

International Journal of Human Rights Education

Volume 4
Issue 1 *Decolonial Human Rights and Peace
Education: Recognizing and Re-envisioning
Radical Praxes*

Article 11

2020

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Recommended Citation

Deck, Liliana. (2020) . "Becoming Rwandan: Education, Reconciliation, and the Making of a Post-Genocide Citizen by S. Garnett Russell," *International Journal of Human Rights Education*, 4(1) . Retrieved from <https://repository.usfca.edu/ijhre/vol4/iss1/11>

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Book Review

Becoming Rwandan: Education, Reconciliation, and the Making of a Post-Genocide Citizen by

S. Garnett Russell

Rutgers University Press, 2020, 272 pages

\$28.95 (paperback)

ISBN: 978-1-9788-0286-5

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In *Becoming Rwandan*, S. Garnett Russell provides a rigorous and detailed account of the Rwandan experience of incorporating global frameworks to local settings as the country navigates the post-genocide era while being accountable to the international community. With a deep knowledge of the country and its educational system, Russell explores the adaptation of international models to local contexts under the current political climate led by the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), the current ruling political party. This book is a must-read for practitioners and

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scholars exploring the effects of education policy in fragile contexts under a state-driven peacebuilding project.

As I read this book, I had to pause several times, since as a Colombian, it felt too close to home, too raw. Thankfully, readers are in good hands. Russell (2020) honors the pain and suffering of Rwandan society. With a perfect balance of scholarly expertise and empathy, she complicates the narrative by comparing what is being taught in schools with what people are really feeling. *Becoming Rwandan* brings to light the danger of bookending historical periods as discrete events instead of placing them in a continuum of lived experiences that are multigenerational, transnational, and complex. Russell describes how the Rwandan government created a new Rwandan identity by utilizing the educational system as part of the transitional restorative mechanisms for its new generation. Her book reveals how Rwanda's road ahead is multi-pronged and treacherous. The contradictions and tensions are palpable in the data she presents, and she carefully centers her research around the voices of teachers and students interviewed during her year-long fieldwork in Rwanda. Borrowing the term "decoupling" from the field of sociology to address these contradictions, her research concludes that "In Rwanda, decoupling occurs in two forms: where intended policies are not always implemented in the schools, and where the policies when implemented produced unintended consequences that are not aligned with the broader objectives of the regime's peacebuilding project or its desire to maintain power" (p. 20).

Russell's (2020) study critically explores the challenges of peacebuilding through education in the post-genocide era. She achieves this by simultaneously acknowledging the positive aspects and questioning the long-term success of such an approach. The book is organized into six chapters, offering the reader the necessary tools to grasp the magnitude of the challenges faced by the Rwandan peacebuilding project. Throughout, Russell provides a detailed account of the precolonial, colonial and independence educational policies while tying in the current situation. She makes evident the country's treacherous road ahead. She finds that "in seeking to foster a generation focused on a unified and patriotic future

rather than on the ethnically divided past, the (Rwandan) government has incorporated global models of peacebuilding and human rights” (p. 3).

In the first chapter, Russell (2020) provides an overview of the genealogy of the peacebuilding concept. Anchored in the classics, she starts with John Galtung’s (1969) concept of “negative peace” (absence of direct personal violence) in contrast with “positive peace” (absence of indirect structural violence). She brings us to today’s United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals and their prior iterations tying it to Rwanda, examining the connection between peacebuilding and reconciliation processes (p.5). Russell adds to the academic literature by exploring how the adaptation of global educational models can assist a country in post-conflict situations while exposing the tensions and conflicts that arise as a result.

Russell (2020) exposes how Rwanda's colonial past, first under Germany and then under Belgium (1916-1962), has shaped society, including the educational system. She highlights how the colonial powers created division among Rwandans, stating that “Under the Belgians, missionaries had almost complete control over the education system, implementing a system favoring the Tutsi and explicitly discriminating against the Hutu” (p. 9). She highlights how a dual-tier system (ordinary and advanced level schools) and language of instruction still persist today and both are used to exclude, favoring the group in power, and bookended with historical events (p. 11). The first language of instruction was French and now, based on politically-driven curriculum and return migration from Uganda and Tanzania, is English. By presenting an overview of the country’s historical events that include the post-genocide developments, the author provides a historical frame of reference for the reader to understand the transitional justice mechanisms used in Rwanda.

In chapter two, Russell starts by describing what has been done in the transitional justice arena at the international level in post-conflict societies and then offers an introduction to the Rwandan case. Locating the educational systems as one of the three commonly used transitional justice mechanisms along with judicial (retributive) and nonjudicial (restorative) mechanisms, she proceeds to describe each one. She explains that “it is assumed that retributive justice will address the justice requirement, while

restorative justice will promote peace within society” (p. 32), and introduces the reader to the mechanisms for judicial (criminal tribunals) and nonjudicial (truth commissions and reparations) transitional justice. Russell reminds the reader that the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) of 1994 and the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) of 1993 preceded the International Criminal Court (ICC) established in 2002 by the Rome Statute and was ratified by 123 countries as of 2017 (p. 34). She offers comparative examples of transitional justice stories from other countries such as South Africa, Sierra Leone, Perú, and Guatemala. She emphasizes the impact of these processes, stating that “transitional justice is concerned not only with addressing the past but also with promoting a shared future” (p. 29).

In the second part of chapter two, Russell (2020) describes how Rwanda has used legal, nonlegal and educational mechanisms for reconciliation. For the legal mechanisms, she critiques how Rwanda relied on the controversial localized transitional justice mechanism of *gacaca* courts (“justice on the grass” in Kinyarwanda) (p. 47). She notes how this was controversial since despite its efficiency in processing the cases, some scholars agree that *gacaca* were more punitive than conciliatory. Writing about the nonlegal mechanisms, Russell outlines three of the main institutions created in Rwanda: the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission, the National Commission for the Fight against Genocide (designed to refuse “genocide ideology”), and the *ingando* (solidarity) camps. The final part of this chapter introduces the reader to the last category of transitional justice used by the Rwandan government - formal educational mechanisms. This section sets the tone for the rest of the book and Russell’s research. The Rwandan educational mechanisms include policy reforms, curriculum reforms and institutional culture.

Russell peppers her book with interesting details that provide a contextual understanding of the curriculum development processes. For instance, she relates how after the genocide, the Rwandan Ministry of Education placed a moratorium on the teaching of Rwandan history, given the lack of consensus between officials and academics on which version to teach. She exposes the disconnect by explaining that after the moratorium,

the Rwandan government partnered with the University of California, Berkeley and an American non-governmental organization to develop a history curriculum which in the end was not distributed equally. Instead, a condensed and edited version was disseminated with different iterations for O- (“ordinary”) level schools and A- (“advanced”) level schools.

Chapter three introduces the reader to how civic education has evolved from the national to global level. This new version of civic education now includes human rights education, multiculturalism, and diversity education. Russell (2020) exposes the differences before and after the genocide stating that “in the colonial and postcolonial eras, government powers manipulated notions around citizenship and ethnicity to ignite division and violence” (p. 60). Russell goes back to precolonial times to highlight the existence and fluidity of different categories where these groups existed as “social classes,” which were distinguished by socioeconomic status or occupation in terms of those who herded cows (known as Tutsi), farmers (known as Hutu), and hunter gatherers (known as Twa)” (p. 61). To explore civic identity and non-ethnic identity concepts, Russell explores the curriculum and textbooks that are a part of the Rwandan Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning’s Vision 2020 program. Her findings lead her to conclude that “the government promotes a nonethnic identity but at the same time mandates that schools teach about the ‘Tutsi’ genocide” (p. 179). She summarizes the goal of the government to provide “a new Rwandan citizenship” as “the construction of a non-ethnic identity and the promotion of the English language” (p.72)

Russell (2020) is intentional in her sampling, which includes over 500 secondary students spanning 15 schools in three different provinces. Her data provide a strong foundation to support the evidence accounting for regional, linguistic, and multigenerational experiences with genocide and the post-genocide era. Highlighting how the new identities have replaced old ones, she asserts that “boundaries based on new markers, such as language, experience during the genocide (i.e., returnee, survivor), participation in clubs, and scholarships, have replaced the notion of three exclusively and rigidly defined groups (Hutu, Tusti, and Twa)” (p. 97).

Russell (2020) offers strong critiques of the government's policies in chapter four; she states that "many observers of the regime's public commitment to human rights [view it] as cynical and hypocritical, given accusations that the regime has in fact committed numerous human rights violations and abuses" (p. 107). This observation summarizes the author's critique in regard to the Rwandan's adaptation, implementation, and communication of human rights education (HRE). The chapter further delves into how HRE has spread around the world and how the Rwandan government has adopted and implemented this global narrative to the national context. Russell explores curriculum and textbooks unveiling the contradictions present in the incorporation of HRE to the Rwandan peacebuilding process. She observes how HRE rhetoric is used to talk about the past, - the genocide - yet ignores current violations. She uncovers how some human rights have been given priority over others and politicized: "The way in which Rwanda has embraced norms linked to human rights and gender equality helps connect the country to the broader world but does not encourage critical discussion within Rwandan schools of contested issues of the past" (p. 131). She exposes how human rights are oversimplified and discussed in abstract terms to avoid controversial narratives.

In chapter five, Russell (2020) analyzes the Rwandan government's efforts in schools to address the genocide as a part of the reconciliation process. By stating that "reforms in history education, or discussions about how to teach about the violent past, particularly the recent past, are usually contentious in a post-conflict context" (p. 136), she acknowledges the challenges for this ambitious endeavor. Connecting transitional justice, reconciliation, and collective memory, she unapologetically challenges the Rwandan government by affirming that they have "produced an official collective memory around the genocide that might be interpreted by some as forced or manipulated to serve the interests of the state" (p. 135). Russell continues her critique by explaining how Rwanda's own *kubona* (reconciliation) does not match the ideal global model because "this version of reconciliation is more akin to thin reconciliation which involves only coexistence, rather than to a thick reconciliation process that involves true introspection and forgiveness" (p. 180). She goes even further by asserting

that “despite the monumental efforts of the government to re-create an imagined narrative of the genocide while wielding the threat of imprisonment for genocide ideology, collective memories, intergenerational memories, and counternarratives live on the minds of students and teachers” (p. 178).

In the final chapter, Russell (2020) expands her argument that the “how” of the peacebuilding project in Rwanda is full of contradictions and nuances. Despite achieving substantial improvement in the development goals that include access to healthcare and education for most Rwandans, along with gender equality, Russell reminds us that there are voices being silenced under the implementation of these peacebuilding efforts. Russell closes her book by highlighting Rwandans’ optimism and trust in the development efforts of the government. This becomes evident in the words of Innocent, a student, who states, “for now there is *peace (amahoro)*, but in ten years it will be even better than today because the whole world aims at *development*, and Rwanda will be much more developed than today. The future is so bright” (p. 183). Russell concludes with her central thesis that “The lived realities and perceptions of teachers and students often do not correspond with the government’s prescribed narrative, demonstrating the complexities of a state-mandated project for peace and reconciliation” (p. 192).

I write these words with caution. While I am conveying my own perspective about what I consider an outstanding piece of scholarly research, it is not lost on me that the inconceivable happened to Rwandans. The wounds of the genocide are present every day of their lives and will be for generations to come. This book provides another perspective to understand the post-genocide experiences of Rwandans and the educational journey of a country that is trying to heal from unimaginable horror. As a Colombian who has experienced and witnessed the horrors of war and internal conflict, I appreciate Russell’s acknowledgement of her positionality while doing research in Rwanda.

Russell’s book questions the use of the Rwandan educational system as part of their peacebuilding project. Her field work, interviews, surveys, and observations expose clearly how the curriculum conflicts with the

realities on the ground. In other words, her research can be interpreted as taking the pulse of the silences. She allows the reader to eavesdrop on what is not being said in public spheres. It is these silences that cause me to marvel at Russell's adept use of academic research to uncover the complex layers of rebuilding a new Rwandan identity while utilizing international frameworks of peacebuilding and reconciliation. I read this book as a cautionary tale of what other countries emerging from violence and conflict, like Colombia, can do as they incorporate transitional justice models into their educational systems.

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