Coming to Terms with the Ineffable: Memory, Truth and Representation in Post-Genocide Societies

Genocide overpowers the imagination with numbers, images, and questions. This volume seeks to address some of these issues: What leads to such unspeakable atrocities against humanity, time after time? How can the victims and perpetrators of genocide come to terms with such events in the past? Based on the ethnographic field research of the individual contributors, the nine essays compiled in this anthropological study explore how events are "represented and reimagined, asserted or elided through narratives and counter-narratives, remembered or forgotten, avenged or unavenged, and coped with or silenced and ignored in different contexts and historical moments" (p. 11). This volume investigates the politicization of memory and representation, particularly in the process of mapping out a narrative of the past in a post-genocide society. Social inclusions and exclusions frequently reflect the ways in which such events are remembered and represented, and thus can further complicate the task of coming to terms with the past and of coping with a post-genocide future. The first comparative anthropological study of these topics, this book is a strong contribution in the field of genocide studies and an insightful study for scholars and students across a wide range of disciplines.

In order to underscore the interrelatedness of key themes, the editors have given all three sections a variation of the same title. By boldfacing a different word in each section, the editors demonstrate how the chapters find cohesion within each theme while also speaking to each other across the book: thus "Truth / Memory / Representation," "Truth / Memory / Representation," and "Truth / Memory / Representation." This organization of topics draws the reader’s attention to an interconnectedness of discourses in the context of genocide and, consistent with the book’s approach to "sidestep ‘black-and-white’ conversations" (p. 13), attempts to undermine inherent dichotomies. The first section examines discourses of truth in the aftermath of genocide. Victoria Sanford’s essay, based on her research on Mayan survivors in Guatemala and specifically on the excavation of clandestine gravesites, explores how the exhumation contributes to the making of collective memories and potentially undercuts state-sponsored truths and dominant narratives.

Sharon E. Hutchinson challenges the "default assumption" (p. 54) that international observer missions deployed to genocide areas are benign. She questions the neutrality of international missions, drawing on her own experiences as an official monitor in Sudan, as well as on Michael Ignatieff’s observation that states will only accept an international intervention if the deployed mission “takes no steps to encourage insurgents against the ruling regime” (p. 55). Hutchinson demonstrates how, as in the case of the Civilian Protection Monitoring Team–Sudan (CPMT), “well-intentioned international monitoring missions actually serve to increase the efficiencies of unjust, violent, and repressive state regimes” (p. 55). In the third essay of this section, Jennie E. Burnet reflects on
how state practices of national memory in Rwanda have maintained ethnic dichotomies between Hutu and Tutsi peoples by emphasizing and establishing distinctions between victims and perpetrators in annual national ceremonies commemorating the 1994 genocide. All three essays in this section clearly point out the potential political power of discourses of truth in a post-genocide context.

The second part of this volume explores memory. Leslie Dwyer’s essay on the “politics of silences” in Bali after the state-sponsored massacres in 1965-66 explores the meaning of silence and forgetting within Balinese society. Dwyer argues that these seemingly “blank spots on a communicative landscape” are in fact highly meaningful, although widely marginalized social and cultural products that need to be better integrated into the study of genocides (p. 114). Uli Linke’s essay, on the other hand, addresses strategies of forgetting as highly problematic cultural techniques that fostered the suppression of memory and a lack of empathy in post-Holocaust Germany. An ongoing “emotional anaesthesia” underlies, as Linke suggests, the unprecedented success of the “Body Worlds” art exhibition, which displays highly stylized corpses. In the third essay of this section, Debra H. Rodman examines how individual as well as state-sponsored memories are strongly influenced and shaped by a prevailing culture of fear and violence in the post-genocide society of Guatemala. As a paradox consequence, denial of the genocide is, as she concludes, widespread among both Mayans and Ladinos.

The third and last section of this book considers representation. Elisabeth F. Drexler examines how multiple institutional responses to the state-sponsored atrocities following the 1999 referendum for independence in East Timor failed to mitigate distrust and to prevent new conflicts from arising. As Drexler suggests, it is precisely the trials’ “failure to examine the complex logics of collaboration and betrayal” (p. 220) that leads to persistent violence in East Timor. Using the violent conflicts between Nigerian Christians and Muslims in May 2004 as a case study, Conerly Casey’s essay explores the role of national and transnational media in the formation of “affective citizenships,” i.e., feelings of political belonging, particularly of youths with the state of Nigeria. Considered as “emotive institutions” (p. 248), media and media representations are, as Casey suggests, extremely powerful tools against the backdrop of ongoing tensions between different ethnic and religious groups. Pamela Ballinger’s essay concludes this section, analyzing the use of “ethnic cleansing” as a political as well as a scholarly term. Drawing on scholarly debates and on the specific case of “Yugoslavia’s first ethnic cleansing” after World War Two when Italians were forced to leave the Istrian peninsula, Ballinger critically interrogates how the term is used by Istrian Italian exiles to present their case as victims of a program of genocide.

Overall, this book is a useful and equally fascinating read for scholars and students of genocide studies, as well as for those who are otherwise interested in the subject matter. The coherent organization of the chapters, including cross-references between essays, makes it a strong and concise contribution. The fact that the specific choice of essays in each of the three sections “Truth,” “Memory,” and “Representation” may not always be apparent—some of the texts fit all three key themes—may be considered as a weakness by some. Others might appreciate this undermining of categories, which appears to be consistent with the editors’ invitation to their audience to “read across editorial decisions” (p. 9) as well as with the overall objective of the volume to challenge “black-and-white’ conversations” within the context of genocide and genocide studies.

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