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## Afterword

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### 12.1 Fieldwork that Confounds Us

Scholars who spend extensive time in post-atrocity contexts increasingly articulate the messiness they see or experience. They meet people who both saved lives and took lives, maybe in retaliation. The acts do not add up to a singular identity of good or evil. Former child soldiers, taken and drugged and taught to kill before they could develop a moral compass of their own, provide an example of such complex characters. Elderly people searching their memories may recall in detail “good” and “bad” people on both sides of an atrocity. One of my interviewees, Daniel, for example, attributed his survival at Auschwitz to the kindness of a guard who moved him to kitchen work because his twelve-year-old body could not bear the manual labor. The access to soup and exemption from labor saved his life.

For outsiders, the cognitive dissonance one experiences hearing these stories may feel uncomfortable at first. They did not experience violence and suffering firsthand. So, it may be difficult for them to accept, for example, that a few Nazis helped Jews or that some Hutus – who did and did not participate in the Rwandan genocide – experienced torture. A colleague of ours, a Hutu, found himself thrown in a pit and covered in gasoline during the genocide. He was fourteen and not a participant in the killing. Spared the flame, he still bore the scars of war. Even while living in the United States, he received death threats when he shared his story. His fears were not unfounded. There is no room, many felt, for the pain of Hutus after the Tutsis had suffered so greatly.

As outsiders, perhaps we are at first afraid of this messiness, afraid that we too might be seduced by stories that rid us of moral certainty. Many of us came to work in the field of mass atrocity for the certainty and security it seemed to provide. While much of the world seemed ambiguous or apathetic, we land comfortably against genocide. What happens to

that certainty if we develop an understanding of how the act of killing comes to be? Does that make us in some way morally complicit or apologists? Many think yes. So, well-intentioned scholars hesitate to publish morally untidy findings that may hurt communities in need. We also fear being seen as an enemy of those who suffered. Our reasons for holding back are understandable, but the result is the same. We return to the security of binaries.

## 12.2 Survivors and Descendants

Survivors and their descendants also struggle to traverse the binaries of victim and perpetrator. When survivors withhold stories about the messiness of war, either out of shame or to protect their children, the next generation becomes vulnerable to the simplified versions of the past they hear outside the home. They then develop political and social views that reflect the distilled accounts of atrocity. These views, in turn, become part of collective memory through film, school curriculums, museums, and commemorative sites. Descendants of victimized groups may rise up in response to perceived weakness or confusion in their parents. Amidst this, the elders may stay quiet; it is just too hard to explain. They may be confused themselves, never having found a satisfying answer to the questions that haunted them for decades after, “Why me? Why us?” They may also fear retaliation from those in their own group with a sharper agenda. Or fear that speaking will reignite the original cause against them.

If survivors speak, descendants of the group that caused the harm may retract from any implied inherited guilt or responsibility they feel imposed upon them. Such intergenerational misalignments are not sources of mere contretemps but can have catastrophic results: The groups remain polarized, and the community becomes ripe again for violent conflict. The polarization also creates conditions for totalitarian leadership to take hold. Where the people are fractured, tyranny and corruption thrive.

## 12.3 Alternative Discourses

Some democratic leaders try to bridge these kinds of divides with discourses of unity, a shared future, and/or resilience. Unity discourses most often show up directly as calls for reconciliation. In the United States, President Biden offered such a call in his inaugural address, when he said,

“We can join forces, stop the shouting and lower the temperature. *For without unity there is no peace, only bitterness and fury.* No progress, only exhausting outrage. No nation, only a state of chaos. This is our historic moment of crisis and challenge, and unity is the path forward” (Biden 2021).

To discontented groups, calls for unity can sound like a request to give up their fight and join the other side, a group they have been taught to distrust. To those in power, unity could mean a loss of resources or status vis-à-vis the outgroup. Calls for unity encourage silence from those with more to say. Those who say “wait!” may be seen as the ones Steven Stedman called “spoilers,” breaking the peace. Unity can be a hard sell (Stedman 1997).

Along with unity, leaders may urge us to look forward to a shared future. At its best, this can lead to meaningful negotiations and bridging. But it too can backfire. An oft-heard refrain is: “Why can’t they just get over it and move on. They need to put the past behind them.” I overheard nearly these exact words while getting my hair cut in Victoria, British Columbia; it was a conversation about local Indigenous people’s grief over children’s graves discovered at the sites of former Indian residential schools. Letting go and looking forward seems like an obvious solution to those who felt none of the suffering. They haven’t experienced the consequences of on-going marginalization either; in fact, they may benefit from it.

Resilience discourses encourage traumatized groups to draw on their inner resources and develop stronger community ties to forge ahead. Just as militaries quickly repair wounded soldiers so they can serve again, new regimes tell wounded hearts to heal themselves so that the country can rebuild. A constructed, sanitary past is easier to move forward from. Messy truths leave us hobbling, slowing us down for the deeper healing that must occur.

There is no going back. Dialogues, laws to prevent future violence, commemorations, and trials all provide opportunities to hobble toward lasting, positive peace. At the same time, these discourses aimed at reconciliation and collective compassion can widen divides. As statutes topple, new commemorative sites appear, and school curriculums shift, those losing a privileged narrative position may balk. As new parties are added to the story, those who had center stage can feel sidelined, as though cut from a play that can only cast so many characters, under a spotlight that can only highlight one at a time. Not all are willing to step aside and make room. Sometimes advocacy against feared deletion or

marginalization is done quietly, in secret, in person, or online. They tell the stories the way they wish them to be told or say nothing. In doing so, they withdraw and insulate themselves from the larger discussion. They survive underground until the time is right.

#### 12.4 The Peacebuilders

Peacebuilders who are engaged in multi-decade efforts know all too well the myths of the binaries. They know that otherwise loving people on both sides perpetuate divides in response to their own pain and on-going fear. Sulaima Khatib, a Palestinian who was imprisoned as a youth for stabbing an Israeli, talks openly about his journey toward collective liberation (Eilberg-Schwartz and Khatib 2021). An organization he co-founded, Combatants for Peace, carries its own inherent contradictions. Engaging in “combat” requires an enemy. The articulation of an enemy divides us yet again. Khatib’s commitment is to non-violent approaches to peacebuilding, a commitment borne of years of mentorship and study. Once released from prison, he continued to work through his own disappointments with the Israeli government, but just as often with Hamas and militant movements within the Palestinian community, with those whom he saw as perpetuating violence. Building the intergroup relationships necessary for peace took him far from his origins and even, for a time, away from his family. Khatib engaged in processes to help him heal from his own trauma, knowing that the struggle for peace is as much internal as external. You cannot take someone to a place you have never been. Although modeling an alternative to violence earned him a Nobel Peace Prize nomination, some Palestinians see him as betraying their cause. And while he can learn Hebrew, study the Holocaust, and make Israeli friends, he is not accepted by the Israelis either. He is still subjected to checkpoints and military interventions. His Israeli friends cannot protect him.

Those who work for peace often do this work with no guarantee of their safety or the safety of their families. Our friend, Dr. Adal Rhoubaid, special advisor to the President of Niger, remains a critical peacebuilder in the Sahel region. He holds the hands of the grieving, provides health advice, develops interethnic alliances, and even, when called in the middle of the night, helps people find their missing cattle. After a local tragedy, Rhoubaid writes to his people,

This morning I went to offer condolences to the survivors of the barbaric tragedy that hit Bakorat, Intazayen (Tilia Department) a few days ago.

If anyone can think they can transcribe or describe the immenseness of despair, sadness, of this population, they lie. I saw hills covered in graves. Common graves that can hardly be approached because of the smell of death. I've seen inconsolable widows and orphans (Facebook, March 26, 2021).

Knowing that the temptation to retaliate with guns is high and without being able to guarantee their security, Rhoubaid perpetually urges his people to choose non-violence. Peacebuilding is persuasion. Because you cannot influence those you rebuke, he cannot turn away from those who have inflicted harm. He needs them just to choose a different path. Because of this, he remains a threat to jihadist movements. The government cannot always protect him, nor can we.

### 12.5 Introducing Restorative Frames

Peacebuilders everywhere work against enormous odds. Armed individuals, proxy wars, corporate interests, state powers, and abundant arms in circulation leave peacemakers the perpetual underdog. Local peacebuilders who reach out to the other side to build bridges can be storied as traitors by their own communities. They are also extremely vulnerable. In January 2021, Dante Barksdale, a leading violence interrupter working on the streets of Baltimore, Maryland for over a decade was shot in the head and killed. The city mourns still. He was well-loved and not easily replaced. None are.

Embracing restorative approaches to violence can assist active peacemakers and scholars alike. Purely retributive responses to violence expose the acts and punish and often isolate the wrongdoers. Sending them away only increases the chances they and their supporters will further radicalize. Since 2016, the International Center for Counter Terrorism in the Hague has trained seventy-five prison staff in Mali to stymie extremist ideologies that otherwise proliferate among inmates. Restorative frameworks offer additional pathways to transformation. Restorative forms of justice give those who enacted the harm an opportunity to give back to those they harmed. In doing so, they build new identities and begin the difficult, albeit vital, work of re-entry.

Furthermore, if we, in the calm of the aftermath, enact harm on those who found themselves wrapped up in the frenzy of war, are we so much better? Those who visit at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum end their tour with a video of elderly survivors sharing their experiences. One man recalls seeing another pray during their deportation. He asked the

praying man, “How can you possibly still believe in God? And what could you possibly be praying for?” The man said, “I’m thanking God for not making me like them.” This offers a poignant reminder (and warning) not to become what we condemn.

A restorative frame keeps us mindful of the limits of legal justice. Not everyone who enacted harm in mass atrocity can be incarcerated for life, nor would that be ideal. Fania Davis, founder of Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth (RJOY), argues that verdicts alone also cannot heal or stop violence. “True justice,” she says, “means a holistic justice that recognizes harm, takes responsibility for harm, repairs harm and prevents recurrence” (Davis 2021). The truth telling, commemoration, investment, and apologies at the heart of restorative and transitional justice assist in this work. Fambul Tok, an organization in Sierra Leone, does this by working with both the harmed and those who enacted the harm during the country’s civil war. Community organizers engage with both parties to create truth-telling forums and opportunities for apologies.

Our artists, novelists, playwrights, musicians, and dancers give voice when the state blocks speech. In Indonesia, for example, a popular music group wove snippets of genocide survivor testimonies into one of their pop songs. This allowed the stories to circulate even though the Indonesian government still refuses to acknowledge the 1965 genocide. Street art, dance performances, and novels all provide venues for publics to work out the psychic wounds they share.

Colombian novelist Juan Gabriel Vásquez believes that great literature offers us a place to practice this work:

Literature, novelistic imagination, is the place, where we will try to suspend judgement in exchange for a kind of dangerous understanding. We try to understand the other, the enemy . . . in a way that shakes our values . . . [Novels] do not come out with a clear conclusion of any characters. Instead, they try to make us penetrate the reality of that character. A very particular understanding that doesn’t happen elsewhere . . . The human passion for judging is left outside this place . . . the answers to the questions happen elsewhere . . . literature is content with finding the right questions to ask. (Vásquez 2021)

When I asked him how we get those most committed to violence to read his and other novels of this kind, he confessed that he didn’t know. Those blinded by rage or who construct lives around violence-inducing certainties will not likely curl up with a book and a cup of tea eager for a journey into complexity.

Allowing complexity offers opportunities to sidestep shame without impunity. Many people would rather die than experience the kind of shame and exclusion that follows perpetration of mass violence. Public humiliation and ostracism remain major fears for most people. Restorative processes focus on responding to the harm rather than shaming. This redirects the desire for revenge to individual and communal wounds – a vital shift to prevent on-going hatred and future violence. Process oriented restorative approaches ensure that all are treated with dignity as the community looks for meaningful forms of accountability. Donna Hicks, of the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs at Harvard University, learned from her work in various post-conflict contexts that lasting peace requires addressing dignity violations as well as material harm (Hicks 2011). You cannot gain people’s trust, she says, if you do not treat them with dignity. Without trust, there can be no peace. Again, treating others with dignity does not mean impunity. Those who enacted the harm must work to repair the damage. But dignity does put an end to torture, solitary confinement, and execution.

## 12.6 Questioning Stories

Restorative frameworks invite the victimized community and others to reflect on their own hatred and possible contributions to the violence. Without condoning the violence, groups can think together how neighbor came to attack neighbor and what larger structural changes might be needed to prevent future outbreaks. Sorting out *victims*, *perpetrators*, and *heroes* can detract from this deeper work and even make it more difficult. Those storied as perpetrators rail against the cultural framing or live up to societal expectations. Those cast in the role of victim may cede their political power and agency to stay “pure” and worthy of assistance. Overemphasizing individual heroes can mask needed systemic changes.

We can prepare for this difficult post-conflict work by becoming more comfortable with this complexity in our daily lives. Each day we are confronted with opportunities to create, buy into, or dispel simplified stories. Whether on Twitter, in a faculty meeting, or when talking about the news at the dinner table, we either anchor into “Us” and “Them” thinking or explore. The allure of ingroup belonging – the intellectual and physical comfort it provides – tempts us to pick a side. In this mental quest for assurance and firm ground, we mentally delete disquieting information.

This work requires interrogating our certainty and then training others in this work. We ask ourselves, where did I get that information? Do I know whether it's true? What am I not seeing? What reaction does this information evoke in me? What behavior will that interpretation elicit? Who stands to gain if I react this way? What other reactions might be more productive in this moment? Am I adding aggression to the situation or setting us on a pathway to conflict transformation? Narrative approaches to conflict encourage us to pay attention to these questions in ourselves and others as material, because how we tell the story and cast characters tells us the likely next steps we will take (Federman 2016). Trained ears know quickly whether we are on a pathway back to war (verbal or physical) or building other forums to work out conflicts.

If this work is vital, why is it so rare? Whenever we interrogate our own narratives, we may feel lost for a moment. Am I sure this person is evil/wrong/purposefully causing harm/unsalvageable? How do I know? If they are not all evil, what does that mean about my own pain? Is there anything true being said on the other side? The transition from a polarizing framework to a broader one can be disorienting. When we guide others, they can easily become defensive. In the process, egos usually take a hit. Yet this opens new possibilities for alternative responses to post-atrocity peacebuilding. Detached from our certainties and understandable desires for revenge, we are better able to flow and find a better place to land than hate. Here Albert Einstein's words bear repeating, "We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them." We must untether ourselves from our polarities before we can untether others.

## 12.7 Stop the Super Spreaders

This work is not entirely internal. Interventions are possible with those who generate and amplify binary framings of people and groups. Rwanda's Radio Mille Collines broadcast messages advocating violence against the Tutsis. Recent findings show how they influenced others to carry their message for them. David Yanagizawa-Drott's (2014) detailed study of the Rwandan genocide found that "the broadcasts increased militia violence not only directly by influencing behavior in villages with radio reception, but also indirectly by increasing participation in neighboring villages. In fact, spillovers are estimated to have caused more militia violence than the direct effects" (1947). This is not dissimilar to a company launching an advertising campaign for a product in an effort



to eventually spread the message by word of mouth. They know friends and families trust each other more than they trust their company, so the idea is to start the ball rolling and hope others pick it up.

The introduction of social media and online communication creates new spreading opportunities of violent extremist ideas, extending reach at an increasing speed. Advocacy of violence resonates far beyond the boundaries of particular conflicts. In August 2021, for example, western extremists heralded the military success of the Taliban in Afghanistan as consistent with their own fight against liberal values (Scott 2021). Encrypted Telegram channels, online message boards (particularly 4Chan), and more mainstream platforms like Twitter and Facebook actively cross-pollinate hate solidarity, despite the platforms' inconsistent and often desultory efforts at content moderation.

Studies continue to show that disinformation or fake news is shared far more widely than reliable stories (Vosoughi et al. 2018). This occurs not only because of the heightened emotions associated with false stories, but also due to strategic manipulation of attention-grabbing content. Krafft and Donovan (2020, 196) find that, "Disinformation did not just spread on its own because it affirmed people's identities, rather it was the result of an intentional strategy to move the disinformation campaign through the larger media ecosystem." And further, "Open web forums are often used as basecamps for coordinating and planning disinformation campaigns" (197). The main goals of weaponized disinformation campaigns are to amplify already existing resentments and anxieties, "raise the emotional stakes of particular issues or foreground some concerns at the expense of others, stir distrust among potential coalition partners, and subtly influence decisions about political behaviors" (Nadler et al. 2018, 2). There is nothing new about propaganda that advocates hatred and violence, but new technologies lend it dramatically unprecedented speed, reach, and power.

Under these circumstances, it may come as no surprise that very few people tend to be involved at the origin of disinformation. When it comes to COVID, for example, the Center for Countering Digital Hate identified only a dozen people responsible for 65 percent of anti-vaccine disinformation online (CCDH 2021). So perhaps we simply need to interrupt the "typhoid Marys" of disinformation and hate, especially when charismatic leaders reach out to vulnerable populations. These super spreaders are not only dangerous to those they immediately reach, but to those who listen to those they reach. Purveyors of strategic disinformation sew discord and then avoid responsibility for it through

the same methods by which they poison the media ecosystem to begin with. It is not just the structures of platforms that encourage the spread of lies and vituperations; the strategic dissemination of disinformation is intended to create the kind of mass confusion that sends everyone into their bubbles, believing and trusting no one outside of them.

## 12.8 How Do We Know?

How do we know if our interventions entrench binaries or embrace complexity?

Peter Coleman, a social psychologist and researcher in the field of conflict resolution, found that when issues are presented as pro-con, the outcomes are more contentious. In contrast, when issues are presented as complicated and multidimensional, the resulting conversations reflect more balanced understanding of the issues (Coleman 2021). Therefore, we can look at how we are framing the issues we mean to engage. We can also think about how we frame the questions we pose to interviewees. Notetaking and journaling separately about our own feelings helps us process contradictory information without jumping to easy answers. We can ask ourselves and others complicating questions such as, “was there ever a time when these groups got along?” or “was there ever anyone on the other side who helped you?” “Were there any decisions that you would make differently looking back?”

The chapters in this book encourage scholars and practitioners to write honestly about what they find, even when these findings make us uncomfortable or disappointed in a person or a group that we support. We can accept that, yes, in some circumstances, perpetrators can be victims and vice versa. Heroes can be reassessed as complicit and compromised. Accepting this more accurate representation of the narrativized identities of violence presents a conundrum for accountability and justice mechanisms that are premised on clear roles. But this does not mean we have to slip into legalism. International tribunals, truth and reconciliation commissions, rehabilitation programs, and NGO-based social movements create opportunities for richer explorations of mass violence. By bringing the literature on perpetration and the more recent field of victim studies into conversation with one another, we support scholarship at the messy middle. Supporting long-term positive peace requires understanding the narrative dynamics within and between groups. The blurring of victim- and perpetrator-boundaries and greater acknowledgement of their overlapping roles can be a crucial part of peacebuilding processes.

We have much to gain through sustained attention to transitions and ambiguities in the actions and identities of participants in violence. For this reason, the contributors to this volume have each paid close attention to how people talk about conflict. This includes not only how people talk about participating groups and individuals, but how those individuals and groups talk about themselves and others. This discourse tells us what groups might do next. Even some of the most ideal (innocent and pure) victims are not incapable of harm; even the most elevated and ennobled hero can have human flaws or even use their celebrity as a cover for mass crime; and even the most horrific perpetrator may have the potential to contribute to social restructuring or, at the very least, to our understanding of the human proclivity toward violence. How we engage with and talk about them influences how the stories continue to unfold.

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