

THE ORIGINS OF THE PLAY

What's written below is self-centered and indulgent and all those things I abhor about a good deal of foreign writing on Africa. But writing about your own writing is always that way. Here are the origins of the play:

Moralizing History

My interest in Africa started with my first hangover. In 11th grade I slept over at a friend's house and woke up the next day with a headache so painful I thought I had brain damage. Nowadays I would address the problem with aspirin and coffee and lemon-lime Gatorade, but at the time I was ignorant of even these most basic restorative measures. I was sitting in my friend's living room staring at his parents' bookshelves. They were economists and kept a library so well stocked it seemed an affront to my stuttering state. I decided to pick up a book to prove the damage wasn't permanent and reached for the best title I could find.

"We Wish to Inform You that Tomorrow We will be Killed with Our Families" by Philip Gourevitch could never be called a normal choice for hangover reading – it would certainly not be mine today. But I was a macabre little Petri dish of hormones in high school, and the title had obvious appeal. I thought it was a thriller. It was something else entirely, a first-person journalistic exploration of the Rwandan genocide and its immediate aftermath, written in the style of those long, pleasurable features in *The New Yorker*, the magazine where Gourevitch now works. At the time I knew nothing about the Great Lakes region. I knew nothing about sub-Saharan Africa in general. In school we may have discussed the Atlantic passage, but in that narrative, Africa was some kind of pre-historical paradise where people lived in harmony with nature and one another until bad Europeans arrived looking for people to buy. Beyond that (and because of that) I was completely ignorant.

This book, however, gave context for the genocide. I was immediately struck by its political nature. It was not an incomprehensible mess, a state-of-nature barbaric struggle between resource-starved Africans mired in poverty and violence, a sort of giant mass of black sadness. It also wasn't the direct result of historical forces – Belgian colonial history was useful for setting the scene but it could not fully explain the magnitude of the event and why it occurred in that specific country at that specific time with those specific, deadly results. The story Gourevitch told had political actors with political agency and the problems traced to their political decisions. Africans with agency – a stupidly infrequent narrative concept in everything I had read before. This was exciting. Because of my American upbringing, agency implies morality, so I immediately set about trying to identify the good guys and bad guys. I was an individualist, a moralist, and I couldn't have been more stupid.

Paul Kagame, the guerilla leader who toppled the genocide regime and brought order to post-genocide Rwanda, was, to my teenage self, reading Gourevitch, certainly a good guy. Sure he had done some debatably unsavory things – overstepping his mandate to disband the Hutu refugee camps in what was then eastern Zaire because they housed perpetrators of the genocide by staging a coup against Mobutu and then systematically destabilizing the newly formed DRC from its inception all the way up to the present day (along with many others, African and not), as well as limiting free speech and manipulating the political system of his own country. But to both of these criticisms Gourevitch has an answer clever enough to shut up any skepticism my hungover teenage brain may have dared entertain: Kagame is Lincoln. Of course.

Old Abe led a divided country soaked in blood, too. His response, in an effort to preserve the Union, was, at times, to cleverly evade, subvert, and outright violate those elements, constitutional or otherwise, that made that very union special. It was a form of political chemotherapy, administered by a complicated, beloved Christ figure at war with a fundamentally evil enemy – the slave power. Everyone but brainwashed southern revisionists think what he did was right, even if what he (and deputies like Sherman) did was extreme. And Kagame faced an even greater challenge – genocide. Not only genocide, but genocide that ended in a situation where victim and killer had to learn to exist in the same country, on the same hills, as neighbors, laborers, and even family. An author I read later compared the situation in post-genocide Rwanda to what would have happened if the Jewish state had been founded in Bavaria. Surely, in such a situation, the ends – unity, security, rehabilitation – could justify the sometimes nauseating means. And surely a people, the Tutsi, who had no help from the outside world as their neighbors tried to wipe them off the face of the planet, surely those people had the right to militarily dismantle any group in the region which threatened their existence, especially if the group cited ethnic stereotypes and the genocide as inspiration or ideal.

But history is always so damn simple in high school. It's dates. It's battles. It's names and stories of victors and their descendants, even victors who started as victims. And historical crushes are easy. I had one on Kagame. And it took me more than a decade to get over it.

The best summary of the complex moral position of post-genocide Rwanda, as usual, is delivered by Jason Stearns. Now a graduate student at Yale, he has observed the Congo war, in which Rwanda has played a major role, since at least the early 2000s. His book *Dancing in the Glory of Monsters: the Collapse of the Congo and the Great War of Africa* and his blog Congo Siasa both provide some of the best historical and political context for the situation in eastern Congo, a violent decade-long war that started after the genocide for a host of reasons, prominent among them that Rwanda's new government

felt the country was a safe-haven for perpetrators of the genocide looking to return to Rwanda to kill again.

But how much of Rwanda's involvement in DRC can be justified as a response to the genocide? Stearns writes:

"Rwanda did have security concerns. One of Kagame's political advisors expressed a typical view to me: 'When the United States was attacked on September 11, 2001, you decided to strike back at Afghanistan for harboring the people who carried out the attack. Many innocent civilians died as a result of U.S. military operations. Is that unfortunate? Of course. But how many Americans regret invading Afghanistan? Very few.'

This point of view does not allow for moral nuances. Once we have established that génocidaires are in the Congo, any means will justify the ends of getting rid of them, even if those means are not directly related to getting rid of the génocidaires. Was the destruction of Kisangani necessary to get rid of them? The killing of tens of thousands of civilians? The pillaging of millions of dollars to finance the war effort?" (Stearns, 335) In the end my view of Kagame and the RPF did not shift one-hundred-eighty degrees from celebratory to defamatory – it got complicated. It's not a useful exercise to divide all political actors into two camps – good and bad. The best thing is to continue to study and to appreciate, at all times, how complex the world is.

Gluttony and Discipline

Last year I was working as a waiter in a restaurant where people ate and drank with unholy abandon – pork belly and bourbon and thirty-six-day dry aged beef rib eyes with French fries and chimichurri – and I was amazed by the cooks, by their queer mix of discipline and decadence. Shifts were hectic. The need for both consistency and speed in the kitchen reminded me of athletics, of manipulating your body to produce results you could never conceptualize in the moment, of moving faster than your mind. I respected these guys.

But at the same time all this discipline was deployed in the service of something completely undisciplined – American food culture, one of the most graphic illustrations of capitalist excess, eating and drinking and pissing and shitting so much (and so solidly and free of worms) in a world where people subsist on maize meal and rice (and these are only the seasonally hungry – forget starvation). The old high school moralist in me felt rage – mostly at myself. I was a collaborator. I served it. I profited off it. I ate it. That food was delicious. Those drinks were well made and inebriating. The paycheck paid rent and kept me writing. But at the same time I was losing touch with the rest of the world – working nights and writing days – so I started to re-read some of my books from college to help me not feel so dumb and decadent.

One book I read was *Machete Season: the Killers in Rwanda Speak*, French journalist Jean Hatzfeld's interviews with poor Hutu farmers who committed the genocide and were, at the time of the interview, serving long sentences in the overcrowded Rilima prison. From these I gleaned bits of information on the daily routine of the killings. It involved, to my surprise, a good deal of what must be called celebration.

Here are some quotes Hatzfeld got from the killers:

"We roasted thick meat in the morning, and we roasted more meat in the evening. Anybody who once had eaten meat only at weddings, he found himself stuffed with it day after day...When we got back from the marshes, in the cabarets of Kibungo we snapped up roast chickens, haunches of cow, and drinks to remedy our fatigue." (Hatzfeld, 60-1) "We gorged on vitamin-rich foods. Some among us tasted pastries and sweets like candies for the first time in our lives." (Hatzfeld, 62) "Meat became as common as cassava. Hutus had always felt cheated of cattle because they didn't know how to raise them. They said cows didn't taste good, but it was from scarcity. So, during the massacres they ate beef morning and evening, to their heart's content." (Hatzfeld, 62-3)

The killing itself involved discipline:

"Doing it over and over: repetition smoothed out clumsiness. That is true, I believe, for any kind of handiwork." (Hatzfeld, 36) "In the end, a man is like an animal: you give him a whack on the head or the neck, and he goes down. In the first few days someone who had already slaughtered chickens – and especially goats – had an advantage, understandably." (Hatzfeld, 37)

Feasting plus the discipline of swinging the machete – here was a mix of substance abuse and athletic discipline – a superficial but striking aesthetic approximation of what I saw in a kitchen. Machinery that was organized to produce chaotic results. People with incredible focus and unceasing appetite. The butchering of a pig performed each week at the restaurant, this required the strength and discipline of the butchering of a man. Morally these worlds share little, but I found the surface-level parallels fascinating.

All of this craziness – eating and drinking and violence – is contrasted with Kagame, the man who ended the genocide, who Stearns describes thus:

"A gaunt, bony man with wire-rimmed spectacles and a methodical style of speaking, Kagame left an impression on people. He didn't smoke, drink, or have much time for expensive clothes or beautiful women...[the] only entertainment he apparently indulged in was tennis..." (Stearns, 47)

Here was a man different from the poor murderous farmers, different from the playful cooks I worked with who loved their beer, and different from me, the guy who first read

about the Rwandan genocide while nursing a hangover. But Kagame, like all of us, is complicated.

How to Use a Knife

This play is an attempt to make sense of all of it – the decade of reading and thinking about Rwanda and DRC and the year spent observing and participating in New York restaurant culture. Maybe it succeeds. Maybe it fails. But I wanted to write something big and challenging, and I hope you come see it and let me know what you think.

Hatzfeld, Jean. *Machete Season: The Killers in Rwanda Speak*. Linda Coverdale, trans. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux. 2003.

Stearns, Jason K. *Dancing in the Glory of Monsters: The Collapse of the Congo and the Great War of Africa*. New York: Public Affairs. 2011.