

The Limits of Oral History: Ethics and Methodology Amid Highly Politicized Research Settings

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Abstract: In recent years, oral history has been celebrated by its practitioners for its humanizing potential, and its ability to democratize history by bringing the narratives of people and communities typically absent in the archives into conversation with that of the political and intellectual elites who generally write history. And when dealing with the narratives of ordinary people living in conditions of social and political stability, the value of oral history is unquestionable. However, in recent years, oral historians have increasingly expanded their gaze to consider intimate accounts of extreme human experiences, such as narratives of survival and flight in response to mass atrocities. This shift in academic and practical interests begs the questions: Are there limits to oral historical methods and theory? And if so, what are these limits? This paper begins to address these questions by drawing upon fourteen months of fieldwork in Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzegovina, during which I conducted multiple life history interviews with approximately one hundred survivors, ex-combatants, and perpetrators of genocide and related mass atrocities. I argue that there are limits to the application of oral history, particularly when working amid highly politicized research settings.

Keywords: Bosnia-Herzegovina, ethics, mass atrocities, methodology, Rwanda

Introduction

Recently, I took part in an intimate workshop that focused on the hidden ethical and methodological negotiations that often inform the practice of oral history. The workshop seemed like an ideal venue in which to explore some of the

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challenges I had encountered applying oral history in the aftermath of mass atrocities.¹ For one year, I had been struggling to write an oral history based on fourteen months of oral historical and ethnographic fieldwork in Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzegovina (Bosnia).² However, this process had been impeded at every step by my desire to minimize harm for my informants. While it had not originally been my intention to do so, my original research project had been quickly overwhelmed in response to the politically charged circumstances surrounding the rural Rwandans and Bosnians—survivors, ex-combatants, and perpetrators alike—with whom I conversed during that period. I emerged from my fieldwork with an intimate “view from below” of the aftermath of mass atrocities in these nations. Furthermore, due to my immersion in the political agendas of my informants, I too became critical of the official narratives promoted by the ruling regimes, which were constructed to legitimize a dictatorial regime (in Rwanda) and widespread government corruption (in Bosnia). Yet I remained reluctant to publish, not because I feared personal reproach from the Rwandan and Bosnian governments (though it is perhaps inevitable under the circumstances), but because I worried about the repercussions of my findings for my participants.

In the aftermath of the 1994 Rwandan genocide and the Bosnian War from 1992 to 1995, both Rwanda and Bosnia can be considered highly politicized research settings, though the quality and severity of the associated oppression varies between and within nations.³ This politicized research setting affected the course and outcome of my fieldwork and subsequent research findings in unpredictable ways, a process that I outlined in my paper for the workshop. Because the Tutsi-dominated Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) led by President Paul Kagame poses, in my opinion, a far greater threat to the security of my Rwandan participants than the Bosnian government poses to my Bosnian participants, I decided to focus my workshop paper on four Bosnian informants—an academic, an aid worker, an ex-combatant, and a convicted war criminal—who greatly impacted the course of my research project.⁴ In an effort to protect their identities, I referred to each individual using a pseudonym and carefully withheld certain aspects of their life histories—two standard strategies for maintaining informant confidentiality used by oral historians and related practitioners.⁵

Moments before I was scheduled to present, however, a colleague who had worked in Bosnia for several years approached me. “I think I know who Ademira is,” she said, referring to the aid worker I had talked about in my paper, circulated among workshop participants a few weeks before.⁶ My colleague proceeded to name several organizations and prominent female Bosnian activists in an effort to make me reveal Ademira’s identity and the organization for which she had

worked. I refused to answer my colleague's questions. I knew that if members of Ademira's organization were to learn of her involvement in my fieldwork and her opinion of the organization she would lose her job—the sole source of income for her family. As a result, I was shaken by this experience. If my colleague had been so affected by the generic fragments of Ademira's narrative I had cited that she felt it necessary to push me for more information, how might the Bosnian authorities or Ademira's superiors react? I was then and am now committed to protecting Ademira's identity and was worried that the generic pieces of her life history included in the article would be enough to allow concerned parties within her organization or the government to eventually identify the real person behind the provocative words. Under the circumstances, is it then ethical for me to speak or write about my conversations with Ademira?

This experience was but one among many similarly problematic episodes that have caused me to question the limits of oral history when working in highly politicized research settings. In the following discussion, I will delve into the challenges particular to my fieldwork and my efforts to write about my research findings in a format acceptable to oral historians. First, I will discuss the challenges that emerged during the interview with regards to the practices of deep listening when faced with extreme human experiences. Next, I will outline the challenges of sharing authority with my informants, who by virtue of their typically disadvantaged positions within Rwandan and Bosnian society had themselves become complex political actors who attempted to use my research as an opportunity to promote their own political agendas.⁷ Finally, I will discuss the challenge of then writing about the rich and nuanced life histories that I co-created with my informants, which while valuable for allowing me to contextualize their political agendas and their understanding of the recent mass atrocities that overwhelmed their communities, cannot be published lest I endanger them by making them easy for government officials and other interested parties to identify.

The research project and methodology

I came to study the aftermath of mass atrocities in Rwanda and Bosnia as a result of my studies in the Interdisciplinary Humanities Doctoral Program at Concordia University in Montréal. In 2005, I branched out from my previous career as a forensic archaeologist specializing in grave exhumations to explore possible interfaces between the forensic sciences and the social sciences, particularly the disciplines of cultural anthropology and oral history. My initial goal was to determine ways of making forensic archaeology accessible to and relevant for a range of social scientists interested in the prevention of mass

atrocities. I settled on the phenomenon of inscribed intent, a term I introduced to delineate practices whereby perpetrators inflict physical violence upon their victims in a manner that is intended to express their perception of their victims as members of an unwanted national, ethnic, racial, or religious group.⁸ I then embarked upon fourteen months of ethnographic and oral historical fieldwork, during which I conducted multiple life history interviews with approximately one hundred survivors, ex-combatants, and perpetrators of mass atrocities in Rwanda and Bosnia in order to learn more about the culturally specific intent behind the various forms of genocidal violence that occurred during the respective genocides.

My decision to incorporate life history interviews into a project with intended legal and forensic import was risky. Practitioners of international criminal law frequently regard oral sources with suspicion on the grounds that their reliance on memory makes them susceptible to misinformation and manipulation from a variety of sources.⁹ Such criticisms are not new to oral historians, who dedicated much of their early efforts to defending oral history from similar critiques by archival historians and promoting the “different credibility” of oral sources.¹⁰ For example, Alessandro Portelli celebrates the fact that oral history allows researchers to amass information about individuals and communities that lack written languages or appropriate spaces in which to comment upon their experiences, thereby revealing a wider range of human experience. Furthermore, Portelli has gone as far as to argue that oral historical methods produce more accurate data due to their ability to preserve important forms of communication not typically documented in archival sources, such as “tone and volume range and the rhythm of speech” that carry implicit meaning and social connotations that are absent in written language.¹¹

With regard to the accusation that oral sources are vulnerable to manipulation, meanwhile, Paul Thompson has responded that any practice related to historical inquiry, whether based in archival research or oral sources, can be compromised by individual agendas. He contends:

until the [20th] century, the focus of history was essentially political: a documentation of the struggle for power, in which the lives of ordinary people, or the workings of the economy or religion, were given little attention except in times of crisis . . . This was partly because historians, who themselves then belonged to the administering and governing classes, thought that this was what mattered most . . . But even if they had wished to write a different kind of history, it would have been far from easy, for the raw material from which history was written, the documents, had been kept or destroyed by people with the same priorities. The more personal,

local and unofficial a document, the less likely it was to survive. The very power structure worked as a great recording machine shaping the past in its own image.¹²

In response to the refutations of Portelli and Thompson, therefore, I decided to incorporate oral history methods and theory into my fieldwork in the hopes of eliciting richer and more detailed interpretations of the mass atrocities experienced by my informants. I decided to rely primarily upon two different interviewing styles widely used by oral historians. With each participant, I began by conducting at least one life history interview during which I encouraged my informant to tell me about his or her life experiences in as little or as much detail as was necessary for me to gain an understanding of who they were. In these early sessions, I asked few questions and spent most of my time listening to people make sense of their lives as a whole, rather than simply focusing on their experiences surrounding the genocide. Once they had finished narrating their life histories, subsequent sessions took the form of thematic interviews in which I asked questions tailored to my participants' unique backgrounds, incorporating my interests in local history and culture, symbolic violence, and the aftermath of genocide and related mass atrocities. By the end of my fieldwork, I had conducted a minimum of two and as many as six formal interviews with each of my hundred informants. I had probed a range of Rwandan and Bosnian experiences, including those of men and women of different ages, economic statuses, and political affiliations. Of particular importance, I found that this methodological approach provided me with a rich and nuanced understanding of the conflicts. This, in turn, made it easier for me to conceive of my participants as dynamic actors whose actions and interpretations of the genocide and related mass atrocities shifted over time—even within the context of our interviews—in response to a variety of motivating factors.

During the interview: deep/difficult listening

However, it became apparent early in my fieldwork that the highly politicized research settings in which I was working were complicating my research in unexpected ways. In January 2008, I found myself sitting across from Alexandre, a Rwandan elder who under normal circumstances would be enjoying the respect and wealth he had earned as a municipal politician and religious leader. Instead, he was incarcerated in a Rwandan prison for his role in organizing and inciting the 1994 genocide of Rwanda's Tutsi minority population and the murder of several prominent Hutu moderate politicians in his community.

At the beginning of our interview, Alexandre asked me for a pen and paper. I expected him to use them to keep his own notes of the interview, or to entertain

himself during the pauses when my translator adapted Alexandre's story from Kinyarwanda to English.¹³ Instead, the piece of paper became a point of reference for the interview. As Alexandre spoke about the atrocities he organized (and perhaps even directly perpetrated himself), he drew stick figures that represented Tutsi men, women, and children in various states of torture, murder, and mutilation to demonstrate how the Hutu extremists were trained to treat their enemies—the Tutsi—during the genocide. The images he created were graphic and horrifying, depicting the evisceration of pregnant women, the impalement of men and women using sharpened sticks and other objects, and the killing of small children by swinging them by their ankles against walls—all with the goal of inflicting a slow and painful death upon their victims.

In response to Alexandre's drawings, and the lengthy descriptions he used to explain exactly how each form of violence caused suffering and death, I was mute. My ability to respond with more than a nod of the head vanished, and while I continued to take notes—a practice I had to engage in when conducting interviews in the prisons because I was not permitted to record them—the quality of my notes deteriorated. Upon revisiting these notes later that day, I realized that while I had captured the basic details of what he was saying, I had ceased writing follow-up questions in the margins to return to in a subsequent interview and had failed to document changes in his speech patterns and body language. I quickly realized that due to the horrific nature of the events, Alexandre was describing I had failed to listen deeply during the interview, which then hindered my ability to revisit his narrative with a critical eye.

Thus, an interesting and troubling paradox between oral history and other social sciences emerged early in my fieldwork. Developing and maintaining a substantial emotional and professional distance from one's informants may not be perceived as a problem in many disciplines (and is even actively encouraged in the forensic and legal sciences). For oral historians, however, my inability to engage in deep listening—whereby the researcher seeks to engage not only with the words being uttered but also with the deeper meaning inherent in the narrative as a whole—was a substantial problem.¹⁴ It meant that Alexandre had succeeded, whether intentionally or unintentionally, in forcing me to distance myself from the horrors he depicted and any deeper meanings in his words. And while I met him twice more for follow-up interviews, I found myself dreading each meeting, anxious about what he might say or do, and my stunted ability to engage with his narrative.

Surrounding the interview: sharing/performing authority

This leads to a second point of tension related to my efforts to practice oral history in a highly politicized research setting: namely, the process of sharing

authority—a concept introduced by Michael Frisch that is commonly referenced, yet rarely problematized, in the oral history literature.¹⁵ When conducting life history and thematic interviews, oral historians anticipate that both the interviewee and the interviewer approach the interview space with agendas. At minimum, the interviewee attempts to convince the interviewer of the accuracy of a particular perspective or version of events, while the interviewer seeks to direct the conversation toward their primary research questions. Thus, while the oral historian’s power lies in his or her critical distance and training, for example, many oral historians simultaneously empower their interviewees by encouraging them to take the lead in the conversation, deriving “power from being there and telling it like it was.”¹⁶

But when working amid highly politicized research settings, is sharing authority still possible or even desirable? My experiences conducting fieldwork in Rwanda and Bosnia suggest that there are necessary limits to sharing authority due to the polarizing impact of the recent genocides and their aftermath. For example, Alexandre frequently used our time together to try to convince me of the legitimacy of his participation in the 1994 Rwandan genocide. He portrayed himself as a victim of the times—an upstanding member of his congregation and community who had turned to politics because he wanted to be a force for the advancement of his people—the Hutu majority. With the emergence of a new multiparty system in the early 1990s, Alexandre joined the *Mouvement Révolutionnaire National pour le Développement* (MRND) because all the “real Hutus” were becoming members.¹⁷ He claimed he did neither agree with the increasingly anti-Tutsi policies that were implemented by the MRND in the years and months leading up to the genocide nor support the increasingly anti-Tutsi rhetoric employed by the media. Alexandre, like so many Hutu elites at that time, had a Tutsi wife and used his marriage as evidence that he had no problems with his Tutsi neighbors, and did not believe that the Tutsi were a genuine threat to Hutu hegemony in Rwanda.¹⁸ However, as the RPF gained power and favor with the international community and moved closer to negotiating a power-sharing deal with the MRND, Alexandre began to change his mind. He came to genuinely believe that the RPF were prepared to take control of Rwanda by force and, in doing so, would punish those Hutu who had opposed them, particularly the Hutu educated elites.

As evidence of the RPF’s intent to subjugate the Hutu people, Alexandre told me several stories about the brutality of the Tutsi monarchy that had ruled Rwanda prior to its independence in 1962, as related to him by his parents and his grandparents, schoolteachers, and fellow members of the MRND.¹⁹ From these stories, Alexandre concluded that the Tutsis wanted nothing more than to return to the mass enslavement of the Hutu people and became committed to

preventing the reestablishment of Tutsi hegemony at any cost. And with the assassination of Hutu President Juvénal Habyarimana on April 6, 1994, Alexandre had no problem calling upon Hutu youth in his community “to stand and fight against the RPF” to prevent the enslavement of their people.²⁰ He provided weapons, oversaw vicious attacks on unarmed Tutsi civilians (including elders, women, and children), and otherwise played a vital role in inciting the genocide that overwhelmed his community for the next three months.

Alexandre was unapologetic about his role in the genocide. While he acknowledged upon reflection that the brutal violence with which Tutsi civilians were killed was dishonorable—both to those who inflicted it and those who suffered it—Alexandre interpreted the genocide as one small part of the larger civil war that had enveloped Rwanda since 1990.²¹ He recalled that in the moment he perceived the killing of Tutsi civilians as an honorable act. By killing Tutsi men, women, and children, the Hutu extremists became warriors, earning status by eliminating not only the external Tutsi threat that sought to overthrow the Hutu government (the RPF) but also those Tutsi who had enslaved their ancestors in the past, a category that extended to all Rwandan Tutsis regardless of political affiliation, age, or gender. Furthermore, Alexandre contended—like so many of the convicted *genocidaires* I interviewed—that the RPF’s treatment of the Hutu majority in Rwanda since the 1994 genocide was evidence that the Hutu extremists had been correct to resist using genocidal violence. He argued the RPF imprisoned Hutus for the slightest provocation, while Tutsi war criminals went free. Likewise, despite having not left the prison in fourteen years, Alexandre had heard that the Tutsis were once again in control of the Rwandan government, military, and media. In his mind, this was a modern version of the enslavement of the Hutu people that had occurred under the Tutsi monarchy.

It would have been easy to dismiss Alexandre’s narrative as the ravings of an ideologue, and as mentioned above I had to make a conscious and difficult effort not to let my knowledge and suspicions of the crimes he committed during the 1994 genocide interfere with my ability to listen to what he was trying to tell me. I could have chosen to steer his narrative more aggressively toward subjects that were easier for me to listen to or resisted his efforts to portray himself as a victim in order to focus more on his role as an instigator of genocide. However, a more interesting question was to ask myself why Alexandre was choosing to narrate his experiences in such a polarizing and often contradictory manner, simultaneously portraying himself as an unwilling victim and a willing perpetrator of mass atrocities. In doing so, I began to suspect that Alexandre’s efforts to complicate his involvement in the genocide perhaps had very little to do with my presence. Instead, it was necessary for him to be able to convince himself that he still retained something of his pre-genocide

humanity—that his decision to incite and participate in the massacre of Tutsi civilians had been justified on some level, and in no way altered the fact that he was still a human being worthy of respect and basic human rights.²²

In approaching Alexandre’s narrative in this manner, I was reminded of Antonius Robben’s work among survivors and perpetrators of Argentina’s Dirty War—the state-sponsored political violence that overwhelmed Argentina from 1976 to 1983, during which an estimated 13,000 civilian activists were forcibly “disappeared.”²³ Robben formulated the concept of ethnographic seduction to refer to the process whereby informants—survivors and perpetrators alike—compose their narratives in a manner that is intended to legitimize their interpretation of events. He recalled:

They did not simply want to tell their story to an interested outsider, clear their name, or give way to a catharsis; as important players in the public arena, they had a political stake in making me adopt their truths. They perceived foreign researchers as the harbingers of history who would retell their stories, and through the investiture as scientists provide these with the halo of objectivity and impartiality that their academic stature entailed.²⁴

Certainly, I found ethnographic seduction to be a constant challenge in my interviews with survivors, ex-combatants, and perpetrators in both Rwanda and Bosnia. As an oral historian, I was aware of and comfortable with the collaborative nature of the interview space and the narratives that were constructed. I realized that by encouraging Alexandre to narrate his life history on his terms rather than asking him to adhere to a predetermined formula, I was gaining an intimate understanding of how he—through his lens of violent ethnocentrism—made sense of his experience of genocide and mass atrocities and Rwanda politics in the past, present, and future. Thus, I found myself agreeing with Kathleen Blee who, based on her work among women of the Ku Klux Klan, argued that by immersing themselves in the narratives of “ordinary people whose political agendas they find unsavoury, dangerous, or deliberately deceptive,”²⁵ oral historians could learn a great deal about how the individual prejudices, practices, and structures central to extremist organizations are empowered and reproduced over time.

However, because my research project had a legal goal in mind, my encounters with ethnographic seduction made me uncomfortable. By acknowledging that my informants were capable of constructing their narratives in a manner that was intended to manipulate my understanding of the crimes they described, I risked devaluing my fieldwork and subsequent findings, not to mention the use

of oral testimonies in a legal setting more generally. The prosecution for the International Criminal Tribunals for Rwanda and the Former Yugoslavia is not interested in examining how and why their informants construct their testimonies. The primary concern is with presenting irrefutable testimonies that can serve—often coupled with other types of evidence—as proof of criminal intent and action. To acknowledge the possibility of ethnographic seduction, therefore, calls into question the already tenuous reliability of oral sources from the perspective of practitioners of international criminal law. This, in turn, raised a question that I was not sure I was qualified to address, but which troubled me nonetheless: given the highly politicized research settings that form surrounding mass atrocities and the potential for ethnographic seduction, should oral sources be relied upon by international courts and tribunals that are established to address violations of international criminal law?

After the interview: writing oral histories

For the purpose of my research project, I concluded that while the narratives that I elicited were nuanced and incredibly informative for understanding the internal mechanisms that fed the conflicts in Rwanda and Bosnia, they were too politically entangled to be of use in a legal or forensic setting. This led to a new challenge: as I abandoned my intended research project on genocidal intent and symbolic violence to pursue my emerging interest in the political uses of history in modern Rwanda and Bosnia, I grew increasingly unsure of how to then write about my informants and the knowledge they had imparted to me.

In preparing for my fieldwork, I had read books by renowned oral historians such as Alessandro Portelli, and had been impressed by the sense that he built strong relationships with his participants, and then transferred those relationships to the page to provide a more nuanced understanding of how people made sense of hardship, and even mass atrocities.²⁶ This approach represented a refreshing and compelling alternative to the typically dry accounts produced by practitioners of international criminal law and the forensic sciences, where legal and scientific interpretations of events often take priority over the people—usually anonymous—who experienced them. And, perhaps naively, I was intrigued by the possibility of applying a similar lens to my fieldwork to highlight the complexity of the aftermath of mass atrocities in Rwanda and Bosnia.

However, as I began writing I realized that the highly politicized research settings in Rwanda and Bosnia—still tangible in each country over a decade after the respective genocides and mass atrocities had occurred—was once again complicating my intentions. As I began writing detailed accounts of individual informants, such as Alexandre and Ademira, I was haunted by the sense that

I was revealing too much. During my fieldwork in Rwanda, I had on several occasions encountered pressure to hand over the names of my informants and fieldnotes to the authorities, which naturally I refused to do.²⁷ Fortunately, my obstinacy did not result in additional problems for my fieldwork, assuming I maintained a low profile for the remainder of my time in the country. Nonetheless, these encounters impressed upon me the importance of obscuring the identities of my informants.

Initially, I planned to use pseudonyms and to avoid mentioning any biographical details—the places where my informants had been born or lived most of their lives, for example—in order to better protect their identities. However, I soon feared that this was not enough. As a young, white, Anglophone, Canadian woman whose research budget did not enable me to live in the richer, ex-patriot neighborhoods in the communities where I conducted fieldwork, I stood out as a foreign researcher at all times. And due to my interest in the experiences of rural Rwandans and Bosnians, I frequently found myself working amid small communities in which my comings and goings were easily monitored and even openly discussed via the local rumor mills. This was particularly true of my research in the prisons and genocide memorials, two types of communities where administrators and informants alike often observed my presence with great interest. Add to this the highly politicized research setting, whereby talking to the wrong people or asking the wrong questions could quickly result in a researcher attracting negative attention from the government, and I found myself walking a tenuous line upon which my actions—and perhaps those of my informants—were always under observation.²⁸ I realized it might not take the interested parties in Rwanda and Bosnia very long to match the words and ideas I cited in subsequent publications with my informants.

This was particularly true when I considered the deeper meaning of those narratives that resonated most strongly with me as I revisited my fieldnotes and interviews in the months following my return to Canada. I had plenty of data that supported the official narratives promoted by the Rwandan and Bosnian governments, as all of my informants were familiar enough with their governments' agendas to be able to tailor their experiences in a manner that fit neatly with the official narrative. But by conducting multiple interviews with each informant, over time many Rwandans and Bosnians grew comfortable diverging from the official narrative in crucial ways.

For example, among the survivors I interviewed, I began observing small fissures in their support for their governments' policies toward national unity and reconciliation. There was a great deal of mistrust toward their governments, which were generally described as using survivors to serve a larger strategic purpose while failing to address the issues of poverty, poor mental and physical health, and

corruption that impeded their daily lives. There was also mistrust within communities. Many of my survivor informants, while forced to coexist with their neighbors—sometimes the same people who had been responsible for inflicting extreme suffering on them during the respective genocides—found it difficult to imagine a secure future for themselves that included multiethnic cooperation. They commonly lived in fear of their neighbors despite the prevailing atmosphere of peace and tolerance, and openly expressed anxiety over the inevitability of future bloodshed and perhaps even genocide. In many instances, this atmosphere contributed to support among survivors for a preemptive strike against those people who had victimized them in the past because of their ethnicity, revealing a powerful reservoir of ethnic tension that is difficult to ignore, yet rarely discussed.

I encountered similar sentiments among many of the ex-combatants and perpetrators I interviewed. While these informants had been educated—in some cases formally—in the rhetoric of official policies toward national unity and reconciliation, they often retained a deep sense of injustice and a focused interest in revenge. Having failed in their efforts to eliminate their enemies, having experienced mass human rights violations at the hands of the victors, and having suffered the general stigmatization by their communities that often accompanies participation in mass atrocities, many of the ex-combatants and perpetrators I interviewed maintained virulent forms of violent ethnocentrism. Their willingness to expound these ideas increased as they became more comfortable speaking to me about their experiences.

This leads to a final point of concern related to my fieldwork. By talking with members of censored or oppressed communities in Rwanda and Bosnia, I was creating opportunities for the democratization of history. However, I increasingly struggled with the ethics of democratizing history when working amid complex political actors whose narratives were often intended to delegitimize their governments, as in the case of Ademira, or spread genocidal propaganda, as in the case of Alexandre. Regardless of how I might feel about the policies of the Rwandan and Bosnian governments at present, I had to ask myself what good could possibly come from publishing narratives that called into question the legitimacy of these institutions that, overall, were maintaining the peace in otherwise potentially volatile situations.

However, to not present those narratives that were critical of the Rwandan and Bosnian governments—which were in the majority—would make me complicit with the poor policy decisions and human rights abuses perpetrated by these regimes. It would do nothing to advance the interests of my informants whose complaints against their governments were often well-founded, if perhaps not well-intentioned. And perhaps most importantly, it would do little to promote dialogue surrounding the political uses of history and the failings of

the state in Rwanda and Bosnia—phenomena that I believe bear a substantial share of the responsibility for lingering ethnic tensions in these nations.²⁹

Conclusions

As a result of these mitigating factors, perhaps surprisingly, I censored myself. I decided to protect my informants first and wrote my doctoral dissertation as an extended field report on inscribed intent in full awareness that its relevance for the forensic sciences and international criminal law would be limited. I included only passing references to my informants, and used direct quotations only when I was confident that doing so would prove in no way incriminating to the people who had uttered them. The outcome was not a strong example of oral history. I spoke on behalf of my informants, rather than with my informants, and wrote about them in such general terms that the humanizing and democratizing potential of oral history was completely obliterated in the process. Given my initial intention to bring oral history into conversation with other disciplines interested in the investigation of mass atrocities, I interpreted the final product—while ranked by my committee members as outstanding—as a failure of sorts. While I believe that the integration of oral historical theory and methods into my project allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the political, historical, and cultural dynamics shaping Rwanda and Bosnia in the aftermath of mass atrocities that might otherwise have been the case had I chosen a different methodology, the highly politicized research setting imposed too many limitations on the outcomes of my research for me to express these depths adequately.

In the short term, I believe my decision to minimize the life history component of my fieldwork in my subsequent publications was correct, as it was the only sure way to minimize harm for my informants while my fieldwork was so fresh. Over time, should the political landscapes in Rwanda and Bosnia shift and become more tolerant toward dissenting or critical analysis of public policy, for example, or as the memory of my fieldwork fades for the communities in which I worked, it may be possible for me to revisit my interviews and fieldnotes with a different purpose. For the time being, however, I have restricted myself to writing about how the highly politicized research settings in Rwanda and Bosnia complicate the process of conducting qualitative research, in this case allowing me to identify a series of critical limitations in the practice of oral history surrounding the tenets of deep listening, sharing authority, and the writing of life histories in the aftermath of mass atrocities.

However, one limitation of oral history will likely persist indefinitely. In response to the idea that oral history can promote the democratization of history, the lingering question that remains when working amid highly politicized research

settings is: To what end? By uncritically disseminating the narratives of complex political actors who seek to delegitimize their governments or justify their involvement in mass atrocities, for example, oral historians risk inadvertently becoming part of the machinery of propaganda by promoting memories and myths that could be used to promote further bloodshed between communities. To contextualize these narratives by locating them within the larger historical or political landscape within which they are produced, or by drawing upon secondary sources that critique the informants' perspectives detracts from the oral historians' ability to give voice to those who are typically absent from history. The voice of the individual becomes subsumed by other sources of authority—including that of the researcher—to an extent that many oral historians would seek to avoid precisely because it undermines efforts to share authority and democratize history by allowing people to tell their stories on their own terms.

These experiences have led me to conclude that while oral history can be of enormous benefit for understanding mass atrocities' foundations within a community and their impact on civilians from different sides of the conflict, greater theorization is required regarding the limits of oral history when approaching highly politicized research settings. There are distinctive theoretical, ethical, and methodological challenges that must be negotiated when conducting fieldwork surrounding mass atrocities—challenges that are widely discussed among ethnographers, and yet rarely problematized by oral historians perhaps due to practitioners' recent interest in the subject.³⁰ Thus, the overarching goal of this paper is to encourage reflection and promote additional dialogue on the necessary limitations imposed by the inclusion of oral history practice when working amid highly politicized research settings.³¹

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NOTES

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- 1 I use the term *mass atrocities* throughout this article to refer to violations of international criminal law such as genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes.
- 2 Following the work of Lynn Abrams and other prominent oral historians, I understand oral history as both a research methodology and an end result that is distinct from ethnography, though the two practices can overlap in significant ways. As a research methodology, oral historians typically rely on the collection and analysis of life history and thematic interviews to engage with versions of the past that are typically absent from official sources of historical knowledge—a view from below. As an end result, oral historians privilege publications, presentations, and other means of dissemination that retain as much as possible the original voices of their informants—either from transcripts or audio and video recordings—as distinct from that of the practitioner. For more information, see Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2010).
- 3 This phrase has been most recently introduced and adapted by Susan Thomson to refer to those environments “in which government exerts significant control over sociopolitical discourses and seeks to control what people can say about the government and its policies.” For more information, see Susan Thomson, “Getting Close to Rwandans Since the Genocide: Life in Highly Politicized Research Settings,” *African Studies Review* 53, no. 3 (December 2010): 20.
- 4 There is a rapidly growing literature on the challenges of daily life in post-genocide Rwanda. For more information, see Susanne Buckley-Zistel, “Nation, Narration, Unification? The Politics of History Teaching After the Rwandan Genocide,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 11, no. 1 (March 2009): 31–53; Jennie Burnet, “Gender Balance and the Meanings of Women in Governance in Post-Genocide Rwanda,” *African Affairs* 107, no. 428 (2008): 361–86; Jennie Burnet, “The Injustice of Local Justice: Truth, Reconciliation, and Revenge in Rwanda,” *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 3, no. 2 (August 2008): 173–93; Bert Ingelaere, “The Gacaca Courts in Rwanda,” in *Transitional Justice and Reconciliation After Violent Conflict: Learning From African Experiences*, ed. Luc Huyse and Mark Salter (Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2008): 25–59; Bert Ingelaere, “Do We Understand Life After Genocide? Center and Periphery in the Construction of Knowledge in Postgenocide Rwanda,” *African Studies Review* 53, no. 1 (April 2010): 41–59; Bert Ingelaere, “Peasants, Power, and Ethnicity: A Bottom-up Perspective on Rwanda’s Political Transition,” *African Affairs* 109, no. 435 (2010): 273–92; Scott Straus and Lars Waldorf, ed., *Remaking Rwanda: State Building and Human Rights After Mass Violence* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011); Susan Thomson, “‘That Is Not What We Authorized You to Do . . .’: Access and Government Interference in Highly Politicized Research Environments,” in *Surviving Field Research: Working in Violent and Difficult Situations*, ed. Chandra Lekha Sriram, John King, Julie Mertus, Olga Martin-Ortega, and Johanna Herman (London: Routledge, 2009): 108–23; Susan Thomson, “Getting Close to Rwandans since the Genocide: Studying Everyday Life in Highly Politicized Research Settings,” *African Studies Review* 53, no. 3 (December 2010): 19–34; Lars Waldorf, “‘Like Jews Waiting for Jesus’: Posthumous Justice in Post-Genocide Rwanda,” in *Localizing Transitional Justice: Interventions and Priorities After Mass Violence*, ed. Rosalind Shaw and Lars Waldorf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010): 183–202; Lars Waldorf, “Censorship

and Propaganda in Post-Genocide Rwanda,” in *The Media and the Rwanda Genocide*, ed. Allan Thompson (London: Pluto Press, 2007): 404–16; Eugenia Zorbas, “What Does Reconciliation After Genocide Mean? Public Transcripts and Hidden Transcripts in Post-Genocide Rwanda,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 11, no. 1 (March 2009): 127–47.

- 5 I continue these practices in this article, in which I use pseudonyms when referring to my informants and obscure details related to their life histories in order to protect their identities.
- 6 I chose to write about my interviews with Ademira because she had greatly influenced the course of my fieldwork and subsequent research findings in Bosnia. Ademira had challenged my right to interview the members of the nongovernmental organization for which she worked. She argued that the international community was turning a blind eye to the real challenges facing modern Bosnians, and particularly female survivors of the Bosnian War and genocide. She urged me to abandon my Western preoccupation with the Bosnian War and examine government corruption within Bosnia in the present—a phenomenon that ensured minimal support to survivors of the war in order to ensure that they remained traumatized poster people for attracting foreign aid, which in turn would be largely used to line the pockets of immoral politicians. Ademira’s narrative opened my eyes to the complexity of the political landscape in Bosnia, and for this reason, she became one of my most important informants.
- 7 In this instance, I have merged Erica Bouris’ conceptualization of the *complex political victim* with Erin Baines work on *complex political perpetrators*. For more information, see Erin Baines, “Complex Political Perpetrators: Reflections on Dominic Ongwen,” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 47, no. 2 (2009): 163–91; and Erica Bouris, *Complex Political Victims* (Bloomfield: Kumarian Press, 2007).
- 8 In the resulting dissertation, I maintain that certain overlapping categories of symbolic violence, including gendered, ageist, spiritual, heritage, and interpersonal violence, have the potential to communicate genocidal intent, and in so doing can tell prosecutors and researchers a great deal about the criminal intent of individual perpetrators. Furthermore, I argue that these categories of genocidal symbolic violence require greater study as they often contain crucial information related to the roots of social death among survivor and perpetrator communities in the aftermath of genocide. For more information, see Erin Jessee, “Inscribed Intent: Genocidal Symbolic Violence and Social Death in the Aftermath of the Rwandan and Bosnian Genocides” (Ph.D. dissertation, Concordia University, 2010).
- 9 Most recently, Nancy Combs has criticized the use of eyewitness testimonies by international tribunals, such as the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda and the Former Yugoslavia, on the grounds that human memory is greatly diminished by the passage of time, personal political agendas, distortion from the introduction of postevent information, and close proximity to violent or stressful events. For more information, see Nancy Combs, *Fact-Finding Without Facts: The Uncertain Evidentiary Foundations of International Criminal Convictions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
- 10 For example, see Alessandro Portelli, “What Makes Oral History Different,” in *The Oral History Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (New York: Routledge, 2006).

- 11 Ibid., 34.
- 12 Paul Thompson, "The Voice of the Past: Oral History," in *The Oral History Reader*, 2nd ed., 26–27.
- 13 The majority of the interviews I conducted during my fieldwork required the use of a translator so I could accommodate my interviewees in their native language, which was Kinyarwanda. I worked with one male and one female translator—in accordance with the preferences of my informants—in an effort to make people as comfortable as possible in the interview space. Both of these translators were relatively neutral (or as neutral as it is possible to get in Rwanda) in terms of their political affiliations and ethnicity. Both had lived outside Rwanda for most of their lives and were part of the Africa-based Rwandan diaspora that returned to Rwanda following the 1994 genocide. While this background put them at risk of being automatically identified by my informants as Tutsi returnees, and therefore uncritical supporters of the RPF, their work throughout Rwanda as trauma counselors and human rights advocates for Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa had established them as well-respected pillars in their communities and eliminated the possibility of their being spies for the RPF. I do not use their names in this publication in order to protect their identities.
- 14 For additional works that promote deep listening, see Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991); Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); and Luisa Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory: The Cultural Experiences of the Turin Working-Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
- 15 Michael Frisch first introduced the concept of shared authority in 1990. This term has since been replaced by the more dynamic and process-oriented concept of "sharing authority," which implies an ongoing collaborative relationship and shared decision making between the interviewer and the interviewee. For more information on its original conception, see Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: State University New York Press, 1990). For more information on later adaptations of the concept, see Steven High, Lisa Ndejuru, and Kristen O'Hare, ed., "Special Issues on Sharing Authority: Community-University Collaboration in Oral History, Digital Storytelling, and Engaged Scholarship," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 43, no. 1 (Winter 2009).
- 16 Steven High, "Sharing Authority: An Introduction," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 43, no. 1 (Winter 2009): 13. However, it is important to note that efforts toward sharing authority surrounding the interview and the production of oral histories are only a partial solution to a much larger problem related to the power imbalances that exist between researchers and their informants. The literature on discursive authority—a subject that anthropologists such as Charles Briggs have been theorizing about for over a decade—evaluates in greater detail the privileged position of the researcher. For more information, see Charles L. Briggs, "The Politics of Discursive Authority in Research on the 'Invention of Tradition'," *Cultural Anthropology* 11, no. 4 (1996): 435–69.
- 17 This powerful, predominantly Hutu party (along with the more openly extremist *Coalition pour la défense de la république*) was largely responsible for orchestrating and inciting the 1994 genocide in which an estimated 800,000 civilians—most of

- whom were members of Rwanda's Tutsi minority population—were killed. For more information on the 1994 genocide, see Alison Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999).
- 18 The politics of beauty in Rwanda, as shaped by decades of German and Belgian racial theorization, have contributed to the belief that Tutsi women are more beautiful, intelligent, and well-mannered than Hutu women. This belief emerges from the *Hamitic hypothesis* introduced by European scientists, who argued that the Tutsi—by virtue of their lighter skin, more gracile features, and superior intellect—are descendants of the biblical figure, Ham and therefore are Caucasian in origin, making them the natural leaders of the more African Hutu. As a result, Hutu men will often seek Tutsi brides as a means of conferring their wives' status upon themselves and their future children. For more information, see Christopher Taylor, *Sacrifice as Terror: The Rwandan Genocide of 1994* (New York: Berg, 1999).
 - 19 Among these stories were allegations that the Tutsi monarchs used to build human bridges from living Hutu civilians to enable their armies to cross rivers, and murder Hutu babies by stabbing them with sharpened spears to help themselves stand. Needless to say, the historical accuracy of these iconic stories is questionable. However, they are important because they are commonly recited in Rwanda, even today, and speak to the legacy of Hutu suffering internalized by many Hutu extremists.
 - 20 The circumstances surrounding Habyarimana's assassination are controversial. The RPF maintains that Habyarimana's inner circle of political affiliates were responsible for shooting down the President's plane on April 6, 1994, while critics of the RPF believe there is evidence to support the charge that the RPF is responsible for the assassination. For more information related to the RPF's position, see The Mutsinzi Report, "Report of the investigation into the causes and circumstances of and responsibility for the attack of 06/04/1994 against the Falcon 50 Rwandan Presidential aeroplane registration number 9XR-NN" Republic of Rwanda (2009), <http://mutsinzireport.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/01/Falcon-Report-english.pdf> (accessed August 18, 2011).
 - 21 The argument that the violence in 1994 was a continuation of the civil war that had overwhelmed Rwanda since the RPF invasion in October 1990 is commonly used by Hutu extremists to justify and diminish the atrocities experienced by the Tutsi minority.
 - 22 As time passed, Alexandre grew increasingly reluctant to talk about the genocide, and instead focused on the good person he had been before the genocide—as a leader to his community and a deeply religious man—and the good person he was becoming following his imprisonment. Alexandre was one of many confessed perpetrators I interviewed who used certain features of prison life—his occasional and always unprovoked torture and harassment by prison authorities, willing participation in rehabilitation courses, revived religious fervor, and eagerness to live alongside Tutsi in harmony once again—to demonstrate he had rejected the anti-Tutsi propaganda that had overwhelmed him during the genocide. He frequently asked me to fight for "good Rwandans" like him who were still facing long prison sentences despite having acquiesced to the demands of the RPF and confessed their crimes. What was particularly troubling about these requests was that while

- Alexandre might appear remorseful in one instance—suggesting he had learned only too well how to speak the language of reconciliation promoted by the RPF—he could rarely maintain such sentiments when he began talking about the civil war, the RPF, or the challenges of daily life in the prisons.
- 23 For more information, see the 1984 report by the National Commission on Disappeared Persons (*Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas*, CONADEP) *Nunca Más* (Never Again). *Argentina Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, Never Again: A Report by Argentina's National Commission on Disappeared Persons* (London: Faber & Faber, 1986).
 - 24 Antonius C. G. M. Robben, "Ethnographic Seduction: Transference and Resistance in Dialogues About Terror and Violence in Argentina," *Ethos* 24, no. 1 (March 1996): 84.
 - 25 Kathleen Blee, "Evidence, Empathy, and Ethics: Lessons from Oral Histories of the Klan," in *The Oral History Reader*, 2nd ed., 322.
 - 26 Alessandro Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Alessandro Portelli, *The Order Has Been Carried Out: History, Memory, and Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003); and Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).
 - 27 Toward the end of my work in the Rwandan prisons, I was pressured by one prison director to hand over my notes and the names of my informants. When I refused to comply, my access to the prison was informally rescinded—the prison administrators simply refused to assist my research any further, making it impossible for me to conduct additional interviews.
 - 28 Approximately one year before I began my fieldwork in Rwanda, Susan Thomson's doctoral research on the status of the Rwandan government's policy of national unity and reconciliation had attracted the negative attention of the RPF. Though I was not aware of her research at the time, her efforts to work among rural Rwandans and in the prisons came under fire—much as my own eventually would—when she refused to share the names and contents of her interviews with the authorities. Thomson's passport was taken away and she was sent to *ingando*—the Kinyarwanda term for the state-operated reeducation camps—before finally discontinuing her research and fleeing the country. For more information, see Thomson, "'That Is Not What We Authorized You to Do . . .'" ; and Susan M. Thomson, "Reeducation for Reconciliation: Participant Observations on *Ingando*," in *Remaking Rwanda: State Building and Human Rights After Mass Violence*, ed. Scott Straus and Lars Waldorf (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), 331–9.
 - 29 There is a rapidly growing literature on the challenges of daily life in post-genocide Rwanda. For more information, see Susanne Buckley-Zistel, "Nation, Narration, Unification? The Politics of History Teaching After the Rwandan Genocide," *Journal of Genocide Research* 11, no. 1 (March 2009): 31–53; Jennie Burnet, "Gender Balance and the Meanings of Women in Governance in Post-Genocide Rwanda," *African Affairs*, 107, no. 428 (2008): 361–386; Jennie Burnet, "The Injustice of Local Justice: Truth, Reconciliation, and Revenge in Rwanda," *Genocide Studies and Prevention*, 3, no. 2 (August 2008): 173–193; Bert Ingelaere, "The Gacaca Courts

in Rwanda," *Transitional Justice and Reconciliation After Violent Conflict: Learning From African Experiences*, ed. Luc Huyse and Mark Salter (Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2008): 25–59; Bert Ingelaere, "Do We Understand Life After Genocide? Center and Periphery in the Construction of Knowledge in Postgenocide Rwanda," *African Studies Review* 53, no. 1 (April 2010): 41–59; Bert Ingelaere, "Peasants, Power, and Ethnicity: A Bottom-up Perspective on Rwanda's Political Transition," *African Affairs* 109, no. 435 (2010): 273–292; Scott Straus and Lars Waldorf (eds), *Remaking Rwanda: State Building and Human Rights After Mass Violence* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011); Susan Thomson, "'That Is Not What We Authorized You to Do...': Access and Government Interference in Highly Politicized Research Environments," in *Surviving Field Research: Working in Violent and Difficult Situations*, ed. Chandra Lekha Sriram, John King, Julie Mertus, Olga Martin-Ortega, and Johanna Herman (London: Routledge, 2009): 108–123; Susan Thomson, "Getting Close to Rwandans Since the Genocide: Studying Everyday Life in Highly Politicized Research Settings," *African Studies Review* 53, no. 3 (December 2010): 19–34; Lars Waldorf, "'Like Jews Waiting for Jesus': Posthumous Justice in Post-Genocide Rwanda," in *Localizing Transitional Justice: Interventions and Priorities After Mass Violence*, ed. Rosalind Shaw and Lars Waldorf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010): 183–202; Lars Waldorf, "Censorship and Propaganda in Post-Genocide Rwanda," in *The Media and the Rwanda Genocide*, ed. Allan Thompson (London: Pluto Press, 2007): 404–416; Eugenia Zorbas, "What Does Reconciliation After Genocide Mean? Public Transcripts and Hidden Transcripts in Post-Genocide Rwanda," *Journal of Genocide Research* 11, no. 1 (March 2009): 127–147. To date, however, there are few academic critiques of the post-genocide landscape in Bosnia. The primary exceptions being David Chandler's work on government corruption and a handful of articles on Bosnia included in the edited volume *My Neighbor, My Enemy: Justice and Community in the Aftermath of Mass Atrocity*. For more information, see David Chandler, "Anti-Corruption Strategies and Democratization in Bosnia-Herzegovina" *Democratization* 9, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 101–120; David Chandler, "Building Trust in Public Institutions? Good Governance and Anti-Corruption in Bosnia-Herzegovina," *Ethnopolitics* 5, no. 1 (March 2006): 85–99; and Eric Stover and Harvey Weinstein, ed., *My Neighbor, My Enemy: Justice and Community in the Aftermath of Mass Atrocity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

30 For example, see Ellen Moodie, *El Salvador in the Aftermath of Peace: Crime, Uncertainty, and the Transition to Democracy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010); Antonius C. G. M. Robben, *Political Violence and Trauma in Argentina* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005); Alexander Laban Hinton, ed., *Annihilating Difference: The Anthropology of Genocide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); and Carolyn Nordstrom, *A Different Kind of War Story* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997).

31 Some debates of this nature are occurring among oral historians working with the Center for Oral History and Digital Storytelling at Concordia University. However, in most instances, these practitioners are working with people who have immigrated to Canada after fleeing mass atrocities in their native countries, which in itself

presents a different set of theoretical, ethical, and methodological challenges for negotiation. For more information, see the Center for Oral History and Digital Storytelling Web site: <http://storytelling.concordia.ca/oralhistory/index.html> and the Community-University Research Alliance project "Life Stories of Montrealers Displaced by War, Genocide, and Other Mass Human Rights Violations," Web site: <http://www.lifestoriesmontreal.ca/> (accessed August 18, 2011).