

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

FRAMING “RWANDANNESS”: STUDYING RWANDA IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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Kristin Conner Doughty. *Remediation in Rwanda: Grassroots Legal Forums.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. 283 pp. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$65.00. Cloth. ISBN: 9780812247831.

Bert Ingelaere. *Inside Rwanda's Gacaca Courts: Seeking Justice after Genocide.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2016. 234 pp. Maps. Illustrations. Tables. Appendixes. Glossary. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$64.95. Cloth. ISBN: 9780299309701.

Erin Jessee. *Negotiating Genocide in Rwanda: The Politics of History.* Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017. 302 pp. Chronology. Map. Terminology. Illustrations. Bibliography. Index. €106.99. Cloth. ISBN: 9783319451947.

Andrea Purdeková. *Making Ubumwe: Power, State and Camps in Rwanda's Unity-Building Project.* New York: Berghahn Books, 2015. 306 pp. Glossary. Maps. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$100. Cloth. ISBN: 9781782388326.

When we first set out to write this review essay, motivated by the boom of recent publications on Rwanda, we thought these four books from a variety of disciplines seemed to share a common feature that haunts much of the literature on Rwanda: the “before” and the “after.” Yet in these four studies the genocide, often previously (and still by some) seen as a moment of profound historical rupture, is decentered. These studies all reflect emphatically

contemporary perspectives, interested in continuities and the permutations of the “before” while firmly rooted in the “after.” This focus allows for rich interdisciplinary work from a new generation of scholars and perhaps suggests that we are far enough away in time from the genocide to frame a more defined and creative field of Rwandan studies.

What becomes striking in reading these texts together is the particularism with which each author treats the subject of “Rwandanness” or “Rwandicity,” ranging from the politics of historical production (Jessee) to transitional justice practices, both formal and informal (Ingelaere and Doughty), and the role of the state in unity-building projects (Purdeková). All four take pains to situate their studies within the rural peasant experience, bypassing urban and more mobile populations almost entirely and going to great lengths to validate their own embeddedness in what they locate as the “true” Rwanda. With Paul Kagame’s reelection with 98 percent of the vote in August 2017, these scholars provide timely critical insights into the workings of the state and the impacts of its postgenocide reconciliation projects on the everyday lived experiences of Rwandans.

Despite this presentist turn in Rwandan studies, history remains a contentious field in which Rwandans negotiate their identities and relationship to the state. In her immersive study *Negotiating Genocide in Rwanda: The Politics of History*, Erin Jessee, an oral historian, seeks to answer a complex question: how do Rwandans interpret history in order to make sense of the genocide? Drawing on a thoughtful and self-reflective methodology, Jessee argues that the official government narrative works only for a minority of Rwandans. After 1994 the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) propagated a simplified history of precolonial unity disrupted by colonial powers who enforced racial divides that developed into an exclusive and violent Hutu nationalism in the postcolonial era and culminated in the genocide. Jessee argues that this narrative has created controversy over nearly every aspect of Rwanda’s past, and she predicts that “if left unchecked, [these tensions] could threaten the long-term political stability of the nation” (26).

Taking the narratives of individual Rwandans as her primary unit of analysis, Jessee focuses on life histories, organized into categories similar to what Kristin Conner Doughty (in *Remediation in Rwanda*, reviewed below) terms “genocide citizenship”—that is, public identities defined by how they relate to the genocide. Jessee begins with national memorial employees, whom she refers to as “professional survivors,” who not only assist in disseminating the government’s narrative, but who also must navigate a complex web of social relations and their own personal histories. Jessee then examines the life histories of survivors outside of official settings, a limited category as only a small portion of the population is permitted to identify as “survivor” (118). Jessee’s interviewees, many of them elders who claim descent from royal lineages, provide a periodization of Rwandan history that proceeds from precolonial richness and social harmony to postcolonial violence and instability. Some expressed nostalgia for Rwandan kings

(or mwamis), claiming they were “loved by all Rwandans” (122). Most, when asked about the postgenocide government, expressed gratitude toward the RPF but remain wary of its attempts to promote development, unity, and reconciliation.

Jessee then turns to the narratives of convicted *génocidaires* in an attempt to “share the narrative burden” with a broad swath of Rwandans (150). Using Erin Baines’s (2009) notion of the “complex political perpetrator” (86), Jessee highlights the common tendency among *génocidaires* to downplay actions during the genocide and speak in terms of longer histories of their own perceived oppression. One of Jessee’s interviewees, Martin, positions himself as a victim of circumstance who was forced to commit murder in 1994. Through their time in prison and *ingando* (solidarity) camps, many convicted *génocidaires* became well-versed in the government narrative. Jessee positions their rehearsals of this narrative as part of crucial survival strategies in the new Rwandan state. Among the survivor and *génocidaire* interviewees there was also the shared perception that the current Rwandan government, though having provided stability and other beneficial developments, is not that dissimilar from previous regimes.

In the final two chapters Jessee tackles the less studied experiences of returnees, Twa peoples, and those who “do not fit” into proscribed post-genocide categories. The narratives of returnees varied depending on their experiences of exile and the country from which they had returned, though as strong supporters of the RPF and active gatekeepers in government institutions many expressed concern over the very place of history in the public sphere. Twa peoples, a hunter-gatherer community who “self-identify as an indigenous minority” in Rwanda, present a particularly complex case (225). In the 1990s the Twa found themselves subject to violence from both sides. Hutu extremists perceived the Twa to be supporting the Tutsi and targeted them during the genocide. They were again caught up in violence as their presence among Hutu refugees in the Democratic Republic of the Congo was seen as a threat. This series of misassociations has led many to consider the Twa as “double victims” (229). Postgenocide Twa attempts to be recognized as an indigenous group and to engage with international indigenous organizations is hampered by fears of being perceived as promoting “genocide ideology.” Those who do not fit into prescribed categories include Jeanne, a Hutu woman who lost her Tutsi husband and several children in the genocide, and Elliott, a Tutsi *génocidaire* whose family kept his true identity from him in his youth. Through the life histories of these people Jessee demonstrates the complex social formations and personal histories that complicate the state-imposed categories of survivor/victim and perpetrator/ *génocidaire*. These chapters highlight the difficulty of recovering narratives that are marked by silences and erasures. Jessee’s study makes some productive inroads into these histories, although those looking for more detailed analysis of these “non-fitting” narratives will be left wanting more.

Negotiating Genocide offers a critical introduction for those learning about the production of history in contemporary Rwanda. Those who have not been to Rwanda will relish the close readings Jessee supplies of national memorial sites, and her frequent discussion of research ethics and methodology offers critical insights for those embarking on oral projects in post-conflict regions. With detailed front material, maps, chronologies, and terminologies, *Negotiating Genocide* is an invaluable resource for teachers and students alike.

While “history” remains a central point of contention in Rwandan public and private life, how to cope in practical terms with the legacies of mass violence and the judicial crisis produced by the genocide remains a major challenge in postgenocide Rwanda. Both Bert Ingelaere and Kristin Conner Doughty examine questions of transitional justice and social repair through formal and informal legal structures and processes.

The institution of *gacaca* courts, based at least rhetorically on the precolonial tradition of “justice on the grass,” has been heralded by some for its unique approach to adapting local customs and emphasizing the restoration of social life through confession and public participation. Ingelaere’s ambitious study attempts to provide an in-depth examination of *gacaca* trials through the coding and analysis of over seventeen hundred trials alongside hundreds of life history interviews, focus group reports, and ethnographic observations. As opposed to Jessee’s largely unmediated approach to life histories, Ingelaere approaches these narratives quantitatively, tabulating word frequency, social markers, and generic features. This mixed-method approach, elaborated in detail in chapter 2, required a dexterous analytical framework and an “on the ground” and “immersive” methodological rigor. Through systematic and iterative analysis, Ingelaere documents how the *gacaca* “experiment” in transitional justice morphed over time from an emphasis on confession to accusation, from favoring restoration to exacting retribution.

Ingelaere begins by detailing the mechanics of this judicial process, tracking the progression of court cases through confession, participation, and categorization. While public participation is a cornerstone of *gacaca*’s purported aims, Ingelaere reveals much lower attendance and engagement than is often assumed. Even where attendance was high, Ingelaere notes, this presence did not necessarily translate into active involvement. Ingelaere focuses less on what *gacaca* was supposed to achieve and more on how it was actually experienced by participants. The study is at its liveliest and most insightful in its richly detailed accounts of these court cases. Long excerpts of trial transcripts provide a window into the complex, performative, and increasingly adversarial atmosphere produced in the space of these makeshift courts. Ingelaere vividly relays the emotive impact of these trials, from the importance of trust to the at times overwhelming presence of fear. The state played a prominent role in manufacturing the kind of “rehearsed consensus” performed in the courts, particularly through the judges who

acted as intermediaries for state power. This dense web of administrative structures encouraged self-surveillance and self-censorship within the officially sanctioned “regime of truth” and created feedback loops that informed the nature of popular engagement with these state-led projects of reconciliation. Ingelaere also provides in-depth case studies from two rural sites: Rukoma, an isolated hill (or sector) in southeast Rwanda, and Ntabona, located in the north of the former province of Gitarama. Although these are two seemingly similar sites, the case studies reveal their different trajectories and dynamics of genocide and postgenocide reconciliation. Local variations in settlement histories, demographic distribution, intensity of genocidal violence, and responses to the end of the genocide all affected local responses to gacaca.

Ingelaere concludes by making the case for looking at gacaca courts as an attempt to rebuild social life, to see the heart (*umutima*) and humanity at the core of these processes and the “sociocultural construction of Rwandan personhood” (13). While the cases Ingelaere details were often adversarial and the conclusions rarely satisfied the diverse goals of participants, the restoration of social relationships remained their paramount function. Yet Ingelaere also warns of the dangers of romanticizing such local processes of transitional justice: notions of authenticity, tradition, and “truth” are continually contested. Ingelaere instead invites us to engage with the actual practices and popular experiences beyond the wide celebration of gacaca’s seeming success.

In *Remediation in Rwanda*, Doughty also looks at the gacaca trials but places them in a wider field of judicial practices, both formal and informal. Doughty examines the micropolitics of reconciliation and the multiple forms of “remediation” as they operated in three different legal forums: gacaca courts, mediation committees (*comite y’abunzi*), and legal aid clinics. This novel approach decenters genocidal violence as the principal focus of judicial mediation and demonstrates the continuities in how Rwandans engage with these legal models to renegotiate their social positions within broader sets of concerns involving land, gender dynamics, violence, and the politics of victimhood. The coercive role of the state is still very much present, but Doughty refreshingly shifts focus to the everyday uses and intersecting purposes of these legal processes for moral reconstruction and social maneuvering.

Doughty’s field of reference is impressively wide, integrating global transitional justice models with more specific literature on African legal traditions. The first two chapters provide incisive context, examining the production of history, the politics of the “customary,” and the legal models and justice discourses that frame these practices of remediation. Perhaps most provocative is Doughty’s argument around what she terms “genocide citizenship” (25). While the postgenocide state officially erased “ethnicity” as a marker of citizenship, legal forums and other reconciliation projects paradoxically work to solidify social categories based on one’s position in relation to the genocide. Doughty argues persuasively that this “genocide

citizenship”—intersecting with other social categories of class, gender, age, and region—provides the crucial link between the state and the local and that this concept provides the structure for—while it is also structured by—everyday engagements with these legal forums.

Most of the text focuses on how Rwandans maneuver through these three sites of legal remediation. In chapter 3 Doughty takes a new look at the *gacaca* courts as spaces through which Rwandans could negotiate “genocide citizenship,” material loyalty, and community belonging and by examining them as a “form of governance intended to manage the relationships among people, forging them into a binding moral field” (97). She deftly weaves testimony, oral evidence, textbook entries, and careful observation to move beyond seeing *gacaca* sessions as merely coercive spaces characterized by “predetermined performances scripted by ethnicity” (113) to reveal the creative and varied ways Rwandans engaged with this process.

In chapter 4 Doughty explores the more quotidian *comite y’abunzi*—committees, launched in 2004, that worked alongside *gacaca* courts in resolving low-level civil and criminal disputes before locally elected mediators. Doughty pays particular attention to the poetics and ritualistic nature of these proceedings, framed around principles of obligation, harmony, and punishment. As Ingelaere found similarly, material loss and compensation often overshadowed the emphasis on outright violence. Land conflicts were central to their operations, speaking to continuities across the “before” and “after” of the genocide and a wider economics of memory.

Chapter 5 turns to perhaps the most unique and thorough site of mediation-as-practice, the legal aid clinic. Located at the National University of Rwanda in Butare, the clinic provided a space where “customary” mediation and “modern” legal modes based on universal human rights discourses collided. The staff members at the clinic were not state-backed authorities but primarily law students at the university, and the process focused on individual cases as opposed to the community-centered approach of the courts and the committees. These sites provided greater discretion and opportunities to engage in debates over gender roles, sexuality, financial responsibility, and social expectations outside of more restrictive postgenocide frameworks.

Through her examination of these three sites and the varied social actors that animate their proceedings (and in particular, the stimulating examination of lay judges as “intermediaries”), Doughty argues persuasively that there is no such thing as “benign” reconciliation: social healing in and of itself, now and in the past, can be dangerous as it reflects a form of power negotiated by “ordinary” people who do not always agree on its meanings or ways to achieve it.

If the goal of remediation is social cohesion, then the objective of unity building might be said to be the context in which this social cohesion meets the political. Andrea Purdeková’s *Making Ubumwe: Power, State and Camps in Rwanda’s Unity-Building Project* is a study of meaning-making in Rwanda and the country’s attempts at building a cohesive nation-state. The genocide

marked a watershed in the trajectory of state consolidation, and Rwanda is now unique for its dense, intricate, and elaborate high modern and interventionist state. Focusing on both the discursive abstract of government rhetoric and the mundane nature of its implementation, Purdeková encourages us to understand *ubumwe* (“unity” in Kinyarwanda) as having “a political life of its own” (8).

In part 1 Purdeková introduces a wide array of concepts and frameworks that are essential for understanding her analysis: productiveness over effectiveness (or the “how” over the “why”); unity as an articulated political idea and unity-building as a corresponding political tool; neo-traditionality as a framework for understanding state unity-building efforts; and intersecting ethnic/class dynamics. Part 2 then analyzes the political processes that produced this concentration of government authority. Chapter 3 looks at state legitimization, articulated via the guarantee of security, the provision of welfare and/or development, and the delivery of unity as social harmony. In this section Purdeková highlights how “unity” in Rwanda does not necessarily correlate with peace, and the methods through which the RPF (which, as a political party, she considers more powerful than the state) dispatches rather than decentralizes control.

In parts 3 and 4 Purdeková examines the specific sites where this “performative unity” takes place. Partially due to her close connections to the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission, Purdeková is able to offer an in-depth look at the bureaucratic work of reconciliation. Chapters 8 and 9 provide a comprehensive analysis of ingando camps which, she argues, existed in a position of strategic liminality and a space of experimental alterities as different versions of these camps were tailored to fit specific populations (returning Tutsi, génocidaires, students) and varied in terms of duration and location. Her close reading of the camps is useful for understanding the dynamics of state power at work, and the ways in which particular spaces became demarcated sites of learning and relearning Rwandan history and traditions. Through civic education, development projects, and top-down “Vision 2020” goals aimed at alleviating poverty, the postgenocide state has worked to engineer “good citizens” and a “eutopic order” that attempts to distract from continued inequalities by promising an imaginary and elusive future in the “new Rwanda” (214).

Making Ubumwe is essential reading for anyone interested in the operations of state power in Rwanda. Purdeková demonstrates the often seamless oscillation between the goals of national-scale structures and the more ambiguous designs of local micropolitics. Although she does conclude by discussing how Rwanda deviates from much of the standard literature on the nature of the African state, Purdeková has left the door open for others to take up a more comparative framework of analysis, which could prove productive.

All four of these texts, emerging from doctoral work undertaken in the past ten years, introduce a new generation of scholars and herald the exciting and innovative directions taking shape in Rwandan studies. Ingelaere and

Jessee provide strong introductions to the study of postgenocide Rwanda paired with richly detailed case studies of historical production and legal practices, respectively. Doughty and Purdeková provide ambitious theoretical analyses that open up rich possibilities for connecting Rwanda to wider regional literatures. While the texts differ in their comprehensiveness, theoretical sophistication, and intended audience, all convincingly decenter the genocide and highlight productive continuities that suggest areas of future inquiry beyond the common tropes of violence and identity.

At least in part due to the specific constraints and conditions put on researchers, Rwandan studies has had a tendency toward seeming insular and isolated. The texts examined here face similar challenges: all save one (Doughty) stop short of fully engaging with the literature or historical trajectories and influences beyond the borders of Rwanda. In an odd statement, quite out of place with the rest of his analysis, Ingelaere opens his first chapter with a reference to Rwanda as “hidden in the heart of Africa . . . almost unknown beyond its borders” (14)—an assertion that will certainly be off-putting to many Africanists. But this tendency toward isolationism, at least on the part of researchers, leads to a relatively small (though certainly growing, as the recent proliferation in publications attests) group of scholars all seemingly speaking to and citing one another.

This approach has a number of drawbacks: missed opportunities for fruitful comparative analysis; reification of historical contingencies in Rwanda that certainly existed elsewhere, not the least among its neighbors; and the exceptionalizing and geographic dismemberment of Rwanda not only from Africa but also from a wider global context. It also suggests a question—who is the intended audience? Although each work holds a great deal of potential for comparative analysis, why do the studies contain so little non-Rwanda-specific material?

On the other hand, this group of scholars, as clear from the works discussed here, are engaged in truly interdisciplinary, even transdisciplinary, work. Each author demonstrates important methodological innovations, made necessary by state constrictions on research and on the ability of Rwandans to speak openly about their experiences before, during, and after the genocide. Jessee demonstrates the productive possibilities of reading oral histories alongside museum studies and popular media. Ingelaere combines the quantitative rigor of development studies with the accessibility of more political anthropological approaches. Doughty provides “thick” anthropological analysis supported by historical and theoretical breadth. Purdeková, trained in political science, mobilizes rich ethnographic and sociological approaches in her examination of state power. Each author has, in some ways, taken up Elisabeth King’s (2009) challenge to turn “data problems into data points” in an environment that is not always friendly to researchers. The methodologies, mindfulness, and creative harnessing of the available material set an example for scholars looking to conduct research in Rwanda today or in the near future.

But there is a danger here. The authors' emphasis on defining "Rwandanness," attributing agency, and embedding their studies in "authentic" local experience has the potential to romanticize and exaggerate the distance between the state and its people and the uniqueness of the Rwandan case. Structural violence, coercion, and the ability of people to defy and resist the state through everyday acts have the tendency to become assumed rather than closely examined. Yet these studies all challenge some of these established tropes and point to encouraging new directions in the study of contemporary Rwanda. Each one hints at intermediary figures who complicate the clear distinctions and sharp edges of postgenocide identity politics. Each provides a methodological richness and self-reflectiveness often uncommon in other fields. Each offers new languages and frameworks that, when applied to other cases of conflict, historical production, and postcolonial state building, may prove invigorating to scholars working elsewhere in the continent.

It is perhaps meaningful that the two books reviewed here that push the study of Rwanda furthest (Doughty and Purdeková) share a common trait: neither mentions the word "genocide" in their titles. Similarly, in his 2017 inaugural address, newly reelected President Kagame did not reference the genocide by name; instead, Kagame touted African solidarity and called for the honoring of all "those who struggled and perished to build this new Rwanda, and to liberate Africa." Pan-African autonomy and unity have increasingly become hallmarks of Kagame's political discourse, a rhetorical move that potentially speaks to an international shift in opinion. No longer the darling of the West, a glowing example of progress and development, Rwanda has come under fire for its human rights violations, lack of a free press, and the assumed nondemocratic nature of its most recent elections. Rather than courting global supporters, Kagame has shifted his focus to regional and continental concerns, advancing himself not only as a leader of Rwanda, but moreover as a leader of Africa. Scholars of Rwanda would be wise to stay attuned to these wider regional histories, eschewing the teleological structuring of the "before" and the "after" and reintegrating the study of Rwanda into African studies.

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