

BOOK REVIEW

Caroline Williamson Sinalo. *Rwanda After Genocide: Gender, Identity and Post-Traumatic Growth*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. vii + 227 pp. Bibliography. Index. \$105.00. Cloth. ISBN: 9781198591478.

After the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda, Naasson Munyadamutsa was the only psychiatrist left in the country. Studies of trauma in post-genocide societies have been plentiful, but in *Rwanda After Genocide: Gender, Identity and Post-Traumatic Growth*, Caroline Williamson Sinalo proposes “a new reading of trauma; one that recognizes not just the negative, but also the positive, responses to traumatic experiences” (xv). Williamson Sinalo uses her extensive experience working with the Genocide Archive of Rwanda to assess how survivor testimonies have exhibited positive signs of growth, on both individual and collective levels, since 1994.

The study opens with a chapter devoted to trauma theory and its limitations, as well as some of the different strategies that survivors in Rwanda have adopted to conceal the impact of the genocide on their lives. Williamson Sinalo, arguing that western medical models are unable to fully capture the traumatic experiences of Rwandans, applies instead a “post-colonial application of the theory” to her selected series of Rwandan testimonies.


The second, third, and fourth chapters focus on how these testimonies express agency and communion, two factors in post-traumatic growth, and how those expressions break down along gender lines. In Chapter Two, Williamson Sinalo argues that post-traumatic growth among Rwandan men has come from recovering and reworking pre-colonial notions of male strength and invulnerability into a masculinity tied to the post-genocide government’s Ndi Umunyarwanda (“I am Rwandan”) program. Male post-traumatic growth, she concludes, has functioned primarily at the communal level, where energy has been redirected from fighting for your country to working for it. In Chapter Three, Williamson Sinalo focuses on women’s experiences of positive self-perception and “agentic growth” (103). While her argument stresses women’s experiences of growth at the individual level, she ends with the important role women’s organizations have played in Rwanda, which suggests that these spaces also provide important communal opportunities for support, growth, and healing.

In Chapter Four, the author offers a compelling analysis of how men and women express differing views on unity, reconciliation, and guilt. Rich and extensive use of direct quotations from the testimonies offer provocative insights into the complexities of forgiving at individual and communal levels. Here, Williamson Sinalo convincingly demonstrates the divergent opinions regarding government programs of unity and reconciliation by centering the voices and active agency of individual survivors.

The final chapter deals with *We Survived: Genocide in Rwanda* (2006), a collection of testimonies published by Aegis Trust. Williamson Sinalo, in comparing original transcripts of the testimonies to the versions in the book, explains and critiques the challenges in translating, condensing, and making personal testimonies legible to an international audience. Williamson Sinalo traces the “violence of translation” (158) by assessing how editing choices rendered the majority of these testimonies formulaic, relatively ahistorical, and more reader-friendly to international audiences, which included the removal of specificities, the portrayal of survivors as “nicer,” and the censoring of criticisms against outsiders.

Williamson Sinalo offers fascinating insights into gendered experiences of trauma and recovery in post-genocide Rwanda and calls attention to the dangers of “translation”—both literally (in the case of testimonies) and theoretically (in the case of trauma theory). Overall, however, this study offers a limited snapshot rather than a nuanced assessment of post-traumatic growth over time. Highly contested histories and categories of identification tend to be oversimplified and do not fully engage with scholarly and public discourses; a deeper engagement with debates over who constitutes a “survivor,” for example, would have given readers a better sense of how these forty-two testimonies fit into the larger landscape of national memory and knowledge production. Finally, while the study of gender provides a critical contribution, exploring the impact of other categories such as age and geography would further expand our understanding of survivors’ experiences.

Where this study shines brightest is in its insistence on positive and productive possibilities; Williamson Sinalo’s study is refreshing in its optimism. *Rwanda After Genocide* illustrates the important and rich potential insights gained from close linguistic analysis and attention to local languages. Despite some missed opportunities to engage with the larger conversations regarding history, memory, and trauma in Rwanda, this text serves as a reminder to scholars of the importance of centering African voices and that trauma, though often theorized at the group or national level, is also a highly individualized experience.

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For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

- Ansoms, An. 2010. "Views from Below on the Pro-Poor Growth Challenge: The Case of Rural Rwanda." *African Studies Review* 53 (2): 97–123. doi:10.1353/arw.2010.0037.
- Rettig, Max. 2008. "Gacaca: Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation in Postconflict Rwanda?" *African Studies Review* 51 (3): 25–50. doi:10.1353/arw.0.0091.