

Book Review: Accounting for Horror: Post-Genocide Debates in Rwanda

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Nigel Eltringham. *Accounting for Horror: Post-Genocide Debates in Rwanda*. Sterling, England: Pluto Press, 2004. 232 pp. \$26.95 (paper).

When reporting on the Rwandan massacres, the Western press has often used stereotypic language with references to tribal savagery and hackneyed allusions to “the heart of darkness.” Tainted with racism and generally limited in scope the information regarding Rwanda has usually been shallow at best. Taking a multidisciplinary approach, Nigel Eltringham addresses the dangers of oversimplifying the catastrophic mayhem of Rwanda and details deep critical explanations to “account for the horror.” Eltringham delves into Rwandan history and politics. In addition, he examines certain aspects of language use regarding Rwanda and presents findings from his sociolinguistic study, which includes narratives from Rwandans relating their perceptions of colonialism, national history, and the mass killings.

With a look into Rwanda’s past, Eltringham writes that “social distinction in colonial Rwanda was racially constructed and did not conform to the current multidimensional understanding of ‘ethnicity’” (p. 19). Instead, the distinctions made among people of the region were propagated. With the 1933–34 census, “racialisation” labeled the population into three groups: Tutsi, Hutu, and Twa, and “following patrilineal custom children...inherit[ed] the identity inscribed on their father’s ID card” (p. 18). As a result, artificial biological separations were established on paper and subsequently specific physical and cultural variations were socially generated in the minds and in the behaviors of the people toward each other. Further, the author discusses how political players propagated ethnic and racial divisions in order to gain power. By examining the killings of the 1959 “revolution” and the 1963/64 massacres, Eltringham addresses how such distinctions led to other killings and to the 1994 genocide. Before the 1994 killings, “genocide propaganda” included references to the 1959 and 1963/64 massacres as empowerment of “the Hutu’ liberating themselves from the Tutsi’” (p. 47). However, Eltringham explains that the division between the groups was not a long established distinction marked by certain cultural norms or language, or by absolute socioeconomic or political imbalances, or by real biological differences. Instead, the differences were developed and strengthened to promote prejudice and hatred for the political gain of a few.

Eltringham writes that the postulated distinctions between “the Tutsi and the Hutu” were further exacerbated by reports and writings about Rwanda. Eltringham notes that instead of being “the result of ‘primordial bloodlust’,” the Rwandan genocide was “*modern*, premeditated, [and] well organized” (p. 64). The author discusses how the treatment of the Rwandan genocide, mired in racist attitudes, appears in written documentation describing the people as primitive and “tribal.” Although acknowledging that comparisons to the Holocaust have given the massacres “legitimacy” in Western countries, Eltringham discusses at length both the similarities and the differences between the Holocaust and the Rwandan genocide. For instance, like the Holocaust victims, people in Rwanda often did not know why they were being targeted, and many were killed for who they were and not for what they did. Unlike the Holocaust, in Rwanda the speed of the slayings was much quicker and more of the population participated in the killing. Despite the differences or similarities, Eltringham writes:

the Holocaust has played a central role as comparator in discussions of the 1994 genocide. Although this is natural and there are significant comparisons to be made, making the Holocaust preponderant not only obscures significant divergent characteristics of the Rwandan genocide, but may undermine our ability to detect, prevent and/or swiftly stop future genocides that do not adequately resemble the Holocaust. (pp. 180–81)

By concentrating specifically on the Rwandan genocide, Eltringham argues that the prosecution of those previously responsible for the bloodshed in Rwanda should be the focal point.

To focus on “the individual criminal responsibility intrinsic to the crime of genocide” (p. 181), Eltringham asserts that the term “moderate Hutu” needs closer scrutiny. The author suggests that Hutu moderate could be replaced with “‘Hutu opposing Habyarimana and his power’.” Such a change in phrasing would give clarity and accuracy in meaning that could lead to accountability of individuals responsible for the killings. Eltringham discusses the “subliminal impact” of “Hutu moderate” in maintaining “collective guilt,” which undermines the reparations and reconciliation needed in Rwanda (p. 181). Because the use of

Hutu moderate “disguises great complexity” and perpetuates “a binary framework” in which a Hutu can only be “qualified as either moderate or extremist”(p. 76), Eltringham argues that greater accuracy and specificity in references made about people, their actions, and time is necessary for Rwanda to reconcile and maintain peace.

In the process of reconciliation, Eltringham warns of the intrinsic dangers in appealing to history for solutions. Since the “structure of power” in Rwanda has been “constructed on the construction of history” (p. 148), history has been used to create and perpetuate divisions in Rwanda, and Eltringham writes that to believe

a single, absolute history is attainable (and preferable) has not only proved to be deadly, but overestimates the capacities and misunderstands the nature of historiography. While there may be a non-negotiable *chronicle of events*, the narratives that actors recognise (and value) as history are the product of an interpretive exercise that inevitably generates different narratives. While Rwanda has a single past, a single, definitive history is unattainable. (p. 182)

To illustrate the variations in perspectives, Eltringham presents several narratives collected from Rwandans speaking on the past events. Eltringham admits the collection is not fully representative of as many “‘ethnic’ narratives” as possible, but that the accounts illustrate the differences found in human perceptions. From his narrative research, Eltringham concludes that

we should not allow our faith in a single, “real” history to prevent us from accepting and exploring competing narratives that reflect contemporary concerns in Rwanda. If we strive to isolate one version of Rwandan history such concerns will remain Hidden. (p. 179)

To remember respectfully the victims of the Rwandan genocide, Eltringham writes that humanity must resist adopting a single historical narrative, but instead must seek a “dogmatic, tenacious and transparent” (p. 181) into the “*modern, premeditated*” (p. 64) killings of human against human.