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BOOK REVIEW

From surviving to living: Voice, trauma and witness in Rwandan women’s writing, by Catherine Gilbert. Montpellier: Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée, 2018. 296 pp. €27 (paperback). ISBN 978 2 36781 268 7.

How do genocide survivors communicate their experiences of loss? Who are the audiences for these testimonies? These are the central questions animating Catherine Gilbert’s book exploring Rwandan women’s written testimonies of the 1994 genocide. Examining a mainly French-language corpus – ranging from the earliest published testimony, Yolande Mukagasana’s *La mort ne veut pas de moi* (1997) to Élise Rida Musomandera’s more recent *Le livre d’Élise* (2014) – Gilbert explores the ways in which these women write about the genocide from their subject positions as Tutsi genocide survivors based in the West (for the most part) and writing for Western audiences. Drawing heavily on trauma theory, Gilbert argues that these women work through their trauma by bearing witness to the atrocities they endured; writing allows them the possibility of moving from ‘surviving’ to ‘living’. Importantly, Gilbert stresses how tenuous and difficult such a process is.

In the first chapter, Gilbert explores the figure of the witness, highlighting the multiple ways in which Rwandan women experienced the genocide. Here Gilbert proposes the categories of ‘survivor-witness’ (direct witness); ‘secondary’ witness (indirect witness or outside observer); and ‘reader-witness’ (‘the engaged receiver of testimony’) (p. 54). Not only do these categories capture the range of positions survivors occupied during the genocide – some women directly witnessed violence while others witnessed it in exile – they also point to the necessity of an audience if the trauma is to be successfully communicated.

The second chapter examines how the testimonials ‘give voice’ to trauma and questions trauma as a universal experience. The Western trauma framework is problematic, Gilbert argues, because it assumes two things: ‘first that language is inadequate to convey the traumatic experience, and second that the unassimilable nature of trauma is universal’ (p. 87). Rather than assume pain is inexpressible or incommunicable, Gilbert looks at the particular narrative strategies the writers employ to make their narratives ‘hearable’ or ‘readable’ (p. 89) to Western readers.

Indeed, the vast majority of the texts that Gilbert considers were written in collaboration with Western writers. In chapter three, Gilbert explores the practical and ethical nature of these relationships. While collaborators can allow Rwandan writers access to Western publishing institutions and act as empathetic listeners to their testimonies, there is also a risk of appropriation and exploitation. This chapter helpfully teases out the complexities of this process, but the agency of the women themselves is somewhat downplayed as it is not always clear the control they exerted over the published narrative.

Chapter four explores a key theme – silence. Gilbert examines how the authors write silence (through the use of ellipses, for example) and places this within a wider context of silence surrounding the genocide at both the national and international level. On the one hand, within Rwanda there is the silence imposed by the government as only certain experiences of the genocide can be articulated in

public (i.e. Hutu who were killed cannot be remembered); on the other, there is the silence of the international community as they failed to intervene to stop the genocide and continue to ignore it (though the numerous Western television and film productions about the genocide might suggest otherwise – BBC Two’s television series *Black Earth Rising* being a recent example).

In the final chapter, Gilbert considers how testimony can help survivors move from ‘surviving’ (merely coping with everyday life) to ‘living’ (having a sense of control over their lives). Yet, she points out that the Rwandan government’s current policy of ‘selective remembering’ makes this difficult for survivors. Through an insightful discussion of how the authors in her corpus discuss *gacaca* (community courts set up to try cases of genocide), Gilbert shows how the government’s wider project of creating national unity and reconciliation has mostly been unsuccessful, with the possibility of forgiveness particularly fraught. Although Gilbert makes clear in the Introduction that she will not discuss the testimonies of Hutu women (p. 29), their absence in this chapter seems curious. A discussion, however brief, of some of this work would have helped to nuance the ways in which the ‘official’ memory of the genocide is being contested by a range of women.

The book is admirable in its joining together of Francophone and Anglophone scholarship on Rwanda – two literatures that often remain apart – and in its goal of centring the voices of Rwandan women survivors themselves. Yet its critique of trauma theory could perhaps be taken further – there is no discussion, for example, of *ihahamuka*, the Kinyarwanda term that is often used to refer to trauma amongst genocide survivors. Similarly, a central claim of Gilbert’s analysis is that women’s testimonial literature requires an ‘engaged reader’. Yet what exactly this means in practice is never made clear. Indeed, although perhaps beyond the scope of Gilbert’s analysis, I couldn’t help but wonder about reception – how exactly are these texts understood by the Western readers they are ostensibly targeted towards? How are they received by Rwandans within the country and in the diaspora? How do they compare to texts published in Kinyarwanda for local audiences? Nevertheless, the book is a valuable contribution to the study of genocide testimony, particularly from the perspective of women.

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