Reconciliation and Restorying in Rwanda and Canada: A narrative

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On Ugliness and Beauty

I slip through one of earth's portals and find myself inside a beating heart.

Everything is alive in the jungle – not like out there. Not like the dead concrete, rusting cars, and grey technology of that world.

No, not like that.

Here, is organic.

Here, is vibrant.

Here, is alive.

A heavy mist blankets the jungle, while a few rays of light struggle to break through the foliage. Water drips from the top of the canopy, collecting in the voluminous leaves below. Birds are everywhere – tricked by the vibrant colours of intelligent plant life. "I'll feed you. You feed me." Isn't that what it's all about?

Like the monkey who carries the jungle's moths and insects on its back.

And the soldier ants who protect their brothers on the long journey home.

I am struck by the untamed beauty of Rwanda's rainforests, by its red soil and thousands of hills, and while the natural beauty of this country is striking, it is the people who stand out the most. They are kind and generous by nature, they value community, and cling to an ideal of hope. And in all of this, I ask myself, "How does one reconcile the beauty of this place with the ugliness of the genocide?"

Everyone I know who has visited Rwanda and spent time with its people will tell you that they still struggle with this question, and they always will.

The Past and the "Presentism"

In 1994 Rwanda, the effects of years of colonial meddling erupted into 100 days of murder, where it is estimated that up to one million people were killed. (Ferguson, 2015) Hutu extremists, frustrated by years of oppression and educated by even more years of hate propaganda, formulated and carried out the organized slaughter of their Tutsi neighbours. The sheer brutality of the violence has led many scholars to question what could have possibly incited so many human beings to participate. They have put forward many theories, some which question human nature itself (Burnett, 2009). As this debate continues, Rwandans have been tasked with the job of moving forward.

Interestingly though, the genocide is the elephant in the room in Rwanda. Well, in some rooms. It is rarely discussed in casual environments, and in fact, to utter the words Hutu and Tutsi could be cause for trouble. "We are all Rwandans," they say. However, when visiting memorial sites, the genocide is discussed in the rawest of forms. No detail is left out. From skull analysis to bloodied walls, rusting machetes, open coffins in mass graves, and blood-tainted clothing, visitors are exposed to the raw truths of genocide. And these stories are told by survivors. I've visited many places of memorial in the world, but none as haunting as those in Rwanda.

A survivor of the genocide at Ntarama guides us through the grenade blasted doors of the church memorial. To the right, skulls

line the wall – one can decipher the head wounds, but our guide is quick to inform us of each. Death by machete. Death by hammer. Death by crushing.

The clothing of the victims hang solemnly throughout the church, still muddied from the April 1994 rainy season, and soaked with blood. Onesies, soaked with blood. The tiniest of pants, soaked with blood. Sprayed with chemicals to maintain their original form – to have greater impact on the visitor.

On the altar stand piles of machetes, hammers, spears, and farming tools – all weapons used in the slaughter at Ntarama. Beside them are the water buckets and children's bottles that had been brought by those who assumed they would be housed in sanctuary. Identity cards and jewelry are scattered over the church. My guide picks up a card and gives it to me. I hold it like a relic, caressing the black and white picture, tracing my finger along the line that encircles the word Tutsi. This man's clothes are here somewhere. This man's bones are here somewhere.

The Sunday School. Possibly the worst site of all. Children hid there with their baby siblings, but this story does not end well. When they were found, the babies were brutally thrown against walls, and the children killed with machetes. The blood still remains on the wall.

Survivors encourage visitors to enter the mass graves, a common form of burial after the genocide. These graves are underground, but have windows at ground level so that the consequences of violence can never be unseen. I follow. Down, down the stairs into what can only be described as a warehouse of coffins. They are piled in stacks twenty high, in an unending stream

of rows. The lids are left partially open. Purposefully. One must see the ribs and vertebrae and skulls and femurs and hands to appreciate what happened here.

> *I cannot write or speak of this experience without weeping. It will never leave me.*

This is part of the government's truth-telling process (Republic of Rwanda, 2006). The hope is that by exposing people to the ugly truths of genocide and human nature, that the past will not be repeated.

Perhaps Canada needs a more honest truth-telling process. In addition to the recentering of innocence in Canadian discourses, Di Mascio (2013) writes about bystanders and the importance of rethinking "who knew what when" about Residential Schools (p. 85). Indeed, most settlers remain bystanders today, but they must understand that to be advantaged means that someone else is disadvantaged. There cannot be a short end of a stick without a long one. This is difficult for settlers to come to terms with, and the clever use of semantics has cemented settler innocence. Take Chrisjohn and Young's (1997) arguments regarding cultural genocide in *The Circle Game*. When the treatment of Indigenous peoples in Canada is referred to as a "genocide," many settler Canadians "ignore it" or "treat it as rhetorical flourish" (p. 60). My good friend who completed his Masters in Genocide Studies and his thesis on the Rwandan genocide is also wary of terming what happened to Indigenous peoples in Canada as a "genocide." He prefers to preface genocide with the word "cultural" in this case. However, as Chrisjohn and Young (1997) argue, as per the definitions of genocide put forth by the Genocide Convention, genocide does not require killing; the forced assimilation and

transfer of a people, and “inflicting conditions of life calculated to bring about physical destruction” (p. 61), which clearly occurred through the Residential School system, fully satisfies the definition. The Government of Canada plainly stated that it wanted to “get rid of the Indian problem” (Chrisjohn & Young, 1997, p. 61), just as Germany wanted to get rid of the "Jewish problem," and Rwanda wanted to get rid of the "Tutsi problem." As the authors proclaim, “cultural genocide is genocide” and thus, “Canada cannot exempt itself” (Chrisjohn & Young, 1997, p. 63).

One of the barriers to moving forward is the notion of "presentism," which is to judge events in the past according to the values and standards that existed at the time (Chrisjohn & Young, 1997, p. 66). This has become a method of dodging settler culpability for the Indigenous genocide in Canada. Take for example the following phrases: “Well, at the time it was normal to be racist” or “Let bygones be bygones, and we’ll start fresh." There are many problems with this discourse, but one in particular is that it demonstrates further evidence that settler Canadians are blind to the racism and assimilationist structures that *still* exist in Canada. Only when Canada truly accepts its complicity both in the past *and* the present, can a genuine truth-telling process begin.

Toward Reconciliation

Reconciliation in Rwanda is a process of social re-engineering, governed strictly by the government of Paul Kagame. Many initiatives have been implemented to clarify the historical influences that played a part in the genocide, as well as the importance of moving forward as a unified country. Reconciliation is a required component of public school education, and hundreds of thousands of Rwandans have participated in peace education

programs (Ingando and Iterero), and finally, all Rwandans are required to participate in Umuganda (United Nations, n.d.). Umuganda requires that every able-bodied citizen aged 18-65 participate in three hours of community service on the last Saturday of every month. This is a part of the Indigenous pedagogy of Rwanda, which had been lost during the years preceding the genocide, and has now been reinstated as a way of bringing communities together. I had the opportunity to participate in Umuganda while I was in Rwanda, and it was a truly transformative experience. The Rwandans taught us that it is important to communicate while participating in Umuganda. While shovelling dirt for the road project, we had rich discussions about culture and community. Umuganda concludes with large and small group community discussions over a meal of maize, where the topics range from special announcements (weddings and births) to issues in the community that need to be resolved.

Umuganda made me think about the reconciliation process in Canada. Although discussions have taken place at the federal and provincial levels between Canadian and Indigenous governments, the power of local community discussions should not be ignored. I live in Miramichi, New Brunswick, a community that neighbours three Indigenous communities, yet embodies racism to its core. Like most Canadians, Miramichiers have fallen victim to Canada's Great Marketing Campaign and "take enormous pride in the constructed identity of their nation as one that is innocent of any wrongdoing" (St. Denis, 2011, p.310). It has been difficult to move forward with reconciliation when community members work tirelessly to recenter their own innocence and are blind to their power and privilege. The national discourse of "racelessness" has led Miramichiers (like many Canadians) to believe that Indigenous people need to "get over it" because "these things happened

hundreds of years ago." The "just get over it" argument has become an acceptable and almost rote response to the topic of racism in our country and community. It is as if this response has been memorized and stated so many times that it is now a part of the Canadian consciousness. A Canadian could not imagine a Hutu telling a Tutsi survivor to "get over it," yet settlers use this language all the time to refer to the cultural genocide in their own country. Perhaps we hear this response so often because the dominant group (in this case, white Canadians), feel that treaty discussion draws "attention away from the dominant groups", which is "seen as unfair, a loss of something to which they are entitled" (Johnson, 2018, p. 88).

There are many ways to counter this thought process, but of course, it is difficult work. Educators certainly have a role to play, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) Calls to Action (2015) outline how this can be done in schools. But I also believe that Umuganda has a place in this process. The power of community people simply sitting down and talking and working together, can have enormous outcomes. Many people in our city have never had a conversation with an Indigenous person or visited an Indigenous community. They have no concept of the struggles, the poverty, and the inequity of services in Indigenous communities. All they have been exposed to are the myths – free education and no taxes. So, although I see the benefit of Indigenous and non-Indigenous leaders discussing reconciliation, I feel that the community members have to be more involved in this process, and they must do this together. Umuganda has been a transformative piece of the reconciliation process in Rwanda; hopefully, Canada can incorporate the community more as it moves forward with its own reconciliation process.

The Power of Restorying

Eric Irivuzumugabe is a survivor of the Rwandan genocide who believes in the power of restorying. At the age of sixteen, he survived the genocide by hiding in the rural forests, but when his family was tracked down, he escaped with his two uncles, hiding for 15 days in a cypress tree. His story of survival is powerful, and I had the pleasure of spending many days with Eric while I visited Rwanda. As I mentioned earlier, it is not appropriate to ask a Rwandan about their experiences in 1994, but Eric wanted to share his narrative, even bringing me to the significant places in his story. He brought me to visit the mass graves where 70 members of his family now rest, to his family home, and finally to the area where the cypress tree once stood (ironically, it was chopped down by imprisoned perpetrators as the local prison needed firewood for boiling water).

Let's consider the power of place in Rwanda for a minute. I believe in the importance of taking an anthropological look at ourselves, and a key piece of this process is identifying the role of place in our lives. If you were to re-read the assignment that I handed in before my trip to Rwanda, you would see that I dedicated a large portion of it to the power of place in my life. And when I think of place, I am reminded of its subtleties. In Rwanda, place is not subtle. Place is the house where your family was murdered, yet you live out your life there every day. Place is the road that you travel to the market, where Interahamwe mercenaries had set up road blocks, killing thousands of people. Place is where you attend church every Sunday only to be reminded that they were once not spaces of sanctuary, but rooms of slaughter. Place is a memorial where survivors have the courage to share what they witnessed in the hopes that it will never happen again. Place is where 70 members of

your family are buried too soon. Eric wanted to share his significant places with me and I'm not sure that I will ever be able to repay him for that.

Eric would argue that there is power in place, but there is also power in restorying. Although he shared many narratives from his 1994 experience, he shared as many, if not more, of the process of reconciliation both within his heart and in his country. Because reconciliation is a Christian concept (Corntassel, Chaw-win-is, & T'lakwadzi, 2009, p. 145), it fits well in Rwanda. Missionary work during the years of colonialism has led to entrenched Christianity in Rwanda; even the betrayal by clergymen during the genocide has not shaken the peoples' belief in the church. Thus, the concept of forgiveness has allowed many survivors to move forward in the reconciliation process. Through the Gacaca Courts, which operated up until 2012, justice and reconciliation were addressed at the grassroots level. While the national court system was used to try the planners of the genocide and those who committed "serious atrocities," community courts were used to hear the trials of other genocide suspects. During this process, more than 12,000 community-based courts tried more than 1.2 million cases throughout the country (United Nations, n.d.). The Gacaca trials are associated with reconciliation as they gave perpetrators the opportunity to confess their crimes, show remorse, and ask for forgiveness in front of their community. Indeed, there are many published stories of reconciliation from these trials, where survivors and perpetrators have become friends. These are the narratives that the Rwandan government and people like Eric, would prefer to include in the restorying of Rwanda.

As a visitor, it is obvious that there is a national discourse and a set of narratives that are at play, and Rwanda has been very

tactical in its storytelling. Even the cab drivers are told to regale their customers with stories of beautification and economic development. We always seemed to be taken the "long way around," and it wasn't unusual to take a cab to town, but end up at a tour of the new health facility. This is not to take away from the enormous strides that Rwanda has made; it went from being the poorest country in the world in 1994 to a major economic competitor, and arguably one of the most developed countries in Africa today (Ferguson, 2015). And simply the thought of experiencing something as horrific as the 1994 genocide to becoming the safest country in Africa, and the ninth safest country on the planet according to the *Telegraph Journal* (Smith, 2017), is pretty outstanding. However, there is no question that reconciliation is a forced concept. Rwandans are not allowed to admit that, but it's true. Some of my Western colleagues who have lived in Rwanda for quite some time, have told me that yes, it's forced, but perhaps it needs to be. There have been numerous acts of genuine forgiveness, but some Rwandans will tell you that for them, they are just words.

Like Rwanda, Canada must "unsettle" and "unravel" its past, while restorying the dominant culture's version of history (Corntassel, Chaw-win-is, & T'lakwadzi, 2009, p. 138). In the years dating from Rwandan independence in 1961 until 1994, the Hutu version of history was taught as propaganda in schools. This miseducation is one piece of the genocide puzzle in Rwanda. In Canada, the dominant culture's version of history has also miseducated its youth, while ignoring the narratives of Indigenous people. During a 2008 gathering of Indigenous Elders from the Indian Residential School Survivors Society, they noted that "We must go slowly. We cannot force reconciliation" (Corntassel, Chaw-win-is, & T'lakwadzi, 2009, p. 143). This is a notable difference between the reconciliation processes of Rwanda and Canada, but

there are many similarities. According to the TRC mandate, there is a "compelling desire to put the events of the past behind us to work towards a stronger and healthier future…The Truth of our common experiences will help set our spirits free and pave the way to reconciliation" (Corntassel, Chaw-win-is, & T'lakwadzi, 2009, p. 144). This sounds similar to Rwandan discourse; however, Corntassel, Chaw-win-is, & T'lakwadzi (2009) argue that this is a "convenient framing of the issue," which allows settlers to keep the acts of cultural genocide locked in the past, alleviating them from all guilt (p. 144). The result is that the dominant culture is able to maintain the status quo, rather than taking ownership over the issue and forcing change to existing power systems. This identifies another stark difference between reconciliation in Rwanda and Canada: the cultural group responsible for committing the genocide remains in power in Canada, while in Rwanda, it is the oppressed group that rose to power and remains in control. In fact, it is interesting that the ruling party chose forgiveness as its platform when revenge was within its grasp.

What Can We Learn From Rwanda?

Although the Rwandan government's reconciliation policy is controversial, I believe there is a lot that Canada can learn from it. Perhaps most important is the recognition of the ugliness of our past and present. What happened to Indigenous peoples in Canada was a genocide and racism clearly *still* exists in Canada. Racism permeates Canada's systems, institutions, dinner table conversations, locker rooms, pubs, parking lots, hockey rinks, and the list could go on and on. Settler Canadians have major work to do in deconstructing their own biases, power, and privilege, and in unravelling romanticized narratives and discourses of "racelessness" that they have been exposed to since birth. In addition to this, a

restorying process must begin, and it must come from the Indigenous communities. When these processes simultaneously occur, Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians can work toward reconciliation. Not just the leaders of government, but regular community members as well – we need to start speaking to one another, to create bridges for cross-cultural understanding, to dispel myths, and to take part in our own form of Umuganda. Educators have a responsibility in this process as well; we need to empower and educate students to be capacity builders in their communities as we move forward with reconciliation.

My friend Eric says that hope is alive in Rwanda and that a flame of healing burns across the country. One day, this may be true for Canada as well, but first, as Chrisjohn and Young (1997) point out, we may need to spit in a few eyes in order to open them (p. 78).

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