

LIVING GENOCIDE:

RWANDA, WOMEN AND HIV

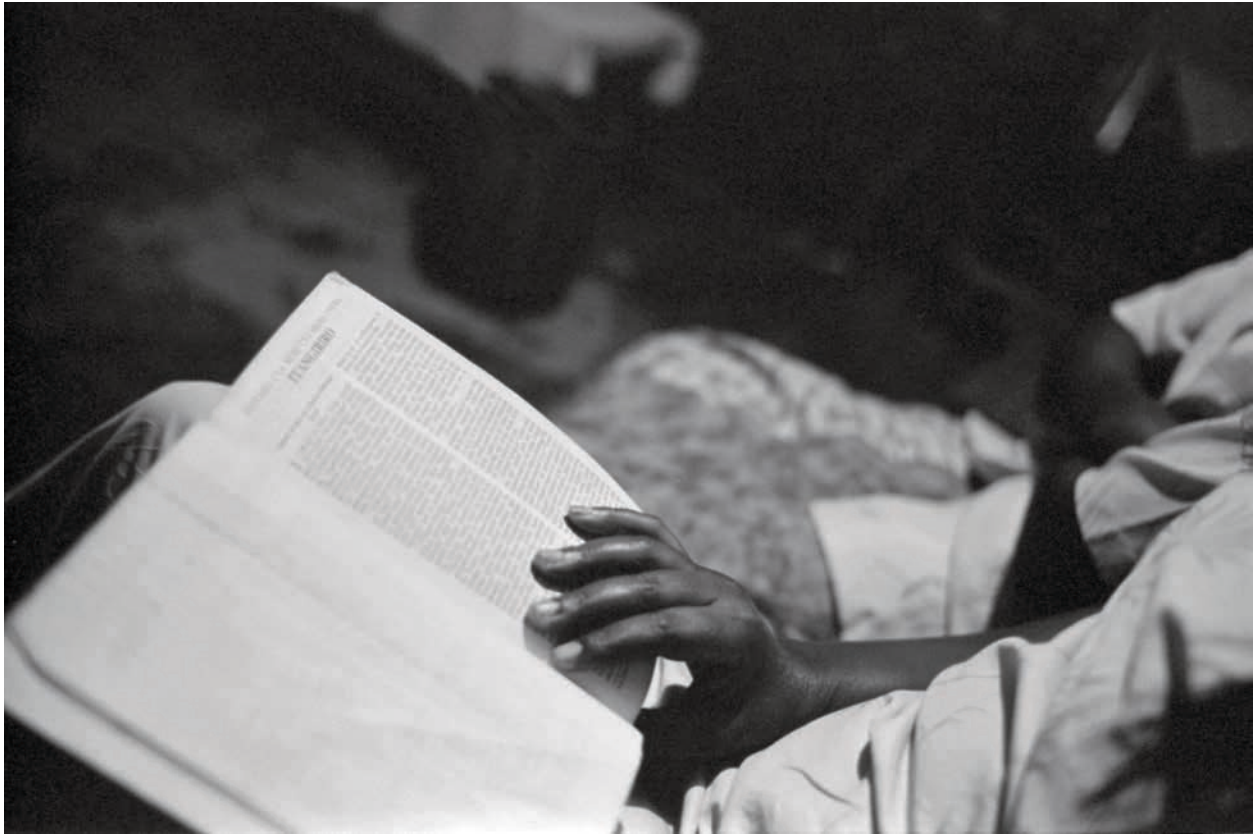


DURING 100 DAYS FROM APRIL-JULY 1994 OVER 1 MILLION RWANDAN TUTSIS WERE KILLED IN A HORRIFIC GENOCIDE. NOT INCLUDED IN THE COUNT ARE AN ESTIMATED 150,000 WOMEN WHO WERE RAPED AND INTENTIONALLY INFECTED WITH HIV AS PART OF THE GENOCIDE. TODAY THESE WOMEN ARE LIVING WITHOUT JUSTICE OR RECOGNITION AS THEY PREPARE THEIR FAMILIES FOR LIFE WITHOUT THEM.

GENOCIDE IN RWANDA IS NOT DEAD. IT IS ALIVE IN EACH OF THESE WOMEN. IT CAN BE SEEN ON THEIR FACES AS THEY WALK EACH DAY TO GET WATER, CARE FOR THEIR CHILDREN, AND DEAL WITH THE PSYCHOLOGICAL AND PHYSICAL EFFECTS OF RAPE AND HIV.

IN SPRING OF 2004 I TRAVELLED TO RWANDA TO MEET THESE WOMEN: TO LIVE IN THEIR HOMES, HEAR THEIR STORIES AND PHOTOGRAPH THEIR LIVES. THIS PROJECT BEARS WITNESS TO THEIR LIVES: FOR THEIR FAMILIES, THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY AND OUR FUTURE.

-Lindsay Welch



With Mutoni in my thoughts, here I am. What strikes me most is how educated, sophisticated and dignified the people are here. There seems to be very little drunkenness and drug abuse, and very little crime. It seems that people have a quiet pride that keeps them above all that. Which really puts the genocide in a new perspective for me. There is no way that something 'just happened' here. It was very clearly thought out, planned and organized. People here don't 'just do' anything.







I travelled to Guitarama today with a group of women who were reenacting the genocide to commemorate what they lived through ten years ago. Rather than focussing on the horrors, the day was filled with singing and dancing in celebration of their survival.

Driving home was beyond words. The energy was even higher and the music was non-stop all the way. Atanasi and I were in the front seat clapping and waving to everyone and calling out the window as we drove by. The women were singing "Rwandan women . . . we will survive". There just aren't words.

Alexis asked if he could share his story from the genocide with me today - actually the story of his life. My first recording and one and a half hours long! It was quite draining and we were both exhausted by the end. I heard words for fire and for blood and dead. Also recognized places like Gisnanyi, Guitarama, Congo. I am curious to discover more of what was said. It also made me feel hopeful for what will come. This really is something possible. Overwhelming and blessed and true. It really is beautiful to find that people are beginning to trust me and want to open up to me and share their stories.

. . .

I found out that Alexis' family was split up in Guitarama and he spent 2-3 months on his own as a 12 year old, living in the woods with no help. The Interhamwe raided the village where he was with his family and everyone tried to run off. He saw some of his brothers beaten with machetes and killed. He ran off to save himself. Months later he overheard talk that the RPF was liberating Rwanda and he wandered into a town where he later happened to see his aunt Dorothe in the street.





“They took me and raped me. First a Mutwa, and then all the Hutus who were there raped me. All this was done before my children. After everyone finished raping me they praised themselves on top of the praises that they had got from their colleagues during the course of their actions. One Tabaro found them and advised them to leave me since I had been a good supplier of local brew to them. I could not tell where I was but this savior of mine took us to a church in Kibeho but we found it full and had to stay in the compound.

Before long we were attacked and all the people who were in the church were killed and the church burnt down to ashes. We managed to escape to a convent for a week but the people would die every other day for they would come for people to kill at their own timing only that we had learnt their signals: when the drum sounded once it meant they were sharing what they had looted; twice meant that they were coming for somebody to kill.”

-Mukondo Margret

We travelled to Gisenyi with HIV results for local women who had been tested a month before.

Convincing women to be tested is only the first challenge. Testing is not readily available so women in rural areas must travel to a provincial site to meet with a nurse from the capital to have blood drawn. The nurse then returns home to process the blood sample. Once the results are known, word is sent back to the province that the nurse will be returning on such and such a day with the results.

Hopefully all the women who were tested find out when the results will be shared. Hopefully they are able to make the return trip to meet with the nurse and get the results.

Unfortunately, resources are spread thin. Testing is slowly becoming available, but there is very little psychological support offered beyond a woman's own circle of family and friends.

In Gisenyi we told eleven women that they are HIV positive. One woman found out that she was negative. And Atanasia learned that her newborn baby is not currently HIV+. Hopefully she will be able to find enough formula to feed him so she doesn't have to risk feeding him with breast milk.





Last night was magic. Dorothe took me into her bedroom and we sat together, arms intertwined in the lamp light and she told me her story. Tears in her eyes, sorrow in her heart.

Learning bits of her story over the past weeks helped me to follow what she was saying. The genocide didn't start with her generation either. Both of her parents were killed during an ethnic cleansing in '73. Then she lost her husband in 1994. And two sisters and a brother, their spouses and nine nieces and nephews were killed during the genocide.

A woman asked me to photograph the funeral of her husband. After ten years she finally had the resources and information to locate his remains.

When I arrived in Gisozi I learned that it was a mass burial. Over 50,000 were buried that day.

Without qualified anthropologists it was difficult to determine which bones belonged to which people. Rather than risk separating the bodies, multiple bodies shared the same casket.









“On Thursday, April 7th, 1994 we noticed that all our Hutu neighbors were sharpening their pangas and did not want to talk to us. They started looting and breaking down Tutsi’s houses. Those who could went to Ruhanga, while my grandmother and I hid in a small room next to a destroyed house. We were got out by the militia who took us together to my mother’s house. She was killed first, followed by my two children and I was hit twice by something that I could not identify and fell.

It felt like a dream but they dragged me to the pit latrine in which they had dumped many bodies and put me in and covered it with logs and thorns. That was the last thing that I heard and the next time I woke up, I felt my mouth had lots of undefined things in it and when I spit, they were teeth. I managed to push away the logs and there was my youngest child who had managed to get himself out of the latrine. He saw that the militia was coming and got back into the pit again. This went on until I was out of the pit and went in search of drinking water. I was naked and swollen and did not want to look at myself.”

-Mutegwamaso Emeritha





There is a heaviness in the air today as the boys work around the house.

Yesterday Dorothe, Alexis, Fraterne, Paterne and Emanuel went to Guitarama to pull Paterne and Fraterne's mother, brother and aunt out of a latrine where they had been put to die ten years ago. No one should have to see their family that way.





We went to Gisozi to find out how women in one of the villages are living. We meet in a school. It rains. Its hard to record what they are saying. Women are explaining how during the rainy season they must beg their Interhamwe neighbors to take in their children for the night so they can sleep somewhere dry.

The rain eases and we go out for a walk so they can show me some houses. They point out a house made mostly of tarp-sheeting. They ask if we are close enough for me to photograph it or if I want to get closer. I say yes, I want to get closer. We walk down.

They have me wait outside while they go in to explain who I am and ask permission to enter. After a few minutes I'm allowed in. I start to record. One of the women tries to translate for me. Its more of an interview than anything I've done so far.

She says she lives here with her four children. I ask how old they are. The only one I can see is the infant on her back. The youngest is 10 months. The oldest, 10 years I'm, told her husband is a sick man and useless in helping to support the family or provide a house. She must do it all. All of her family was killed during the genocide. Its suggested that her husband has been useless since the genocide – possibly because of the genocide.

Something doesn't fit. Its being implied that the husband was severely traumatized in the genocide. But all of the children have been born since then. The oldest, 10 could be the result of rape during the genocide. He's the right age.

I ask if the husband is the father of all the children, or is the oldest is from the Interhamwe during the genocide.

And the story comes out.

Her husband is Hutu. After her family was killed he took her by force. But he has protected her from others so she stays with him. He rapes her regularly. And still rapes her today, ten years later. I am sitting on the bed – round logs covered with a few potato bags. It must hurt. Its hard to love the children that are his but she does her best. None of them have died. When it is rainy she must beg known killers to take her children to keep them dry.

She has worked to build something like a house. She has a small garden outside to feed her family. If she leaves him she will have nothing. Her husband keeps her from being raped by others. Without him, no ‘decent’ man would take her in. She’d be alone and most likely raped by other Interhamwe living in the area. There really aren’t any options.

After talking with her we walked away and left her there.



“The militia told one of the boys to rape the girls who were there. All the boys and girls made noise and the militia killed them using pangas and their bodies were piled up. Another group came seeking assistance and all of us who had not been killed were dispersed. I went back home and that evening one of the men who had come to remove the bodies raped me all night and came back the next day with his friends who all raped me. The militia on the way back from looting would drop by to rape me.

I was told to drink all the blood of the Hutus who had been killed. I was told to lick the blood because it had been shed from my brothers. One traffic soldier took me away from these militia and he made me his wife back home. He put one militia in charge of me and he would cook for me. The traffic man was given a transfer and another militia who lived nearby took me to his home for a wife. No other militia was allowed to touch me and this annoyed them.”

-Muhinyuza Claire Alphonsine

Today was the first day I know I was exposed to tb.

Odette is living with six children in a small two room house. She has tb. Three of the children spend their days selling cigarettes and biscuits on the street to make money for the family.

I know I can't stay with her. She lives on the edge of the capital in a small room alongside other single rooms in a maze of crumbling cement walkways. Occasionally there is a hole to the side that is used as a bathroom. The smell is unbearable. This can't be good for someone who already has a compromised immune system.

She tells us her brother is living in Canada but she doesn't know where he is or how to find him. He is the only one who might look after her children once she's gone.

Every day a man who raped her walks by her house. He lives down the street.





“My husband was killed along with our three sons and the rest of us ran away to the bushes. They finally found us hiding in the forest and they took us to river Nyabarongo. They told us that before throwing us in the river they needed to know sexually how Tutsis are. Several of them raped me in front of my children and then they raped all my girls while I watched. After about three hours of this hideous act they started throwing us in the river. I struggled and swam and the waves threw me out of the water but they followed me, seriously beating me and cut me with machetes everywhere then threw me back in the same river hoping I had died. This went on about three times and every time I would come on land this group of Interhamwe would beat me and throw me back in. With God’s providence the fourth time the waves threw me without any struggle in a remote place called Mugina and there were no Interhamwe.

I gave birth to a child but I have never been happy when I look at him because he reminds me of the seven children I lost to the same people that produced him.”

-Mukakinani Savera

This morning we went to speak with a woman who's left leg was amputated during the genocide. She seemed fine while we were sitting outside but when we moved inside she needed about 15 minutes, doubled over, before she could begin. She was obviously in pain – hard to tell if it was her uterus or a headache but she went from being doubled over and arching back holding her temples and covering her eyes. Alexis told me it was pain from the genocide and then we also found that she was suffering from Malaria.







I had assumed that Dorothe is Alexis' mother.

Today I found out she is actually Alexis' aunt. Alexis and Fraterne and Paterne are orphans from the genocide. Emmanuel is also an orphan. And the boy they call maddog they found wandering in the streets. This means in addition to her own seven children, Dorothe is responsible for four nephews and child she doesn't know.

A Rwandan man named Theodore pays for Germaine and Fraterne to study at University. I would like to find a way for Alexis to study as well. He wants to be a doctor and he deserves the opportunity to be one.







I wish I could have stayed with Marie Claire longer and I promised to return. I wish I could have left her with something but I understand it would only encourage her neighbors to search her house looking for things to steal. Without locks on her door there isn't much she can do. It is better to have nothing. Perhaps they will get tired of looking.

My first night with her I recorded our conversation when the neighborhood chief came to challenge us. Emmanuel saw what I was doing and it made us both smile. I'm not sure what good we thought we were doing but it felt good to be doing something. I never would have given my passport to him and he was quite surprised when I encouraged him to call the police.

A neighbor insisted on lending her a sheet so that I wouldn't have to sleep on the floor. Why don't they give her this sheet if they have it to spare? I'm ok. I can live how she lives. I need to know how it is that people are living, what their life is like. If there are only potato sacks to lie on then that is good enough for me. I have the luxury of returning to my bed in a few months. This reality is theirs; I am only borrowing it. Already the two orphans are sleeping in someone else's house so there are only 5 us on the dirt floor instead of 7.

This morning before I left, Emmanuel went into the bedroom to get something. When he came back he gifted me a beautiful ceramic vase. Some time ago when he had been looking through the dump for things to sell or eat a muzungu had felt sorry for him and had given him this vase that she had just bought, telling him to sell it for money. He felt it was wrong to sell such a special gift and told me that the vase was too beautiful for the house he lives in. He asked me to take it so the vase could have a suitable house and asked only that I find beautiful flower to put in it.





“One farmer took me into his home and promised to take care of me since I was very pregnant but he raped me all night and all day.

After three days, I could not take it any longer and I said I could not give this man any more pleasure of pleading and I said I would rather die running on the road than in that man’s house. I had also got message that most probably my five children and husband had been killed. I escaped, hoping to go to my uncles place but I learned of his death on my way there.

I felt that I was going to give birth any time so I went to a nearby clinic in Shyrongi but the nurse refused to admit me, saying they were killing any Tutsis in the clinic. I could neither go back home because this house had been destroyed completely.

I went to the bush and that is where I delivered the child alone and for many days I survived by eating raw food, running up and down in the bush . . .”

-Mukankubana Veneranda

Two weeks after we visited her, Setiba died at her home from infections related to HIV. During the last months of her life a women's organization provided her with food and money to pay for a helper in her home in hopes of offering her some dignity in dying.

Many of the women infected with HIV during the genocide are not as lucky.

