
INTIMATE ENEMY: IMAGES AND VOICES OF THE RWANDAN GENOCIDE.
Photographs by Robert Lyons, Introduction and Interviews by Scott Straus. New York:
Zone Books, 2006. Pp 13, 185, 75 Black and White photo plates. \$37.95, Hardcover.

What can I say to make you understand?

--Convicted *génocidaire*, (*Intimate Enemy*, p 91)

Genocide overpowers the imagination. Faceless statistics compiled in books and bones piled at memorial sites overwhelm each particular moment of anguish; thick narratives of a few of the hundreds of thousands of victims or killers cannot fully represent the total horror, the organized annihilation of an entire group of humans.

As Scott Straus explains in his spare but eloquent introduction, *Intimate Enemy* is meant to be a “representational experiment” in which the genocide is “open[ed] up for examination.” Photographer Robert Lyons and political scientist Straus depart from typical narratives of genocide in books and journals, in art and at memorials, which center on analysis and interpretation (something Straus has done admirably in his other work.) Likewise, the authors wish to avoid an exhibition of the Rwandan genocide that would “purvey shock and horror and thus paralyze thought.”

The book presents excerpted transcripts of 23 (of the 230) interviews Straus conducted in 2002 with male Rwandan prisoners who had confessed and were convicted of crimes of genocide, followed by 75 of Lyons’ black and white portraits. The photos are of survivors, prisoners, members of the judiciary and civil society whom Lyons photographed over the course of his own three visits to Rwanda from 1998—2000; but Lyons presents them without captions, so the reader cannot distinguish killer from victim, judge from *génocidaire*. Lyons states in his notes that he hoped to create “...an archive in which individuals would be more democratically represented...to make the audience enter a more intimate space, ask questions, experience directly the ambiguous physical resemblances between *génocidaire* and survivor.”

Intimate Enemy’s great contribution is that it gives readers a rare and important opportunity to explore the primary sources of the authors’ work on the Rwandan genocide. By presenting their interview transcripts and photo archive, Lyons and Straus hand readers a ticket to Rwanda for a personal exploration of genocide with minimal instruction.

Straus provides a brief background of each *génocidaire*, and then in response to Straus’ occasional questions, each man reconstructs the story of his participation in the genocide. We listen to how the men were encouraged or threatened to kill, with what farming or mechanic’s tool, with which comrades. The men are sometimes eloquent, other times stilted. Straus occasionally asks the “why” questions, which give rise to the only theories presented in this book—the *génocidaires* personal theories about why they killed.

Lyons' lens pulls close the faces of Rwandan men, women, and children —gazes averted and open, lips pursed and drawn into half smiles, skin smooth and scarred. Our eyes search for clues embedded in their pose, small personal effects like prayer beads, a watch. Is this person a Hutu, a Tutsi? Where was this person in the spring of 1994? We are tempted to rush to the back of the book, where thumbnail prints of each portrait are identified. But it is clear that Lyons means for us to persist in this state of disorientation, at least temporarily.

Intimate Enemy disturbs. We are disturbed from our comfortable position that human slaughter is inhuman and are forced to encounter the humanity of genocide. The prisoners' explanations of their violence are common to our own lives (I was swept up by the crowd, I was young, I was angry.) Our eyes linger sympathetically over one boy's face only later to discover he is an accused killer. We are disturbed by the intimacy of our own encounters with these people, which hints at the particular devastation of the intimate neighbor and family violence that propelled Rwanda's genocide.

The seeming rawness of each testimony and face belies the editorial hand of each author. Also, testimonies from women, genocide survivors, religious figures, or Batwa would open up other issues for our consideration. Keeping this in mind, *Intimate Enemy* is a remarkable, provocative contribution that holds enormous value for seasoned Rwanda scholars and lay readers alike.

"I don't understand," Straus remarks to one confessed *génocidaire*. "What can I say to make you understand?" the man replies. By holding back the analysis that usually dominates accounts of genocide, *Intimate Enemy* grants readers an uncommon closeness to the testimonies and images of Rwandans who experienced it first hand. The distress we experience in this intimate encounter is stimulating, not stultifying. This book does not strive to fortify existing understandings of genocide; rather, it encourages a return to foundational questions such as what is, who commits, and why genocide.
