

The Proper Reaction: Conversations Surrounding Gourevitch's Account of the Rwandan
Genocide

Mary Shandley

Professor Robb

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In *We wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with our families*, Philip Gourevitch's detailed narrative of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, as well as its causes and its aftermath, has sparked discussion and debate on how we should deal with extreme acts of cruelty. Those responding to Gourevitch examine whether his reaction is appropriate.

One of the prevailing themes explored in academic and critical responses to Gourevitch is the role of imagination in the witnessing of violence. Jane Blocker, for instance, references Gourevitch's account of his visit to a church in the town of Nyarubuye that was filled with the decaying bodies of victims of the genocide, which he describes as "still strangely unimaginable."¹ Blocker asserts that "to be a witness... means simultaneously to see and to imagine."² She believes we must draw from concepts and images with which we are already familiar in order to recognize and comprehend the violent image that lies before us. However, in order to fully understand the inhumanity we are witnessing, she says, we must "imagine [our] own witnessing of it, to see [ourselves] seeing it," a concept as limiting as merely viewing a photograph.³ In his article "Deaths in Paradise," James Long shares his own habit of imagining genocide because he cannot fathom something so horrible, suggesting that "perhaps this is part of the crime."⁴ In having to rely on our imaginations to comprehend an atrocity, he says, we inadvertently create distance between ourselves and the victims of the atrocity in terms of our responsibility to help. Gourevitch and many of his academic readers condemn this distance.

¹ Jane Blocker, "A Cemetery of Images: Photography and Witness in the Work of Gilles Peress and Alfredo Jaar," in *Seeing Witness*, NED-New edition, *Visuality and the Ethics of Testimony*, (University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 51.

² Blocker, 51.

³ Blocker, 51.

⁴ James D. Long IV, Elie Wiesel, and Thomas L. Friedman, "Deaths in Paradise: Genocide and the Limits of Imagination in Rwanda," in *An Ethical Compass*, *Coming of Age in the 21st Century*, (Yale University Press, 2010), 16.

However, Susan Spearey argues that despite the “potential problems of witnessing,” it can also lead to an “enactment of justice.”⁵ She feels that this distance does not have to exist; viewing a horrific image, whether directly or indirectly, may well motivate the viewer to take action.

From this concept of mental distance, the conversation about Gourevitch’s work leads to the question of what the moral response is to genocide. Spearey expresses approval of the way Gourevitch causes the reader to think about their own individual assumptions and responsibilities as a way to alleviate their “cultural, geographical, and temporal distance” from the genocide.⁶ On a broader scale, Blocker claims that when Western countries imagine their own witnessing of injustice in non-Western nations, they see themselves as “unseen, as omniscient, disembodied, and disinterested.”⁷ However, she points out, no country can rightly be utterly impartial and uninvolved, because we have a moral responsibility to help each other. Therefore, uninvolved only adds to the injustice. In the same vein, Colette Braeckman points out the “sensational cowardice of the international community” during the genocide that Gourevitch’s account makes evident.⁸ She praises Gourevitch for confronting the West’s “comfortable response” of making moral judgments without actively seeking change.⁹ However, after criticizing the West’s response to foreign conflict such as the Rwandan genocide, academics responding to Gourevitch must ask themselves what the proper response should be. As Braeckman puts it, how do we “move forward without abandoning memory?”¹⁰ James Long

⁵ Susan Spearey, “Affect and the Ethics of Reading ‘Post-Conflict’ Memoirs - Revisiting Antjie Krog’s *Country of My Skull* and Philip Gourevitch’s *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families**,” (Leiden: Cross / Cultures), no. 145 (2012), 528.

⁶ Spearey, 524.

⁷ Blocker, 53.

⁸ Colette Braeckman, “Cowardice and Conscience,” edited by Philip Gourevitch, *World Policy Journal* 15, no. 4 (1998), 104

⁹ Braeckman, 102.

¹⁰ Braeckman, 104.

argues that at least some effort to stop or prevent these tragedies would be substantially more helpful, as well as learning to “deal with it.”¹¹ He points out that the commonly used phrase “Never Again” is useless when it does happen again.

Many critics view Gourevitch as dichotomous and morally absolute in his attempt to answer this question of what the correct response is to genocide. For example, Gary Rosen asserts that Gourevitch relies on an “exaggerated account of the commitments entailed by the Genocide Convention” and veers toward the extreme when he compares the Rwandan genocide to Hitler’s Germany.¹² According to him, Gourevitch fails to acknowledge the limits of Western military powers in terms of what they are willing to risk, “swept along by the moral urgency of [his] cause.”¹³ Similarly, Scott Strauss criticizes the way Gourevitch “neatly divides Rwandan politics into good and bad” through extreme, inaccurate language, a mindset which is “partly an artifact of the concept of genocide, which encourages absolute moral reasoning.”¹⁴ Therefore, Strauss feels Gourevitch is adopting the very language and perspective of the phenomenon he condemns. In James Long’s view, genocide “thrives” when we broadly categorize people while trying to explain genocide.¹⁵

From the issue of moral absolutism, academics and critics of Gourevitch arrive at the question of who is to blame for genocide. Spearey describes Gourevitch as aware of “his implication as an American, a Westerner, and a journalist in the global institutions, histories, and networks that have shaped the advent of the genocide” in Rwanda.¹⁶ However, she also notes that

¹¹ Long, 18.

¹² Gary Rosen, “Can We Prevent Genocide?” (Commentary; New York, February 1999), 54.

¹³ Rosen, 55.

¹⁴ Scott Strauss, “Genocide in Rwanda,” edited by Philip Gourevitch and Alison Des Forges, *African Studies Review* 43, no. 2 (2000), 128.

¹⁵ Long, 16.

¹⁶ Spearey, 524.

he maintains that mental and emotional distance of his fellow Westerners. In their examination of Gourevitch's work, Spearey and other critics bring up several important questions regarding blame: Should we assign blame to these "institutions, histories, and networks" for the preventable deaths in Rwanda? Are we as individuals to blame for putting up this barrier between ourselves and those suffering in other parts of the world? Are the Hutu militiamen themselves even to blame, or are they also merely victims of institutionalized violence? According to Long, we are all to blame, and we are all victims – a concept which he calls "collective guilt" – because the crimes committed in Rwanda were "crimes against humanity."¹⁷ Therefore, to him, the concept of blame is irrelevant and only leads to guilt and division, which provide the foundation of further violence.

Finally, the most pressing and controversial subject taken on by readers of Gourevitch surrounds the word "genocide" itself. Long argues that we created the word in an attempt to comprehend an unfathomable evil, but that in creating this "language around evil," we have also created "a way of behaving that perpetuates the crime."¹⁸ He says the word genocide, the killing of an entire population, causes us to focus more on the killers than the victims. Through this misdirection of focus, Long claims, we lose the individual stories of the murdered.¹⁹ These victims "are not merely statistics, they are less than that: they are ideas."²⁰ He praises Gourevitch for centering his work on people's personal stories from the genocide, thereby detracting from the idea of "collective death."²¹ When we focus on this "collective death," we reduce human beings to nothing more than an abstract concept. Long reflects on the "immediacy of life at the

¹⁷ Long, 16.

¹⁸ Long, 16.

¹⁹ Long, 17.

²⁰ Long, 17.

²¹ Long, 18.

moment of death” that appears in the stories Gourevitch tells, coming to the conclusion that it is only due to our privilege as outsiders that we have the “luxury” of discussing genocide in the first place.²² He finally asserts that we should omit the concept of genocide from the conversation altogether, as it leads to the oversimplification and the trivialization of individual lives. However, he points out, this leaves us with the question of how to go about discussing mass killings and torture on a broad scale without silencing the dead.

Gourevitch’s impassioned account of the Rwandan genocide opens up a wide range of academic conversations that all come down to the fundamental question of how to define the ethics of viewing. For those of us in positions of Western privilege, they ask, what is the proper reaction to images and stories of the suffering of others?

²² Long, 17, 18.

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