

Review: *Genocide Lives in Us: Women, Memory, and Silence in Rwanda*

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Jennie Burnet. *Genocide lives in us: Women, Memory and Silence in Rwanda*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012. 304 pages. ISBN 978-0-299-28644-6.

Jennie E. Burnet's *Genocide Lives in Us: Women, Memory, and Silence in Rwanda* is a solidly-researched, well-written, and deeply disquieting book about women living in the aftermath of the Rwandan Civil War and genocide (1990-94). From the outset, Burnet deconstructs the notion of the "survivor," pointedly rejecting the current Rwandan government's discursive regime, which, in her words, created a "shibboleth of genocide." (128) This shibboleth, she contends, requires speaking aloud only the approved narrative of Tutsi victims and Hutu perpetrators, and leads to silences amplified by nationalized mourning and commemoration, and allegedly "traditional" efforts at justice and reconciliation.

In Chapter 1, Burnet presents Rwanda's history of social classification, and the importance of structure and hierarchy in Rwandan identity. Chapter 2 features an excellent analysis of nationalized mourning, and the evolution of the discourse which centers Tutsi victims of the 1994 genocide as the only legitimate victims, rendering all others invisible. Chapters 3 and 4 analyze silences surrounding victimhood, and critically examine the social costs associated with contradicting the RPF's established narrative of the genocide, which includes a refusal to acknowledge the 1990-94 civil war. Chapters 5 and 6 interrogate the changing meanings of "coexistence" and "reconciliation," and imagine possibilities for future understanding and peace-building.

Central to Burnet's argument is the idea of "amplified silence," which she defines in Chapter 3 as, "intense public silence" surrounding those "excluded, individual, familial, and communal experiences of violence" that fall outside of the RPF's rigorously-policed discursive regime (111-2). Amplified silence is defined not only by silence itself, but also by the "act of silencing" (112). This silencing seems to come from two places. First, the dominant narrative of the genocide, which renders almost invisible the preceding civil war, symbolically silences those whose lived experiences exist outside of the "Tutsi=victim" and "Hutu=perpetrator" paradigm. Second, and perhaps more troubling, is the individual-level silencing that seems to happen on a daily basis within families and communities. This silencing seems almost entirely a result of anxiety created by fear of RPF reprisals. It is little wonder.

Rwandans who speak out about violence committed by the RPF during the civil war, such as opposition leader Victoire Ingabire, often find themselves imprisoned and accused of genocide ideology and denial.

Burnet's ability to obtain these stories from her interview partners is a testament to her persistence, and to the importance of building long-lasting relationships with the communities in which one conducts research. In several cases, it took Burnet years to convince individuals or families that she was serious in her desire to understand and faithfully portray the experiences of survivors, beyond just the accepted government narrative. The result of that dedication is an important book that adds much-needed dimension to our understandings of the "New Rwanda," and that should be required reading for anyone planning to do research there.

It is also an excellent example of the ways in which ethnographic research differs from oral history research. The less-formal ethnographic style allows Burnet to cast a wider net in terms of interviews and observations; indeed, as she documents time and again, virtually any interaction can quickly become a research opportunity. In recent years, oral historians have been moving in this direction—see, for instance, Gregory Mann's *Native Sons: West African Veterans and France in the Twentieth Century* (2006)—cleaving less to our questionnaires and recorders, and employing broader observational tactics, though pedagogical manuals and discussions often chastely turn a blind eye to these dalliances and heresies. Yet Burnet's research here demonstrates the value for oral historians of acknowledging the closeness of our fields, and the potential benefits of a cross-disciplinary approach.

The ramifications of the revelations in Burnet's work about the New Rwanda are also cause for concern for future research. In her second chapter, "Remembering Genocide," Burnet describes how many people were unwilling to speak with her about their experiences or, more often, provided increasingly vague accounts. Though some of this can be attributed to the effects of living long-term with mass trauma, there seems to be something more sinister and troubling at play. The act of silencing she so meticulously documents appears to be working. Those who deviate are ostracized, harassed, or imprisoned. Researchers who attempt to get at the underlying facts of people's lived experiences of this time period face not simply evasion, but a retelling of their participants' stories that more fully corroborates the dominant narrative. And even in the cases in which opposing narratives emerge, researchers are left with ever-more pressing ethical questions. How do we tell these stories when doing so may place our interviewees or research assistants in danger? Even anonymity or confidentiality when paired with a detailed story or life history may not fully protect, especially in a country as small as Rwanda. For oral historians as well as ethnographers, it bears considering whether it is truly

possible to conduct ethical and rigorous research in such a politically-volatile climate.