

It Happened

**The Role of Witness Testimony in Establishing
A Collective Memory of the Rwandan Genocide**

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“It happened, therefore it can happen again: this is the core of what we have to say. It can happen, and it can happen everywhere.”

Primo Levi, Holocaust survivor, 1986

“We shall remind them that what happened here can happen elsewhere . . . It can happen tomorrow. Things have happened, and they can happen again.”

Paul Kagame, President of Rwanda, 1998

“The importance of shared memory can be gauged from the instances in which it has been lacking,” writes Eve Hoffman in her book *After Such Knowledge: Memory, History, and the Legacy of the Holocaust* (161). The book speaks to the concept of “collective memory,” that is, memory which has historical and emotional relevance in the cultural consciousness of a particular group. Hoffman argues that such memory is necessary after events of mass violence and trauma because it provides a forum for the shared mourning needed to put such events behind us. Without it, our collective identity as well as our individual one, is “helplessly locked in the moment of trauma” (162). Hoffman was writing about the Holocaust specifically, but her thesis can be applied to another tragedy, the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. Ten years later, Rwanda, an east African nation, still struggles to come to terms with the brutal decimation of its Tutsi minority at the hands of its Hutu majority. In many ways, this small country, whose citizens took machetes, clubs, and axes to the bodies of their fellow Rwandan men, women, and children, is no closer to reconciliation than the day the killings stopped. The nation is unable to establish a collective memory of the genocide due to its mass participatory nature and the frailty of witness testimony. This inability prevents the creation of a historical record of the genocide and, most importantly, stands as the largest obstacle to the reconciliation and reunification of Rwanda’s people.

Rwanda’s pre-colonial history exists largely as myths. In many ways, what happened then is irrelevant. It may be that there was never equality between Hutus and Tutsis; it may be there was. It more probable, however, that the differences between these groups evolved because Europeans declared it so; this, they said, is the history of Rwanda. The groups are divided by stereotypes about physical characteristics and

stratified by the Hamitic hypothesis. The Hamitic hypothesis, developed at the peak of “race science” in nineteenth century Europe, was articulated in 1863 by John Hanning Speke, an English colonizer. Speke is credited with discovering the source of the Nile River (Lake Victoria) and inventing the anthropological theory that informed Europeans about the inhabitants of their far-away possessions. Speke’s hypothesis argued that there were two races present among African people: the cursed descendants of Noah’s son Ham, the Hutus, who look more “aboriginal” than the “lost Christians”, or Tutsis, who more closely resemble Europeans (Gourevitch 52). When Belgium gained control of the area following World War I, their policies purposefully cultivated Hutu-Tutsi animosity by creating what was essentially a feudal system that made the Tutsis, who constituted only about an eighth of the population, masters of the Hutu. They set these “ethnic” identities in stone and used that stone as the foundation of their colonial rule.

Twentieth century Rwandan history chronicles the rise and fall of both Tutsi and Hutu leaderships: “Like all of history, it is a record of successive struggles for [the] power . . . to make others inhabit your story of their reality . . . when that story is written in their blood” (Gourevitch 48). To grossly oversimplify it, the decades following World War II saw a series of extremely violent coups disguised as “revolution” and “democracy,” with each group jockeying for power and resources by brutally suppressing the other. By 1990 the country was led by the totalitarian regime of President Habyarimana, a former Hutu general. Rwanda’s economy was, like most post-colonial African states, in disarray, and the country was fighting a civil war with the Rwandese Patriotic Front, refugees from past violence attacking from Uganda. Since a largely majority of the RPF consisted of exiled Tutsis, Habyarimana’s government used the war

as an excuse to galvanize popular support for the Hutu Power regime and justify sporadic massacres of Tutsis by both the government sponsored *interahamwe* militia and ordinary civilians. Newspapers and the radio became vehicles of indoctrination, preaching Tutsi-RPF conspiracies and the need for Hutus to “protect themselves.” In 1994 the country was prepared for the “final solution,” but most of the endangered Tutsis would not have known the historical implications of that phrase (Gourevitch 94).

On April 6, 1994 President Habyarimana was killed when his plane was shot down over the capitol, Kigali. Less than an hour after the president’s death, Colonel Bagsura, head of the army, assumed control of the government. He quickly ordered the assassination of the prime minister and ten Belgian UN soldiers (to ensure that the UN would withdraw from Rwanda – which it did), and, “the wholesale extermination of Tutsis got underway” (Gourevitch 114). The killing spree spread quickly over the country, with the radio’s constant broadcasts exhorting Hutus young and old to “do [their] duty as Rwandans” and kill the Tutsi “cockroaches” in their midst (Gourevitch 97). People murdered their neighbors, friends, and family members; local leaders drew up lists of Tutsi residents for the *interahamwe*; priests delivered entire congregations to slaughter. The genocide lasted for almost four months, and when it was over 800, 000 Tutsis and their Hutu sympathizers had been murdered, not counting the injured or the many Tutsi women who had been serially raped. A coalition government made up of members of the RPF (now Rwandese Patriotic Army) and Hutu Power oppositionists took power, and the old regime, along with millions of Hutu civilian *génocidaires*, joined the flood of refugees moving into humanitarian camps in what was then Zaire. There, the exiled Hutu Power government would use the camps to re-group and continue to terrorize

Rwanda, as it does today. The international community that had done nothing to stop the killing (despite numerous documents indicating that both the UN and the Clinton administration knew about it) suddenly sprang to action: "Rwanda had presented the world with the most unambiguous case of genocide since Hitler's war against the Jews, and the world sent blankets, beans, and bandages to camps controlled by the killers" (Gourevitch 170).

The story of the genocide did not end then; indeed, it continues today. The new Rwandan government faced the insurmountable task of repairing the damage, bringing the killers to justice, and healing a nation. In a country where the justice system is decimated by unequivocal institutional support for a crime, it becomes necessary to build new institutions. By the end of 1997, over 125,000 Hutus sat in jails made to hold half that number (Gourevitch 242). The horrific conditions of the jails and the country's slow, stunted legal system managed to make some alleged killers pay for their crimes, but it seemed little like justice to the people of Rwanda. For, like the Jews after the Holocaust, Rwandans recognized the need to establish a collective memory; they saw that to reconstruct and resolve what happened was essential to bringing justice and peace back to their country (Gourevitch 251). The UN-created International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) handled the top cases (the government officials who organized the genocide) but what of the millions of everyday people who participated, either by killing, raping, or looting? As one Rwandan woman, who lost her husband and three of her children and was gang raped in the genocide, said, "It's time for reconciliation. We can't want to take revenge. I can't wish for [the perpetrators] to die" (Nyirandayambje). Rwandans hoped this reconciliation could be found through the creation of the *gacaca*

courts, similar to South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commissions. The courts, instituted by President Kagame in 2002, placed the opportunity to achieve justice back in the hands of the victimized communities. The idea of a *gacaca* is for people to admit their guilt, ask their victims for forgiveness, and either receive a reduced sentence or pay reparations. Today over 11,000 *gacaca* ("grass" or "lawn") courts operate throughout Rwanda (Cobban 6).

The *gacaca* system is not without its problems. *Gacaca* necessitates participation of the entire community. Since, for many, this means they must "turn up every week, sit through long speeches, then see if it's their turn to be accused," it is hard to ensure that participation (Merlino 7/19). The hearings are extremely inefficient; they drag on for hours and, in an agricultural economy like Rwanda's, every hour people spend at a hearing is one less hour they work to provide for their families. In addition, the courts may have more of a polarizing effect than a unifying one: they let thousands of prisoners out of prison and back into their communities, but it remains to be seen if these communities will be able to accept and absorb, "people who are suspected – and many of them actually were perpetrators – in the genocide" (Cobban 10). The courts depend on every perpetrator's willingness to admit his or her guilt. Many perpetrators try to mediate their actions by saying they were forced by the militia or that they are guilty only of standing by and watching others kill. Since the *gacaca* judges are "trying to dig out the truth of what happened under chaotic circumstances [ten] years ago," many of these excuses work, and the victims do not receive any justice at all (Merlino 7/15). But the biggest problem facing the *gacaca* courts, and the reason many suspected *génocidaires* are able to avoid punishment, however, is the fallibility and lack of eyewitness testimony:

Witness testimony loses its power and credibility with every year that passes, and we're talking about witnesses who were living through very traumatic times then, and now are called to give absolutely ironclad testimony about the details of events that happened ten years ago (Cobban 3).

People are hesitant to accuse others because often there is no other proof than one's word.

They are also afraid: because of the (at best) precariously stable political situation in Rwanda, they fear reprisal if Hutu Power makes a comeback. Many of the women are ashamed to come forward and admit to being rape because of the stigma attached.

Others, especially those who were children during the genocide, have simply blocked the memories and are not useful as witnesses. Most tragically, however, is the fact that many of the witnesses are dead or dying, not as a result of the genocide, but of the AIDS epidemic sweeping Africa (Cobban 5).

This lack of witness testimony hinders the *gacaca* court's ability to create a collective memory out of mass trauma; the same problem occurred in efforts to establishing a collective memory of the Holocaust (by no means the first genocide, but perhaps the best known). Dori Laub, a psychoanalyst and concentration camp survivor, posits that the Holocaust was an event which produced no witnesses (80). One barrier to witnessing was the internalization of Nazi rhetoric by the Jews: in an effort to understand how such a horrible thing could be happening to them, they began to believe they *were* inferior, that they *did* deserve it. In addition, no one could sufficiently distance themselves from the event to truly see it; the Nazis knew, and indeed counted on, this. They knew that genocide involved a "destruction of . . . humanity . . . [which is] beyond the limits of human ability (and willingness) to grasp, to transmit, or to imagine" (Laub 82). Thus, victims of the Holocaust lacked the objectivity and rationality needed to

accurately witness and understand the nature and magnitude of such a crime because they were too intimately connected with the crime itself.

An event devoid of witnesses is a clear obstacle to those seeking to articulate the collective history of that event. But even if one insists that there are, in fact, witnesses produced by genocide, it cannot be said that they are all the same *type* of witness, and this, in itself, is another obstacle to collective memory. Witnesses to crimes may be divided into three categories: victims, perpetrators, and bystanders (Felman 207). Their different positions relative to the crime (in this case, genocide) lead them to different ideas of the same event; it is as if they bear witness to three separate sets of circumstances, and are unable to see how the any other testimony could possibly be true. In other words, there are three different acts of seeing going on during one situation. This produces a myriad of “different topographical and cognitive positions, between which the discrepancy cannot be breached” (Felman 207-208). These different positions vastly decrease the ability of the witnesses’ testimonies to be merged into any sort of collective history, for they are as different in what they see as in what they do not. This is perhaps best illustrated when comparing the testimony of victims of genocide with that of the perpetrators.

The monstrosity of genocide creates a great need for its perpetrators to deny that monstrosity. Their best interests lie in having no one remember, not even themselves. The very meaning of genocide, the systematic and total extermination of a group of people, indicates that there will be no one left to remember, so long as those who commit it can lie to themselves. One of the ways they accomplish this is not by denying the logistical facts of the event, but the motivations behind them. The Nazis’ most common

defense was the notion of following orders: "I did it because I was ordered to" (Levi 26). In Rwanda, it is the notion of self-defense. One priest, who was later charged with helping the *interahamwe* find Tutsis in his parish to kill, said, "I didn't have a choice. It was necessary to appear pro-militia. If I had had a different attitude, we would have all disappeared" (Gourevitch 136). Besides self-defense, the belief persists that the genocide was not a crime but a justified popular uprising against years of Tutsi oppression. There are those in Rwanda who feel the Tutsis finally got what they deserved, that Hutus are, and have always been, the true victims of this situation. This kind of self-deception, or purposeful distortion of facts to gain sympathy, is quite common in cases of mass trauma:

People who believe themselves to be victims of aggression have an understandable incapacity to believe that they also committed atrocities. Myths of innocence and victimhood are powerful obstacles in the way of confronting unwelcome facts (Chirwa 111).

For the victims there is no need to legitimize or deny one's actions. Instead they experience a struggle between remembering and forgetting what happened during the genocide. Victims will block out their memories so as not to renew the pain (Levi 24). One way they accomplish this is by never remembering at all: people force themselves to repress the memory or simply never allow the memory to form by never admitting the reality of the situation. Even if they do remember, however, it may not be accurate. Victims sometimes unconsciously filter their memories; they may only remember certain (often trivial) details in an effort to avoid remembering more painful ones (Levi 32). They might even change the memories and remember something that never actually happened. At the same time as all these defense mechanisms come up to hinder remembrance, it seems there is a desire among survivors to tell their stories. Holocaust survivor and author Elie Wiesel said, "My role is the role of the witness . . . Not to tell, or

to tell another story, is . . . to commit perjury” (qtd. in Felman 204). A victim’s wish to tell his or her story does not necessarily extend to understanding the legal and historical import of doing so. Some may recount their tales to others simply for sympathy and ordinary human comfort; they may use that sympathy as a way to re-affirm their own humanity, through solidarity with the person they tell. Many victims need external recognition of their suffering to validate it: “It may apply universally that victims suffer more over time when they are denied official acknowledgement . . . [of] what has been done to them” (Summmerfield 64).

The distinctions between victims and perpetrators, however, are not always clear cut, especially in Rwanda. Genocide victimizes not only those who are killed or maimed but those who commit the killing and maiming. The tendency, usually, is to believe the testimony of the victims, but “[They] are all traumatized – people who are survivors . . . and people who participated in the genocide. . . We have to recognize that” (Cobban 11). The genocide in Rwanda evolved out of years of inter-ethnic conflict within the nation, compounded by broader regional conflict and instability. The country suffers from widespread disease, abject poverty, and a history of ruthless violence and political manipulation of ethnic tensions. As one Rwandan put it, “In Rwandan history, everyone obeys authority . . . You take a poor, ignorant population, and give the arms, and say, ‘It’s yours. Kill.’ They’ll obey” (Gourevitch 23). The genocide was not high-tech; the killing was done with clubs, with machetes; it was up-close and personal, a fratricide in every sense of the word. There was no extensive documentation, as with the Holocaust; such a large proportion of the population actively participated that is it difficult to know how much blame to lay and where. And since the memories of both victims and perpetrators

are so easily manipulated, is it even possible to extract a collective history from them? Perhaps since "a true genocide and true justice are incompatible," a true collective memory is impossible, for memories of such unfathomable horror may shake the foundations of our humanity too roughly (Gourevitch 249).

Holocaust authors may be able to explain why victims and perpetrators each, in their own way, inhibit the production of a collective memory, but what about the bystanders? What about those on the outside, who should be able to objectively judge the situation? Why did they abandon their responsibility to bear witness to the Rwandan genocide? For some, it may have been that the idea of such a heinous crime happening in a modern world, especially a post-Holocaust world, was incomprehensible. For others, it may have been political: a world, or more specifically, an America, that had just seen the bodies of American soldiers dragged through Somolian streets had no desire to send its sons to what could easily be written off as "tribal warfare." Perhaps the nature of genocide is just as Laub says: no one can truly be objective, no one can bear witness.

President Clinton said as much in his 1998 address to the people of Rwanda:

It may seem strange to you, especially the many of you who lost members of your family, but all over the world there were people like me sitting in offices, day after day after day, who did not fully appreciate the depth and speed with which you were being engulfed by this unimaginable terror (Power).

But somehow even that moving statement seems more like an excuse masquerading as an apology; that answer is too convenient, too easy. And an excuse (or an apology) does not make up for the fact that, despite having inherited memories of Auschwitz, the world today did no more to stop the Rwandan genocide than it did to prevent the Holocaust. Thus it may be that both the Hutus and Tutsis are the victims of a crime perpetrated by

the legacy of colonialism and the inaction of an international community to whom the lives of almost a million Africans do not seem to matter.

Laub believes the only reason a collective memory of the Holocaust exists is because enough time has passed for there to be “a new generation of ‘innocent children’ removed enough from the experience . . . to ask questions” (83). The problems inherent in witness testimony to genocide, however, render the *gacaca* court system largely inefficient at moving Rwanda toward reconciliation. The international community’s continued failure to truly destroy the Hutu Power government (currently recognized by France, among other nations, as the “Rwandan government in exile”) means that the damage of the genocide continues, even for those born after it. These children grow up in a still-divided nation, with no accurate record of its history, where those who remember what happened, those who can remind people of the tragedy and perhaps prevent future genocides, are dead, or dying each day. They grow up in country where murders occupy the homes of those they murdered and do not offer apologies or explanations to the families who return from exile demanding to know what happened to their loved ones. Indeed they cannot, because, either “through deliberate intent, or the speed of flight, or the inability to think about such things . . . [t]he signs, the traces of people’s deaths, but also of their lives, are vanished, gone” (Hoffman 160). These children live in a place where the threat of revived violence lingers with each scream in the night, each gunshot in the distance. They, who are supposed to be Rwanda’s “innocent children,” grow up in a world in which the terror of the genocide has not subsided, and the blood of its victims is not yet dry.

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“The terror was designed to be total and enduring,
a legacy to leave Rwandans spinning and disoriented in the
slipstream of their memories for a very long time to come,
and in that it was successful.”

Philip Gourevitch

