Review of After Genocide: Memory and Reconciliation in Rwanda

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Those of us steeped in the study of violence can list scores of books on the tragic loss of an unimaginable number of human lives. It’s important to take a long view of how violence has occurred in the past if we want to gain the perspective of scale necessary to prevent future atrocities. Professor Nicole Fox offers something different in After Genocide: Memory and Reconciliation in Rwanda. Through an in-depth study of memorialization and attempts at reconciliation in post-genocide Rwanda drawing on interviews and ethnography developed over nearly a decade of field research, Fox reminds us that it is also invaluable to understand how this kind of tragedy echoes throughout the everyday lives of survivors. She offers readers in peace and conflict, genocide, and women’s studies an illuminating account of how these legacies shape societies while post-genocide communities struggle to heal from harrowing loss.

Fox brilliantly accomplishes in After Genocide what we typically expect multiple studies to do in concert. Readers will be impressed by her presentation of the history, politics, and culture of Rwanda, as well as the beauty, tenacity, generosity, struggle, and vulnerability of the Rwandan people. Through carefully constructed life stories and community accounts, Fox skillfully weaves together depictions of the phenomenal and the quotidian of community memorial sites, scenes of public courage, anger, and outcry, and the hidden shame that shrouds women’s reconciliation journeys with an analysis of how formulaic approaches to reconciliation overlook the enduring pain and traumas that define survivors’ everyday lives.

After Genocide begins with a critical analysis of Rwandan genocide narratives, examining the fragmentation of the various origin stories used to explain how genocide against the Tutsi began, and how those fragments of truth have impacted state authority, intergenerational understanding, and the prospect for a reconciliation that will outlast survivors. The book accomplishes this by offering a survey of collective memory, which Fox refers to as “memory landscapes,” that continue to shape Rwanda’s present. This narrative analysis illuminates how conflicting histories of what happened live on through the relationships of contemporary Rwandans.

As Fox explains, the Rwandan state narrative helps to validate the president and his administration, enabling powerholders to control the political climate and keep other narratives of the past in check. In this version of history, the conflict originated from German rule and delegation of authority during decolonization. This narrative, though not entirely inaccurate, Fox notes, ignores important nuances while impacting who and what is included in memorialization projects.

Competing sub-narratives are reflected at memorialization sites, which differ in whether they focus on culpability or guilt, Fox explains. Culpability narratives of the Rwandan genocide embrace an idyllic and unified past disrupted either by bad actors from the outside—colonial rule—or bad actors on the inside, such as corrupt government officials in the postcolonial era. These narratives also are imperfect, Fox points out, because each of them excuses certain groups that participated in the acts of division and violence that culminated in genocide during the 1990s. Alternative
“shock” narratives, she continues, that construe the violence as a frenzied, spontaneous occurrence also disregard the longer history of critical events leading up to the genocide against the Tutsi. In After Genocide, the reader learns about the structure and stratification of collective memory after tragic and divisive events through Fox’s examination of how individual reconciliation sites approach memorialization. This is accomplished with delicate and focused attention to the intricacies of how institutional programs intersect with lived experiences. Fox’s deep dive into everyday peacebuilding in the wake of local trauma helps to advance what feminist international studies scholars have come to refer to as the “vernacular of international relations.” This rich reality is opened up to readers through personal accounts of survivors’ ongoing experiences of trauma, as well as their diverse coping strategies. While some survivors want to sit longer with their trauma at memorial sites, others seek to keep it at a safe distance.

Individual survivors are also shown to differ significantly in their experiences and social status. Due to these differences, acts of empowerment and healing for some survivors can mean silence and internalizing shame for others. This is an incredibly important insight for peace studies scholars and practitioners. Fox gives careful attention to the most marginalized victims, offering a more holistic understanding of peacebuilding after genocide. She notes the ways in which “this stratification can lead to civic disengagement and nonparticipation, as well as further violence, pain, and social isolation” (p. 6). The disconnect between the formulaic ideals for reconciliation that Rwanda has adopted at the national level and the everyday practices of reconciliation occurring more locally underscores how peacebuilding can work and where it may fall short. In Rwanda, the persistence of a reconciliation formula provides a clear, powerful sense of shared meaning. This provides a glimmer of hope for survivors because the fact that there is a formula for reconciliation means that there must be an achievable outcome. The other side of this coin, however, is a very real sense of disappointment and despair when that formula fails to lead to tangible results.

Fox also notes instances in which survivors have pushed back against formulas that they felt erased their experiences. Her study reveals a particularly troubling experience for women survivors forced to make painful choices between public vindication and private shame. Memorials diverge in how they deal with sex and gender-based violence (SGBV), which was endemic throughout the genocide. Some memorial sites openly disclose these narratives, while others intentionally silence them or only reluctantly engage in disclosure. “Silences, along with other social processes that stratify collective memory, have profound effects on reconciliation efforts,” Fox explains (p. 112). She adds that “feelings of shame after SGBV were often cited by survivors as the most destructive vestige of the violence” (p. 101). Fox goes on to describe the conundrum faced by women survivors of sex and gender-based violence: the imperative to forgive their assailants. The power dynamics between the forgiver and the person petitioning for forgiveness become reversed, sometimes over and over, depending on the context and the social status of each party.

Among the many contributions After Genocide offers to the field, Fox provides, hands down, one of the most moving and revelatory methodological appendices I have ever read. Readers will be remiss to skip over this final addition, which could be assigned on its own as student reading in qualitative methods and ethnography courses. Here, Fox provides a timely, but long in development, framework for feminist fieldwork, building on feminist epistemological approaches to open up critical conversations about positionality, relationality, subjectivity, and the ethics of
access and representation. Scholars will find her vulnerability and candor here refreshing and inspiring, and her careful organization of established techniques and unanswered questions highly instructive. It makes for a superb conclusion to the book, which, in its entirety, beautifully demonstrates how to embrace these difficulties and produce a remarkable and enlightening analysis. Her final elaboration on the issues of choices in nomenclature used to describe and define the genocide and her own search for comparative insight from other historic genocides epitomizes how ethnographers canmeaningfully engage with predecessor studies to enhance new research. The ways in which Fox moves through the unscripted arenas of field research to a rigorous and richly theorized account of life in the long aftermath of genocide is exemplary, offering an authoritative model for students of ethnography in conflictual and post-conflictual fields.