drums has anchored a surrendering to the frequencies of love, honor, and respect - supporting the creation of new knowledge.

It’s a space that has reminded us of tender moments of listening, pausing, emoting, longing, connecting, rooting, uprooting, moving, playing, holding, hoeing, evolving, creating, offering, strengthening, stirring, embodying, performing, loving, caring, revering, and seeking.

It’s a space that has created more room for pause. Pausing to regenerate power. Pausing to tap into source. Pausing to remind ourselves to root ourselves in the present. It’s a space that celebrates encounters with ‘self.’

As we consider our own role in the bigger picture, we encourage exploring what we can all individually commit to. What does this all mean for me? What can I do? What does this mean for myself?

In this session, we offer reflections on the time we have shared together. We aim to acknowledge the journey we have taken, including moments of growth where we may be making progress. We aim to offer ways of affirming shared moments of authenticity, grounding ourselves in the meaningful contributions and exchanges shared.

We invite you to carry these creative explorations forward, where it makes sense. The vulnerability you’ve shared here—through color, song, form, movement, and story—has created ripples of transformation that extend beyond this room.

We honor each of you for the courage it takes to face the canvas of your experience with such honesty and grace. May we all continue to weave these threads of consciousness into our work, allowing our art to witness and connect us on this path of creative restoration. May we carry this sacred space of possibility forward.

Kennedy Akolo is a Nairobi-based governance, development, and peacebuilding practitioner. He serves as the regional director for Africa at the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), where he is committed to building peaceful, just, and resilient communities in which people can meet their needs without violence or exploitation. In this role, he provides strategic leadership across the region and is a dedicated advocate for peace, equality, and dignity for Africans.

Dr. Kara Blackmore is a curator and educator who works at the intersections of arts, heritage, and social repair. She holds a Ph.D. in International Development from the London School of Economics and Political Science. Her practice is informed by long-term collaborations in areas affected by conflict and migration. Kara has curated exhibitions in Uganda, South Africa, South Sudan, Senegal, The Netherlands, the UK, and Colombia. Notably, she was an Associate Curator for the 15th Dakar Biennale. In 2022 she co-founded Borderlands Art gallery in Kampala, Uganda, as a space to meaningfully support social, political, and environmental art practices.

Rashida Bumbray is a curator and choreographer. In 2022, she organized *Loophole of Retreat: Venice*, a transnational gathering focused on Black women's intellectual labor as part of Simone Leigh's exhibition for the 59th Venice Biennale. As Director of Culture and Art at the Open Society Foundations (2015–2022), Rashida spearheaded the development of the foundation's global grantmaking and fellowship program for socially engaged art. Her art practice in performance and experimental film draws on Black vernacular and folk forms, and her works have been presented by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Tate Modern, Dia: Chelsea, BlackStar Film Festival, the New Museum, Harlem Stage, *Dancing While Black*, SummerStage, and Project Row Houses.

Michelle Coffey is the co-founder and executive director of the Lambent Foundation where she leads the strategy and drives the vision. Focusing on the intersection of art, culture and justice, Lambent's innovative grantmaking practice explores how contemporary art and aesthetics serve as a strategy for promoting thriving cultural practices in Nairobi, New Orleans and New York City. With over 20 years of leadership in progressive philanthropy, Michelle oversees grant programs supporting global human rights, women and girls, criminal justice reform, grassroots movement building, and arts and cultural policy.

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Zaina Kisongoa is a Nairobi-based development, humanitarian, and peacebuilding practitioner. She works for AFSC as the sub regional representative for Somalia and South Sudan where she manages multi-year and multi-donor, innovative programs in peace building, social justice, trauma healing, skilling for youth, and protection for migrants. She is passionate about programming, partnership management, strategy development, and grantmaking.

Molemo Moilola is a Johannesburg-based arts practitioner, researcher, and organiser. She is the co-executive director of Andani.Africa, committed to growing and strengthening the creative economy in Africa by enabling a data-informed, knowledge-driven, and strategic sector. Her work spans curatorial practice, strategic consulting, and cultural policy development.

Bilal Qureshi is an arts journalist, critic, and broadcaster. His writing and reporting have been published in Bloomberg, The Washington Post, The New York Times, on the BBC Arts Hour and NPR.

Megan Quitkin is a storytelling and strategic communications professional with extensive background in domestic and international philanthropy. She has produced editorial and creative communications for bold brands and visionary founders—Ford Foundation, the Howard G. Buffett Foundation, McKinsey & Company, Scherman Foundation, and the late Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, among others—on gender and reproductive justice, democracy, climate justice, digital resilience, and the arts. She has a B.A. from Princeton University and an M.P.H. from Columbia University.

Phumzile Nombuso Twala is a Johannesburg-based arts practitioner, researcher, and organiser. She is a Senior Researcher at Andani.Africa, where she focuses on building evidence-based frameworks for cultural heritage and creative economy development across the African continent. Her practice integrates artistic inquiry with rigorous research methodologies.

Suzanne Mieke Thomson Wambua leads the art department at the Trust for Indigenous Culture and Health (TICAH) in Kenya, bridging traditional and contemporary practices with a focus on community wellness through creative expression, events, small grants, public art, and cultural publications. The work reaches across the East African region and across sectors integrating health, urban planning, and culture.





The GoDown Arts Centre, Nairobi, Kenya, 2011.
Photo by Fabian Alonso.

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