



Introduction

Narrative in the Aftermath of Mass Atrocity

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I.1 Conflict Narratives

During the apex of many incidents of mass violence, those involved could not be more intimately connected: A woman encounters her childhood sweetheart as a killer; a child soils his clothes with the blood of relatives; families that lived side by side peacefully for generations are persuaded to turn on one another; a dominant group persecutes and drives out their politically marginalized neighbors. Lives ended or overturned become defined by that violence as much as those wielding its tools – and all suffer the wounds.

What could possibly inspire people to turn on one another this way? Surprisingly often, the spark that ignites such destruction-among-the-intimate is simply narrative persuasion, wielded as a weapon, thrown on the tinder of long-cultivated animosities. Radio Mille Collines in Rwanda infamously broadcast messages to the populace that dehumanized the Tutsi minority and encouraged their killing, preparing the ground for genocide planners to move in and make the genocide a reality (Power 2013). Today, social media platforms serve as a new venue to create monsters – Twitter, by encouraging simplicity, impulsivity, and incivility (Ott 2017) and Facebook (and Instagram), through its enclosures of opinion and failures in addressing strategic disinformation (see Sunstein 2018; Vaidhayanathan 2018). An important example of the way that social media narratives can translate into genocide comes from a damning UN report on atrocities committed in Myanmar. The Human Rights Council found that Facebook had significant responsibility for the violence:

Facebook has been a useful instrument for those seeking to spread hate, in a context where, for most users, Facebook is the Internet. Although improved in recent months, the response of Facebook has been slow and ineffective. The extent to which Facebook posts and messages have led to real-world discrimination and violence must be independently and thoroughly examined. The mission regrets that Facebook is unable to provide country-specific data about the spread of hate speech on its platform, which is imperative to assess the adequacy of its response.

(UNHRC 2018, para 74)

Following publication of this report, Facebook banned the account of the country's top general, Min Aung Hlaing, along with seventeen other accounts, an Instagram account (also owned by Facebook), and fifty-two Facebook pages originating from Myanmar's military. Taken together, these social media accounts had twelve million followers (McLaughlin 2018).

To illustrate the power of conflict narratives, we do not need to focus exclusively on the perpetrators of genocide but can draw an example from the ideological underpinnings of the allied struggle for freedom in World War II. The US government used comic book mythology to boost military enlistment and augment popular support for US participation in the war overseas, while depicting a nation of racial harmony back at home (Hirsch 2021). Comic books served as perfect vehicles for these messages because of their "broad popularity, comprehensibility, emphasis on raw emotion and a distinct lack of subtlety" (Hirsch 2004, 449). The government exerted influence through a quasi-official agency called the War Writers Board. This Board commissioned stories, reviewed plots, and helped construct many of the well-known superheroes known today (now largely circulated via Hollywood blockbusters). The Board sought to galvanize support for the war by amplifying the wickedness of Axis powers. In 1944, the War Writers Board worked to ensure that Americans saw Japanese and Germans as "incurably hostile" (Hirsch 2004, 462). Consistent with this goal, when the authors of the original storyboards distinguished between Nazi leaders and the average German person, the Board intervened, requesting that both leaders and ordinary German citizens be portrayed as paradoxically sub- and/or grotesquely super-human.

The simple trope, common to propagandists and political analysts alike, of associating entire peoples with their governments can have far-reaching consequences. Simply put, associating citizens inseparably with their criminal states makes it easier to kill them. The brutality of a war

closely follows the success of propaganda that first makes a government a political enemy and then connects an entire people to their government. This connection, once implanted, has a persistent afterlife.

As the world has seen to its horror again and again, stripping people of narrative agency is often but a first step toward their physical annihilation. Regarding large group conflict, John Paul Lederach (2010) writes, “A people’s story is marginalized or, worse, destroyed by the dominant culture, and by this act, meaning, identity, and a place in history are lost” (p. 146). In the context of war, those in power target certain groups as unworthy of consideration, beyond even humanity, while narrating themselves as noble and decent, embodying a pure, uncorrupted nation, assuming the mantle of liberators. These mythologies remind and reassure the story-creators and their followers of their inherent goodness, while justifying violence. Once the mythology takes hold, “the rules for everyday life change,” and torture, killing, ethnic cleansing, rape, and the imposition of hunger, once viewed as incomprehensible and abhorrent in peacetime, become legitimate responses to violence (Jabri 1996, 6–7).

It is abundantly clear that narrative can be used as a tool to construct enemies and facilitate violence; but what about the *aftermath* of mass atrocity? Does everyone put down their narrative weapons when the physical destruction has stopped? In this book, we argue that narratives continue to be deployed by groups coming to terms with the aftermath of mass violence. For regimes, the stories at the end of violence are as strategically crafted as those that legitimate its onset. Believing that clarity brings stability and peace, those struggling with the legacies of violence erect and patrol narrative boundaries. Legalism thrives on these binaries and needs to sort parties into categories to enact justice. The most self-evident way this sorting occurs is through the requirement of precisely defining the parties to a claim; the plaintiffs of a class action lawsuit, for example, must each formally enact their participation with notarized signatures on a page, bringing into being an unambiguous category of “victims,” and the defendant(s) must be similarly identified with as little ambiguity as possible. But post-atrocity boundary-making goes well beyond the courts. A new regime deepens binaries when it reinforces its legitimacy by doling out services to those labeled victims, punishing those deemed perpetrators, and pinning medals on heroes. Just as it is possible to see narratives deployed in the onset and justification of violence, there are ways to evaluate storied narratives in the aftermath of mass atrocity, with implications for both resilience and potential returns to violence.

Rooted originally in semiotics and in literary theory, narrative analysis provides a crucial lens through which to understand and engage with conflict (Federman 2016). Listening to how groups describe themselves, others, and their conflicts informs us about how people might act.¹ Conflict discourses differ from resilience discourses. So long as the former remains dominant, positive peace remains elusive. Understanding the “narrative architecture” of a conflict need not be overly difficult just because we have entered the supposedly haphazard world of story (Bruner 1990). Conflict environments involve the simplest of all narratives: Polarized characterizations of victims and victimizers, binary value frameworks (good/evil), false (but on rare occasions, accurate) attribution of bad intention, and thin plot lines that refer to only a few events, while pointedly omitting others (Cobb 2013). These narratives emphasize linear causality and their tellers demonstrate little or no reflexivity. In psychiatric terms, they have marked tendencies toward narcissism. In societal terms, they can result in carnage.

Scholars participate in these dynamics when they create victim studies and then make a separate field for perpetrator studies. These realms of scholarship enrich our understanding of victimhood and perpetration in their distinct terms but, unless we keep participants of mass violence in conversation, we entirely misunderstand and miscommunicate the systemic dynamics of mass violence. Furthermore, can we be confident that our designations are correct? Young black men targeted in the United States for decades by prejudice and policy are only now slowly receiving a backstory and a new narrative framing. Every regime and each generation exudes tremendous confidence in its categorizations of groups, past and present. Yet, over time, they almost all come crumbling down, usually after tremendous damage has been done.

What is the alternative? Scholars, practitioners, and citizens alike can interrupt cycles of violence by generating “better-formed stories,” those that recognize the interconnectedness of all parties (Cobb 2013). This book advances such work. By illuminating the narrative structures that set the stage for war, we can catch ourselves when our aftermath studies follow the same trends.

The deeper challenge of peacebuilding involves, as Lederach (2010) puts it, “how to reconstitute, or re-story, the narrative and thereby re-story people’s place in history” (p. 146). When a regime topples, it

1 See Cobb (2013), Ross (2007), and Sluzki (2004).

loses its narrative control. In the aftermath of the fall, individual, familial, and cultural stories have been interrupted or destroyed. Then transitional justice swoops in and, with it, justice frameworks, stories, and vocabulary fill the void once occupied by violence. We bring attention to these post-violence settings because the clarity and certainty that oversimplified stories provide can also come at a cost, including the possibility of refueling the discord, stereotyping, and dehumanization at the origin of violence.

I.2 Post-conflict Narrative Landscapes

Post-conflict stories can thrive on binaries as much as the pre-war and wartime stories, with often unexpected and usually disastrous consequences. In an effort to make things right for those who have suffered and to hold accountable those responsible for the violence, justice narratives can inadvertently lay the groundwork for the next violent episode. The perpetual sorting and re-sorting of societies and groups into neat categories of victim, perpetrator, and hero flatten the complexities of violence and the conditions in which it occurs (Enns 2012).

We all-too readily evoke public sympathy for the victims, anger or hatred toward the villains, and fear for ourselves (Loseke 2017). Hannah Arendt (1998) warns that these binary depictions of conflict lead back to totalitarianism via total responses toward those who enacted the harm. Once villains are seen as pure evil, any response we have to their actions is justified. Primo Levi (2017) was also concerned with such flattening and took great care to articulate the complexities of his experience as a victim of the Holocaust. Louis Kriesberg (2003) makes this argument pointedly: “If people in the enemy collectivity are viewed as subhuman, even denigrated as vermin, they are more easily subjected to gross human rights violations and even extermination attempts. If enemy people are regarded as evil, then extreme methods are justified to destroy them.”

These authors, and others, emphasized these points because they knew that publics embrace simplicity more readily than complexity. Publics tend toward stereotyping, misapprehension, and oversimplification. We like to think that as a whole humanity has become wiser today than it was during World War II, yet studies show that we are just as (if not more) susceptible to gross exaggerations and lies. An MIT study published in *Science* revealed that between 2006 and 2017, “fake news” reached more people on Twitter than factual information. To be specific, tweets based on disinformation reached 1,000–100,000 whereas factual tweets rarely

reached 1,000 individuals (Vosoughi et al. 2018). Fake news inspired emotions of “fear, disgust, and surprise” upon reaching its audiences, reflecting the dramatic constructions of the reality the stories portrayed.

Simplified narratives portray groups as uniform, bounded entities, with a coherent structure of decision-making and shared political aspirations. When peacemakers promote more nuanced understandings to build bridges between groups, their efforts may be rebuffed. A claim for collective rights or a peace agreement gains no traction if the public on which it depends for sympathy and activist outrage sees in the claimants a flaw or a failure to correspond with an ideal. These efforts then have no effect in changing conditions of violence and oppression. Moreover, as Niezen (2020a, ch. 5) shows with reference to the Tuaregs of northern Mali, popular images and stories surrounding justice claimants can readily lump them together with their oppressors. A misdirected, ideal-seeking response to justice claims can cast human rights activists and peace brokers in the same mold as violent insurrectionists or, at the very least, as their apologists (Niezen 2020a, 198).

Legalism encourages this framework through an adversarial process that orients us toward locating and punishing singular perpetrators (see Osiel 1999). The energy that moves legal processes forward, Drumbl (2016) observes, derives from the binaries of legal iconography: “Victims are to be pure and ideal; perpetrators are to be unadulterated and ugly. International criminal law hinges upon these antipodes which, in turn, come to fuel its existence” (p. 218). The cleaner the binary, the easier the legal task.² Judges and juries struggle less with their decisions and receive more public support for them when good and evil remain clearly delineated.

In clear-cut cases, meting out punishment may lead to celebrations over justice done, and victims may feel further legitimized by the perpetrator’s capture, but has any of this helped ensure future security? Are communities in a punitive aftermath to mass atrocity necessarily more resilient? Have those who caused harm been called upon to help those they harmed? Retributive justice has, as Lederach (2010) puts it, “an abysmal record for destroying rather than rebuilding the very thing most needed for sustaining the platforms capable of delivering dynamic, just peace: public confidence and authentic public dialogue” (p. 60).

2 See Janicki (2015) and Tannen (1998). Courtroom discursive norms particularly reflect these dynamics; witnesses are asked yes/no questions that invite binary characterizations (Philips 1998).

Retributive justice has its place; perpetrators of war crimes must be stopped. But expecting their trials to heal intergroup fractures expects too much.

Even truth and reconciliation commissions oriented toward mitigating some of the limitations of trials by offering amnesty and a platform for testimony tend to promote the binaries of truth/not truth and of victims/perpetrators. The result could well be a wider repertoire of narrative possibilities; however, these environments often find themselves bound and framed by the same neat delineations as legal process. Rather than adding complexity, they often simply turn our attention from the perpetrator to the victim. The recent turn toward “victim studies” reflects a will toward certainty through this shift of interest from one category of actor (the perpetrator) to another (the victim). In 2016, for example, the *International Journal of Transitional Justice* dedicated an entire issue to victims.

Yet as victimhood amplifies publicly, so too does the perceived wickedness of the perpetrator, even though scholarship continues to demonstrate the ordinariness of most perpetrators of mass violence (Fujii 2009; Owens et al. 2013). The public need for a perpetrator who is every bit as evil as the victim is innocent drowns out the ordinariness of those who called for violence.³ In other words, the more sympathetic the victim, the more villainous the perpetrator, and the more unrelenting the hero must become. Groups jockey for position, trying to push back on narrative frames that omit their role (hero or victim) or demonize them as the perpetrator. Even genocide and transitional justice studies readily mold to the limitations of transitional justice in practice. This means that scholars and practitioners alike must be vigilant regarding how binaries operate in their own field as much as among violence-ravaged communities.

This is important, albeit treacherous, work. Understandably, our responses to horrific violence include those of shock, outrage, and disgust, often followed by feelings of revenge. It is a healthy reflex and one we often associate with virtue. Only an evil person would abide this horror. To lead societies beyond revenge cycles, however, requires moving beyond the feelings of revenge into disappointment and perhaps pessimism about humanity’s potential, but then eventually on to curiosity and compassion, which generate productive responses.

3 See Christie (1986), Federman (2018), and Harré and Van Langenhov (1991).

We are aware that our work is fraught with the risk of being (possibly strategically) misconstrued. The attempt to address complexity, to point out dangerous oversimplifications, and to elevate emotional responses to mass violence can be seen as based in sympathy with those who caused harm. We reply to critics who wish to argue along these lines that conflicts *have become* violent only with the help of these polarizations. While one may feel righteous in the belief that one has located and punished the perpetrator, this punitive response may be paving the way back to violence. We need to find better ways to show our concern for victims. Otherwise, in the post-atrocity narrative mayhem, culpable parties too often find themselves expunged, victims feel pressured to present themselves as pure, and perpetrators struggle for sympathy as they attempt to complicate their storylines. Whatever the reasons for the stereotypical discourses emerging from violence, discourses about participants in conflict will either help interrupt their cycles of violence or hasten their entry back in.

In other words, collective frameworks for each role – victim, perpetrator, and hero – tend to narratively sort people into categories in post-conflict contexts. When stories of complexity disrupt these frameworks, the ideal types pull the story back into a stereotypically recognizable shape. Of course, narrative traditions may vary in terms of story genres and ways of recounting roles, but if a group seeks international recognition, the predominance of western legalism in the spaces providing recognition encourages conflict parties to articulate their experiences in terms of simplified binaries.

A discussion of these three primary conflict roles (victim, perpetrator, and hero) makes visible some underlying narrative conceptions that guide how we understand and respond to violence.

I.3 Victims

The concept of the victim, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, made a migration at some point in the seventeenth century from the Latin origin, *victima*, or a sacrificial animal, to a meaning that is more recognizable to contemporary ears, referring to a person who has been oppressed, ruined, or seriously injured by a power beyond their control. Things shifted again, more dramatically this time, with the late twentieth century's politics of identity and the prominence of the idea that being called something, a name or designation that is not one's own, is itself a source of oppression. The concept of the "victim" has sometimes

acquired agency and been replaced by the term “survivor” (sometimes written as “Survivor” with an honorific upper-case “S”). The word took on this meaning in the post–World War II era with reference to those who were subjected to the horrors that define the time, events like the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, and more personalized, stigma- and isolation-inducing traumas like rape and incest. More than the term “victim,” it tends to be self-referential – as in, “I am a Survivor, not a victim” – making it a positive source of personal and group identity. (We will show later in this Introduction that the perpetrator identity lacks this narrative progression.) The migration from “victim” to “Survivor” is much more than a footnote in conceptual history; it plays out in the now-global politics of recognition that accompany efforts toward post-atrocity acknowledgment, apology, and restitution.

Public reception of images and testimony is central to victim–Survivor transitions. Sympathy acquires currency and political authority when it responds to “ideal victims,” those who are innocent and vulnerable, and has more difficulty attaching to more politically adept survivors (Christie 1986; Duggan 2019). Those who move beyond victimhood to Survivorship activism may be admired for their fortitude or even resented, but in either case they can no longer be idealized as voiceless victims. In renditions of violence, “women and children” became almost one word. Yet, in recent decades, women have emerged as a political force. They challenged Portland police in the United States, the power grab by Belarus President Alexander Grigoryevich Lukashenko, and took up arms alongside men against the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Polish women positioned themselves as agents, not victims, when they protested the Polish court’s uncompromising anti-abortion ruling by marching down cathedral aisles wearing long red dresses and white hats to represent characters in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Those screaming, “My uterus is not your playground” cannot easily be storied as passive victims and as such they may find themselves labeled as perpetrators or terrorists. This is exactly what occurred: Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the deputy prime minister and leader of the ruling Law and Justice party in Poland, called these women criminals and enemies of the state while simultaneously mobilizing militias against them (Santora et al. 2020). But these movements, even if targeted at home, have transnational power. Many around the world have watched in admiration as Afghani women stood in front of the Taliban taking over their cities holding signs that said, “Education, Work, Freedom” and “We Are All Together, We Broke Oppression,” referring to their previous overthrow of the regime. Their efforts are not

without risks, as evidenced by the violent crackdowns that followed. Even influential mass protest has its costs.

Moving from victim to survivor is widely seen as critical for personal resilience, but publics prefer helplessness in their victim narratives. The most idealized victims are voiceless, like the Syrian child (Aylan Kurdi) on the beach or, really, almost anyone dead because they cannot story themselves. Any *collective* shift to survivor identity re-stories them as agentic, and hence as potential political rivals.

So, what is the alternative? To stay a victim? Remaining in, or maintaining focus on, the victim role is costly to any movement. In her work with Palestinians in Israel, Fakhira Halloun (2019) notes the cost to the community of its refusal to move from victim to agent. Without agency, she argued, the community surrenders its power to shape its own future. Victimhood as a political strategy leaves communities unable to see their own potential, waiting to be saved, or used in a proxy war, in this case between the Middle East and the West.

Victims – so identified by self or others – can become the subjects of compassion, but also of fundamental misunderstanding. They become subjected to what Miranda Fricker (2007) refers to as epistemic injustice, that is, they are wronged in their capacity of knowing, subjected to assumptions, biases, and stereotypes that take away their visibility and voice. Their ability to take part in epistemic practice – to convey knowledge to others and to discursively make sense of their experience – is compromised. They constitute a focal point for persistent myths about the aftermath of mass atrocity, unable to story the violence as they see fit. When presenting the words of Holocaust survivors shared during interviews, Federman (2021) found that even scholars challenged their words, making comments like, “I know survivors and they don’t say things like that.” In fact, they did make these comments – and many others that made people uncomfortable simply because they did not conform to norms.

The ideas and inclinations of victims who experienced the same mass atrocity are sometimes assumed, without evidence, to follow a particular trajectory, based purely on thought about what it must be like for them. Some story formulas are created by well-intentioned groups like the Shoah Foundation that, through the mass collection of testimony, prescribed the Holocaust survivor narrative. The quick training of interviewees and the formulaic questions asked created a Holocaust narrative norm. You can see inexperienced interviewers rush survivors through what seem like meandering stories to what they have been told is

important. When this happens, we suppress what they want to tell us, treating them more as specimens than experts. The interview as recorded may generate tremendous sympathy but at the cost of narrative agency. This impressively large testimony project then informs how people hear and tell other stories.

Most of us assume that sympathy is, without qualification, beneficial to the recipient but, from the perspective of narrative, it can have inimical effects on the effort to understand the experience and consequences of mass atrocity. A starting point in sympathy for victims stimulates imaginaries about the horrors they must have endured and what their suffering must be like, then and now. Ideas are readily projected onto them about what it means to experience, suffer, and heal from mass collective violence. Sympathy leads observers to exercise their imaginations, to spin out fantasies about what it must be like for victims but, at the same time, from this point of imaginary authority, to speak over and repress their agency.

Listeners may assume that survivors developed emotional connections to others, such as siblings, with shared experiences. But family and community relationships are often dramatically strained, if not torn apart, by the common experience of violence and memory of violence. Sometimes they see their loss, their powerlessness and suffering, in each other's eyes. Violence ruptures relations between victims, in ways that are difficult to overcome, even in the transition to Survivorship.

Victim narration offers an anchorage to what many assume to be truth, over and against the distortions of official histories and unofficial subterfuge. Victims are sometimes assumed to possess the collective means for overcoming the effects of violence through their testimony and insights into reconciliation. Having lived, surviving the extremes of human depravity, they hold the key to redemption for others. They inspire the idea that victims – and nations – heal through public narrations of traumatic experience. Addressing this point, Dian Million (2013) points to an “internationally recognized economy of justice” in which “the victims of traumatic events suffer recurrent wounding if their memory/pain is not discharged” (p. 2). Through public unburdening, especially in truth commissions, the injuries to individual and collective psyches are widely assumed to be overcome and restored to health or at least eased. Victims are assumed to heal, if not flourish, through the cathartic effects of giving testimony. And from this point of personal redemption, they are able to heal others, to redeem communities and nations. They impel their listeners toward constructing a new national

history/memory and creating a testimonial foundation for national reconciliation (Niezen 2020b, 154).

But the lines of communication between victims and sympathetic listeners are of necessity broken from the start, because no words sufficiently close the distance. This makes survivors particularly vulnerable to the imposition of stories *about* them, presented as narratives *by* them. Sujatha Fernandes' *Cultivated Stories* (2017) shows how various narrative constructions are privileged and advanced while other stories that don't fit the narrative are sidelined. Ronald Niezen's *Truth and Indignation* (2017) illustrates this point with examples drawn from Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission on Indian Residential Schools, in which film screenings and model testimony made up the "templates and exclusions" that produced preferred narratives by those giving testimony for the first time. If, for example, the survivor dwelled on their experience of unrelenting horrors and did not close with a story of redemption, of rediscovering language and traditions, finding religion, reconnecting with family, or even simply entering a twelve-step program, a commissioner might well intervene before they left the microphone with encouragement for them to seek some form of professional help. This recommendation then substituted for the survivors' own narration of hope. Leaving one's listeners with something positive and ideally personally redemptive was an essential part of the template of testimonial practice.

The most direct challenge that victims face is not being storied by their sympathizers but silenced by those who stand opposed to their coming-into-prominence. Those who, one way or another, position themselves politically in opposition to victims will often try to undo sympathy toward them with a rival narrative. One of the ways this occurs is through what we refer to as the *hegemony of the single instance*. This involves acts of persuasion that isolate an incident and apply it generally to all who would be included under the rubric of "victim" from a specific context of violence. Former Italian interior minister Matteo Salvini was particularly adept at this form of narrative. Undoing the tremendous sympathy that followed from images of the death by drowning of five-year-old Aylan Kurdi in 2015 (whom we just mentioned as a silent victim), for example, Salvini focused attention on a rape committed by a group of immigrant youths. The single instance, the one act of violence, then stood in for refugees in their entirety, without situating the incident in the contest of national crime statistics, which reveal a lower incidence of violent crime among refugees than for the general population. The hegemony of the single instance re-stories refugees, adds a "yes, but" to

anything they might have to say, and smothers the publics' inclinations toward sympathetic response with concerns about safety. Even child-victims become suspect: "Yes, they may be innocent and suffering now, *but* what will they become when they're older?"

Imposing a shift in public perception from seeing a group as victims to treating them as perpetrators is a longstanding political stratagem, but a risky one, that could easily skid out of control. The agents of this transformation could well be themselves the subject of public rejection, if not criminal prosecution. We shall see how the Polish government fares in its attempts to target thousands of Polish women as terrorists when they advocate for themselves non-violently. We shall see how Belarus President Lukashenko and Russia's Vladimir Putin fare in the face of thousands of protestors in the streets. To most of the world, their transition to the status of war criminals is now – with good reason – complete. What remains to be seen is how wide the narrative field of perpetration will extend beyond them, and with what consequences.

I.4 Perpetrators

Our common understanding of perpetrators is diminished by two tendencies. One is the inclination to see perpetrators as inhuman monsters. Hollywood, or, better, the human response to the stark simplicity of much Hollywood storytelling, may be partly responsible for the heightened imaginaries surrounding evil. Plotlines driven by unthinking, unfeeling perpetrators standing in comforting contrast to the struggles of a sympathetic hero, are repeated in countless forms in popular entertainment. Cumulatively, this creates and feeds public expectations of what a perpetrator *should* be. Once confirmed by authorities, the perpetrator label justifies a variety of responses. This could include incarceration, execution, or other court-mandated restrictions of life and liberty.

The structural conditions of impunity for mass atrocity in international law constitute a major obstacle to understanding perpetrators. Under circumstances in which senior officials responsible for war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide escape indictment, attention turns instead to the instruments at the end of their orders, the bombs and "ordinary" killers that lay waste to civilian lives. Certain images then get anchored to represent this unnamed, abstract perpetrator – a railway, a machete, a chemical weapon – leaving invisible the humans responsible for their deployment.

There is resistance to considering the stories of perpetrators as valid under circumstances in which victims have – at long last, some say – been given voice. Perpetrators, as Saira Mohamed (2015) aptly puts it, “have no need to bear witness; they are the ones who have controlled the narrative and silenced the oppressed” (p. 1177). A blind spot follows from this compensatory narrative of historical voice, which presents victims as having emerged out of hegemonic conditions of invisibility. To give perpetrators attention in these circumstances is to undo the hard-fought emergence of survivors as active agents in their re-telling of (usually national) histories. Sometimes, when we hand over the proverbial mic to perpetrators, we are asked: “Why do we devote any sympathetic attention to the individuals responsible for unjustifiable bloodshed, and what right do they have for their pain and their wounds to be recognized and respected?” (Mohamed 2015, 1164). Yet, there is a growing literature on perpetrators and their trauma.⁴ Mohamed, for example, pays close attention to the concept of trauma to shift attention from the close association of trauma with victimhood to include perpetrators in the experience of trauma. She depicts perpetrators “as fully thinking beings” who often experience their crimes as traumatic. The “commission of the crime itself causes a psychological injury to the perpetrator, which can result in particular adverse physical, social, or emotional consequences” (Mohamed 2015, 1162).

While scholars increasingly turn their attention to perpetrator studies, we must not overlook the documentarians who, no doubt inspired by Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* (1986), offer us some of the most haunting and intimate looks at those who commit genocide. Rob Lemkin and Thet Sambath, for example, directed *Enemies of the People* (2010), which shares interviews with various perpetrators of the Cambodia genocide. Joshua Oppenheimer, Christine Cynn, and an anonymous Indonesian directed *The Act of Killing* (2012) and later Oppenheimer directed *The Look of Silence* (2014), which introduces viewers to some of the perpetrators of the Indonesian genocide in 1965. *Fambul Tok* (2011), directed by Sara Terry, shares local ceremonies in Sierra Leone that bring together victims and perpetrators to share their experiences. The popularity and impact of these films seem to qualify Mohamed’s point when she says, “as much as perpetrators may have the capacity to bear witness, it is not clear that anyone wants to hear them” (Mohamed 2015, 1168).

4 See Knittel and Goldberg (2019). In this volume, see Hinton (Chapter 6), Payne (Chapter 10), and Federman (Chapter 2).

But it remains true that our knowledge of perpetrators tends to be thin. When post-conflict contexts reject the voices of perpetrators, they ironically produce conditions that allow those who enacted the harm to escape public attention, to slip through the net and evade consequences for their actions. The separation of the world into victims and perpetrators, with sympathy and curiosity directed to victims, leaves the perpetrators to quietly remove themselves from the spotlight and escape into the shadows. Unseen, their motives are readily imagined, and take on whatever ideas are projected into their invisibility. In retributive justice systems, if perpetrators are portrayed as flesh and blood, human and flawed, one risks relativism and impunity.

Restorative justice models provide greater flexibility here. These models focus more on identifying and responding to the harm with the participation of all involved parties. Restorative processes offer opportunities for personal growth, healing, and meaningful responses to violence in the aftermath, yet they cannot guarantee these outcomes. What they can offer is a commitment to keeping each actor in the story and to sidestep the binary constructions that invite new ruptures.

I.5 Heroes

Heroes are arguably critical for social functioning. They tell us what values to espouse and what actions to emulate. Simply put, they can be a lighthouse. Heroic icons give us hope for humanity's potential, especially in the face of countless human failures. Because of their potential and magnetism, they are also ripe for manipulation.

There is something almost lazy and self-comforting in the way that publics recognize the qualities of heroism. They don't emulate heroes. Instead, as with victims and perpetrators, they make them abstract and idealized, perhaps to avoid being called upon to perform the extraordinary themselves. We call young men heroes when we send them to war. This helps parents surrender their sons, wives surrender their husbands, and men to offer the ultimate sacrifice of their lives. We see this dynamic in other contexts as well. Calling medical workers "heroes" in the COVID-19 pandemic became an expression of gratitude, but also a means to encourage them to keep going in the absence of state responsibility for their working conditions and personal risk. Some teachers balked at being called "essential workers" for a similar reason. Labeling some as heroes can mask the cowardice of others, including those whose faults they make up for through personal sacrifice. Said another way, the

hero label can distract from those who acted in ways that were decidedly unheroic.

Who names the heroes? Heroes may be self-cultivated, state-cultivated, publicly named, or some combination of these. The art of heroism in this sense involves self-styling, situating oneself as a great and forceful intervenor in a conflict in such a way (the would-be hero hopes) that publics, eager for validation and identity-affirmation, take up their story and elevate their reputation. Churchill's deft handling of print and radio journalists early in his career and through the World War II is a classic example of an effort by someone who pushed themselves into prominence, a type that the British once commonly referred to disparagingly as a "self-publicist." Over and above such disapproval, the positive value given to these efforts is the prize being sought. In the realm of adversarial legal contests, *justice heroes* combine self-promotion with the strategic public outreach that goes with elevating the profile of a legal contest.

When successful, heroes can count on their narratives for only so long. Publics bore, fame dilutes, and a crabs-in-a-bucket re-shifting of narratives pulls down the once victorious and vainglorious, sometimes to the point that they are subjected to categorical repositioning and become *perpetrators* in the historical imagination. The guiding lights of a resplendent nation become the standard-bearers of imperialism.

This dynamic promotes two narrative frames. One is a model of blind devotion, in which those adding complexity to collective narratives are deemed unpatriotic or ungrateful. This encourages cultish behavior around heroes, obscuring for too long decades of sexual predation, embezzlement, or other crimes. Or, we actively seek the faults of every heroic person, placing them upon a pedestal with a trap door, ready at any moment to drop them into a pit of social shame. Be forewarned if you find yourself on one.

What might be possible if knowledge of heroic actors was cumulative instead of subtractive? Monuments and counter-monuments could stand side-by-side, representing contested heroes and histories, rather than leaving us caught in a cycle of erasure and replacement. We could understand Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., for example, as simultaneously one of the strongest voices on justice in human history and a man who plagiarized much of his dissertation (Associated Press 1991). Mahatma Gandhi was one of the greatest voices for non-violence and a man who molested his nieces and other girls and women under auspices of maintaining his own sexual purity (Grenier and Schaeffer 1983). This kind of

discordancy makes us uncomfortable. We may wonder if quoting Gandhi means we condone his treatment of these women.

Beyond our personal inquiries, heroic titles have political and economic uses. When regimes cast themselves as heroes, they influence how a conflict is understood by future generations. The heroism of US troops who brought down the Axis powers created space for stories told many times and in many ways. Each of these stories, however, quickly passes over the many horrors committed by allied forces, including detonating two atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the bombing of Dresden, and refusing early intervention in the Holocaust. War heroism in particular often occludes much bloodshed.

Those political powers that have not yet engaged in a conflict often define the conflict in such a way that they can resolve it. In other words, victors define what a win means. We see this when powers sign peace accords that are not embraced by local populations. Too soon, they find their solution undone because it was someone else's solution, that of a dominant power, and not the one that would garner legitimacy or lead to lasting peace.

Then we have a third group, those for whom being cast a hero may save them from being cast the perpetrator. The stakes are high at times, not just in terms of tarnished legacies, but in the form of prison sentences. Slobodan Milosevic upended the International Criminal Court with his lawyerly skill and desperate bombast, portraying himself for an audience in Serbia as a great liberator and hero of the nation.

I.6 Digital Inhumanities

Whereas restorative justice environments resist labels, online spaces propagate them. These labels usually begin prior to and outside of any form of due process when the mere deployment of "perpetrator" (and its various related terminology) leads to the loss of political and economic participation, loss of stature and/or social capital, or even loss of life. In contemporary parlance, this is "calling someone out" or "canceling" them. Accusations alone punitively tarnish reputations.

Even well-intentioned justice campaigns enter dangerous territory when they engage in naming and shaming. The mere label of perpetrator, seen as integral to the justice quest, becomes a blunt instrument that can inflict wide damage. Applied unscrupulously, instead of a descriptor of one's participation, the term becomes a political weapon. Even before

trial, social shaming may annul a lifetime of good works and social or economic contributions.

The label can be further weaponized by those looking to undercut potential threats to power, with social media generating mass audiences for disinformation, distraction, and strategic confusion. Those seeking power will often create “perpetrators” where they factually don’t exist. Examples, unfortunately, abound: Jews, Palestinians, male African American youth, or those labeled “communist,” “gay,” or “unpatriotic.” Syria’s online disinformation campaign against the “White Helmets” – the rescuers who worked in the aftermath of bombing raids – demonstrates such an effort to delegitimize heroic efforts that threaten state power (see Chapter 9 by Niezen). The Syrian/Russian disinformation campaign against the White Helmets zeroed in on bookkeeping irregularities in a context in which trade and services were paid for in cash. The binary logic of narratives means that all one has to do is to score one superficially plausible point – one questionable act by a hero or one positive contribution by an accused perpetrator – and the whole edifice of persuasion wobbles on its foundations.

Those who feel they have (or have historically had) no legitimate political voice also sometimes resort to such tactics. The movements that bring these dynamics to light are critical for advancing social justice and equity. Yet they also create opportunities to leverage the labels of “racist” and “rapist” in order to bring down those who represent the forces that historically held them back. Of course, there *are* racists and there *are* rapists, in all-too great abundance. But when we apply perpetrator categories indiscriminately, we create new victims, individuals targeted for their ethnicity, gender, political affiliations, power, or wealth. We also make accountability of the truly guilty more difficult: With only two choices before us – victim or perpetrator – asserting that the accused “did some good things” can dismantle or distract discussions about the harm they committed. The point being, through the power of social media, *any group* can wield powerful discursive weapons. Anti-social media’s call out culture locks us all in the panopticon as both guard and prisoner. Escaping this mutually imprisoning dynamic requires calling everyone *into* conversation.

Those ultimately responsible for mass crime have the most vested interest in destabilizing victim narratives. One of the best ways to prevent this is to avoid creating fragile narratives from the start. Victims painted as caricatures are relatively easy to diminish. To discredit claims against them, those who called for the violence simply create public mistrust in

victim narratives. Conspiracy theories, fake news, and other forms of propaganda raise suspicions about the reliability of testimony. Erasing or discrediting stories of harm not only casts doubt on the stories, but on the reliability of information more generally. How can we expect survivors to publicly narrate their experience in a media environment that facilitates strategic confusion and activist paralysis? Politically motivated disinformation, of course, has long been with us, including as essential strategies of the Cold War. In *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man*, Michael Taussig (1987) adeptly reveals the epistemic confusion created by colonial control of knowledge, and hence the overturning of society's moral foundations: "When 5,000 slum dwellers were rounded up and held in a stadium, a high official denied that the event had even happened. 'what stadium?' 'what slum dwellers?'" (Taussig 1987: 4).

Just as colonial officials denied evidence in order to discursively erase violent events, social media platforms and other new information technologies (ITs) have now all but universalized the schizophrenia-inducing experience of regular subjection to official lies, to the words, "It wasn't there" and "It never happened." Many find themselves caught between their senses and sense of reason.

Big tech corporations influence what we consume over digital media while, at the same time, facilitating the pollution of our communications ecosystem. The faster and farther spread of falsehoods and vituperations than reasoned discourse on social media is one aspect of this phenomenon (Vosoughi et al. 2018). Readily available apps make "deepfakes" a tool for the masses. Those who bathe in the informational torrent of social media struggle to find the truth they seek; and out of fatigue and despair they all too often allow the current to take them where it will. Comforting narratives position them as a victim or a hero, but never part of the problem. Few people seek narratives that reflect back on them as perpetrators. (Would you?) As a result, we tend to consume authors or media (or leaders) who cast us in the best light. Yet, a deeper part of us knows we have consumed a story half told.

How can we expect victims or survivors to publicly narrate their truths and give listeners insight into their suffering when they must speak from a position of deep informational insecurity? Social media platforms contribute to acts of mass atrocity and their troubled aftermath by facilitating this insecurity. They have served as channels for narratives of inhumanity that (almost predictably) precede acts of genocide. Facebook's involvement in the Myanmar genocide as the platform of choice by which hate crimes were committed, leading up to the mass

killing, dispossession, and displacement of the stateless Rohingya people, is a prominent case in point.

Social media platforms act independently in their capacity to tell stories, or at least certain *kinds of stories*. There are common logics of connectivity, datafication, and convergence at work in social media generally, while each platform controls, coordinates, and mediates “participatory culture” and content in a specific way (Burgess and Green 2018). To retain user engagement, these platforms strategically augment emotional involvement with their content. YouTube, for example, is driven by an algorithm that builds on visual material with increasingly heightened emotions in its subject matter, making it an instrument of *amplification*. Facebook brings together communities around core symbols that act as monuments to collective belonging, creating solidarities and enclosures of belief and knowledge of the world. And Twitter forms networks of shared belief that then become pitted against one another in a pattern described by Brian Ott as “the repeated production and consumption of simple messages, which endlessly redirect our attention elsewhere via hyperlinks, reshapes human cognition in ways that nurture simple-mindedness and promote short attention-spans,” ultimately resulting in “mean and malicious discourse” (Ott 2017: 61). For its part, Google’s PageRank algorithm identifies sites that already have broad attention and connections to other websites, making it an ideal tool for *retelling*. Platforms, in other words, tell stories through their structurally designed preferences and selectivities.

Whereas, on the one hand, these platforms encourage and proliferate binaries, they also offer tools for counternarratives. When protestors turn their cameras on police, for example, states struggle to control the story. Now known as “digital witnessing,” these tools record and disseminate evidence of war crimes (Dubberly et al. 2020). With these new tools, we now see an emerging form of NGO-with-teeth, which has overlapping roles in criminal investigation and witness affirmation, in opposition to ongoing mass violence and media manipulation. Technologies, like people, cannot easily be declared unconditionally good or evil.

I.7 Toward a New Narrative Ecology

We embrace our fields’ inquiries into victimhood and recognize that this shift has helped counterbalance fields’ earlier focus on merely identifying victims and punishing perpetrators. We also embrace the new interest in perpetrators that grapples with their motivations, trauma, and paths to

reckoning. We assert, however, that the polarities produced when we separate fields of study risk distorting the origins of conflict and increasing the possibility of repeating cycles of violence. Creating separate fields of study both reflects and perpetuates the ruptured relations caused by violence, including the separation of those who were once neighbors and maybe even lovers, caught up in atrocity. Narrative complexity is a fundamental condition of post-conflict resilience. The blurring of victim-and-perpetrator boundaries and greater acknowledgement of their overlapping roles are crucial parts of the peacebuilding process.

In this volume, we offer cases as integrated wholes. We want to understand conflicts' narrative ecologies. The harmed and those who enacted the harm were pitted against one another by forces too often obscured. Keeping these parties as well as the bystanders and heroes all in conversation with one another offers a different path toward the cessation of conflict.

This path helps decolonize our research, making room for interpretations of events and motivations not readily recognized by western frameworks. Alex Hinton's Chapter 6 shows this powerfully and poignantly in his study of the international criminal tribunals in Cambodia. Targets of the genocide tried to offer interpretations of the events unrecognized and even expelled by the courts. Together, we find that a great deal can be learned through attention to transitions and ambiguities in the actions and identities of participants in violence.

In fact, we see no other viable path. A singular focus on victimhood obscures the complexity of perpetration and vice versa. Again, understanding does not mean impunity; it means focusing on generating resilient spaces that offer bulwarks against totalitarianism and radicalization, a primary concern in post-conflict contexts. Complexity offers access to greater truth and to a much-needed sense of community to people fractured by violence (Minow 2001). A healthy narrative ecology can be developed through better-formed stories, above all stories that promote inclusion (Sluzki 2004).

Mass atrocity is a mosaic within a mosaic. Each tile represents an actor in the drama; and we need everyone together to see the full scale of the events. Each actor is also a mosaic composed of various (often competing) values, intentions, and actions. By keeping the tiles together, we contribute to a systems analysis that makes visible intentions and actions that led to various, sometimes calamitous, outcomes. Treating conflict as a systemic whole promotes the insight that exclusion is only a discursive fiction. We are bound to one another.

For this reason, above all, the contributors to this volume all pay close attention to how people talk about conflict in the aftermath of atrocity. This includes not only how people talk about participating groups and individuals, but how those individuals and groups talk about themselves and others. Even the most ideal (innocent and pure) victims are not incapable of harm. Even the most horrific perpetrator has the potential to contribute to social restructuring or, at the very least, to our understanding of violence. We avoid these truths at our peril. The road we traverse after mass violence will never be smooth, but at the very least it should never take us back to where we started.

I.8 Contributions

The chapters are arranged in such a way that they do two things: First, they present case material that, taken together, offers a panoramic picture of the fraught terrain of efforts to deal with mass atrocity in its aftermath. One of the advantages of the case study approach of the edited volume genre is that it allows us to illustrate from various angles just how narratives of victims, perpetrators, and heroes are constructed and what consequences they have for post-atrocity transitions.

Second, and more unusually, the contributions to this volume present individual steps of an argument, bringing the reader through different stages of persuasion in the book as a whole, while being anchored to the case material at hand. The unifying argument runs something like this: Post-conflict processes aim to construct a bridge between a period of violence and one of just peace. But the seductive appeal of victim identities tends to entrench social divisions and skim over the deeper identity conflicts that served as the conflict's original raw matter (Chapter 1). A series of case studies then illustrates the need to shift away from calcified articulations of involved parties and makes visible the dynamics that keep them entrenched. A study of the French National Railways' (SNCF) struggle to make amends for its role in the Holocaust shows how archetypal prototypes of conflict parties act as attractors, affecting how we understand and respond to harm (Chapter 2). Even though they can be a steadying force in the aftermath of mass violence, trials cannot consistently promise unbiased judgment, both because of their preference for binaries and because they are often influenced by political interests and thus fail to address the root causes of conflict. Studies of the trials that followed the Ugandan (Chapter 3) and Cambodian (Chapter 6) conflicts demonstrate how legal proceedings

solidify these categories and struggle when individuals cannot be easily presented as victim or villain. Studies of post-conflict Guatemala (Chapter 4), Uruguay (Chapter 5), and Rwanda (Chapter 7) demonstrate how changes in state power alter the categorizations of conflict parties. States, however, cannot fully control the destructive effects of popular narratives, as we see in Bangladesh (Chapter 8), where attempts at presenting the estimated 200,000 women raped in the Bangladesh war of 1971 as *victims* received pushback from many who portrayed them as sexually promiscuous traitors. New information technologies might seem to be an answer to narrative contests and allow for more real-time, accessible evidence in the occurrence of mass crime. As states increase their surveillance of their populations, civilians are more often recording and publicizing state crimes. Digital video evidence, however, does not in itself contribute to boundary transcending insight but can inflame indignation and counter-lobbying, pushing us further from understanding the motivations behind mass atrocity (Chapter 9). We are not always ready to see or hear what does not match our shared understandings or visions of ourselves. We see a similar phenomenon in Argentina, where confessions by the armed left became a source of in-group conflict (Chapter 10). Rather than simply leave readers with a robust explanation of the troubles in our subject matter, we conclude with an identity-based pathway to positive peace, returning to the theme introduced by Enns in Chapter 1 with a prescriptive model for reconciliation that engages groups in the co-construction of complex accounts of the past while looking toward a shared future (Chapter 11).

Let us now briefly review these contributions in more detail: Diane Enns navigates the effects of contemporary shifts toward victimhood *as* identity in Chapter 1, using as her site of study some of the Indigenous struggles in Canada that have unfolded in ways that closely parallel contemporary race-based discourse in the United States. Current trends favor oversimplified and fixed conceptions of victims and perpetrators. The resultant discourse shuttles us back and forth between expressions of resentment and comforting platitudes that foreclose possibilities for the kind of rich dialogue needed for political and social transformation. Listening to others becomes a betrayal of one's group. Enns argues that such oversimplification obstructs the very possibilities for social justice that it claims to pursue, leaving those uninvolved in racism and forced assimilation consumed with guilt and inclined to expressions of sentimentality that allow them to feel noble or virtuous. In the resulting cacophony of opinion, social justice advocates fail to notice those with

a direct hand in oppression (past or present) or the fact that they express no remorse. The ensuing moral confusion conceals the difference, say, between an overtly racist leader and a white person who has yet to give racism much thought. Reducing groups to monolithic entities erases the possibility of a “we” that is capable of change and can engage in reconciliation. We lose a sense of the transformative action necessary to set the world right. Those accepting their victimhood as a fixed identity can become addicted to its moral power and begin policing discourse at a cost to their own liberation. Frantz Fanon warns us how the bitter rage expressed as a way to equal the colonial playing field offers fleeting satisfaction, imprisoning all in “a bitter brotherhood.” When this happens, history confines and absolves us from co-creating a shared future. An enriched understanding of the intersection of moral responsibility and identity invites us to listen when we want to pull back, think when we want to simplify, and take the brave step of replacing rage with trust where it never existed.

Pulling out our focus to include a wider field of history and of legal contest makes it easier to see the transformations that take place in narratives about victims, perpetrators, and heroes. In Chapter 2, Sarah Federman’s overview of the stories centered on the complicity (or its absence) of the French National Railways (SNCF) in deportations of Jews from French occupied territory to German death camps offers a clear illustration of such transformation. The comforting story is the one first told. The rail company and the political leadership of the immediate postwar period coopted the heroism of the railway workers (*cheminots*) who risked their lives in sabotaging the transport of German goods and personnel to the front lines following D-Day, making this compelling storyline that of the corporation as a whole, essential to its identity. Another narrative became possible in the 1990s with the widened recognition of the Shoah and the engagement of Jewish leaders and organizations in litigation, pursuing regimes of compensation that remained unaddressed or incomplete in the immediate aftermath of the war. With such contest comes a retelling of the SNCF as an actor, from hero to perpetrator. Then again, the defense against litigation aligns with the argument that the railway company was dominated by the Germans in ways that made it a victim of the occupation. The voices of the survivors share this complexity and refusal to be pinned down to a single story. In an entity as complex as a major corporation and its place in a morally vexed occupation, such diversity of narratives is all but inevitable. What Federman offers above all is a panoramic view of the contested

narratives – in the corporation, the political class, and among the survivors – and the strategic choices that lie behind one narrative being advanced in favor of another.

The difficulties of fitting the moral ambiguities of violent conflict into the neat victim/perpetrator binaries of international criminal law are center stage in Ayodele Akenroye and Kamari Maxine Clarke's discussion of the trial of Dominic Ongwen in the International Criminal Court in The Hague in Chapter 3. The trial centered on the culpability of a man whose horrific acts of violence in the Ugandan civil war of the early 2000s led the ICC to issue seventy counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity against him. The ambiguities of the case and the reference point of the trial's arguments centered on Ongwen's recruitment as a child soldier under the notorious Lord's Resistance Army headman, Joseph Kony. If a boy who is recruited and taught to kill at a young age is not guilty of the crimes he commits (lacking the *mens rea* or "guilty mind"), at what point does his transition into adulthood change the conditions of his responsibility for crime? What are the circumstances in which he can be understood to be acting freely? At what point is a child soldier expected to repudiate his or her superiors and escape the scene of atrocity? And if repudiation and escape are called for in this and other cases of this kind, how might this example extend to other forms of aberrant socialization, the "brainwashing," for example, that can lead an entire nation to accept and act on ideas of the inhumanity and need to eliminate a national minority? For our purposes as editors, the Ongwen case perfectly illustrates the constructed nature of perpetrators and their victims. The brutal techniques by which children's natural sympathy for others was broken down, for example by forcing them to eat while sitting on corpses, makes them at one point clearly both victim and perpetrator, subjected to atrocity while being trained to commit it, with a shifting background of criminal responsibility as they mature and are expected to acquire the faculties of reason and compassion. The foundational concept of *mens rea* in criminal law emerged around the thirteenth century in English courts, long before we understood the social construction of identity and began grappling with the question of mass crime. Only retributive models still demand that we resolve the perhaps unsolvable question of whether intent emerged from an individual mind or a socialized one. Restorative and transformative frameworks, in contrast, focus attention on the harm and how to address the harm. These models sidestep the ontological problems altogether. As a result, they accept more freely that an individual can be a victim of a regime and a

perpetrator of violence, requiring both rehabilitation and responsibility to care for those they have harmed.

Narratives that shape the roles and values attributed to people in (or subjected to) conflict can also be found in the ways that conflicts are framed and justified on a grand scale. In Chapter 4, Karine Vanthuyne and Marie-Christine Dugal illustrate just such a shifting terrain of mass violence and its narrative underpinnings in highland Guatemala. Their close reading of testimony from peasants and the documentary record of public pronouncements thus brings out several major shifts in the dominant idioms of heroism and villainy. The rural mobilizations of the 1970s and 1980s were oriented toward “turning personal battles into sacred struggle,” framed in the idiom of Christian ideas of martyrdom and resurrection. Catholic missionaries working in the Guatemalan highlands came to side with the communist movement, with “liberation theology” overlapping with the communist goal of uplifting the poor and creating a more just society. With these common goals, the clergy was caught up in the government’s violent repression, acted on through the “disappearance” and arbitrary execution of all presumed revolutionaries and their allies, including church leaders. The truth commission that resulted from the peace accord of the 1990s was oriented toward a reframing of the Church’s role in the conflict, from “subversives” to “good Christians,” and “martyrs” embodying examples of self-sacrifice as a pathway of salvation for humanity’s sin. Leftist insurrectionists and their supporters in the Church, once demonized for their opposition to the state (armed and otherwise), became recast as heroes whose struggles inspire those resisting the forced impoverishment and displacements caused by transnational mining ventures. Narratives have clearly shifted in sync with Guatemala’s changing economic and political alignments. The one constant in Vanthuyne and Dugal’s account is the highland peasantry’s subjection to political and industrial violence, even as its causes and narrative justification have profoundly transformed.

In the aftermath of atrocity, certain victim groups find public recognition far easier to attain than others. Those groups that align with a country’s imagined national identity are legitimized more readily than those who remain excluded. Sometimes it is ultimately the hard-won recognition of their suffering that leads to their fuller social integration. We see this dynamic play out in Debbie Sharnak’s Chapter 5, which examines Uruguay’s radical shift from an almost complete denial of its Afro-Uruguayan population to official state recognition. While Uruguay follows a larger Latin American movement for multiculturalism that

began in the late twentieth century, Uruguay is unique in the specific path it took to overcome the invisibility of its black population, a change critically tied to the military government's treatment of Afro-Uruguayans from 1973 to 1985. Sharnak's piece argues that the push for legal visibility occurred because of the twin pressures of Afro-Uruguayan mobilization in the aftermath of the dictatorship, combined with a larger global shift toward support for state-sponsored ethno-racial recognition. Using interviews and sources from Uruguayan and international archives, she locates the importance of official recognition in the context of building a powerful civil rights movement that has had tangible policy outcomes, such as the inclusion of race in the census and an affirmative action law.

In a powerful synopsis of the central material from his book, *The Justice Facade: Trials of Transition in Cambodia*, Alex Hinton (2018), in Chapter 6, offers a close view of the fit, or lack thereof, between the legal approach to roles and responsibilities in mass violence and the more open, fluid moral cosmologies of those caught up in conflict. The proceedings of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) is the site of his close analysis of the "affordances and constraints" that determine what can be said and done in the trial, and hence how conflict can be (mis)understood. Hinton approaches these limits through the central character of Bou Meng, a former prisoner of the notorious S-21 Khmer Rouge torture center. The unspeakable suffering inflicted on the inmates of this center forms the background of the trial. What Hinton wants us to focus on, though, is the judicial process itself, one that structures witness narrative through such mechanisms as the regulatory apparatus of the microphone's on/off button, the process of translation, the way that witnesses are required to sit, and, more consequentially, the ways that Bou Meng's testimony itself is shaped, trimmed, and disciplined. The picture that eventually emerges is one completely at variance with Bou Meng's own interpretation of his ordeal, which is deeply informed by a Buddhist understanding of the "wrong thinking" at the origin of mass atrocity, the karmic justice that obviates the need for retribution, and the urgent necessity to care for the souls of the dead. The court and its witness could not be at greater odds in terms of what they hoped to achieve from the trial, with their differences ultimately traceable to their knowledge of the world. The knowledge of the judiciary is situated in its push to position Bou Meng as an ideal victim, masking his earlier involvement in the violence. Trimming away the creeping undergrowth of his perpetration does not lend clarity to the conflict but occludes the complexity of victims who also participate in atrocity.

In Chapter 7, Samantha Lakin turns our attention to the role of commemorative spaces in formulating and constraining identities. Through in-depth interviews conducted with 100 Rwandan genocide survivors, former perpetrators, ordinary citizens, and key informants, Lakin finds that people perform their experiences and recall their identities differently in national, local, and private commemorative spaces. A contest plays out between national narratives and local commemoration of the 1994 Rwandan genocide, a genocide that resulted in the murder of between 800,000 and 1,000,000 individuals. The post-genocide context of Rwanda provides a salient site for this study precisely because the government “engaged in unprecedented and ambitious state-building and transitional justice projects in the aftermath.” State-sanctioned narratives often defined the victims in bounded terms, not always aligned with local experiences and forms of truth telling. The Tutsi, for example, were the primary victim group, but some Hutu, Twa, or people with one Hutu and one Tutsi parent also suffered under the violence. Commemorative spaces, in their intent to heal and acknowledge, can become sites that entrench the narrative binaries that can lead us back to violence.

In Chapter 8, Nayanika Mookherjee considers the dynamics of state-sanctioned narratives of rape in the aftermath of war. Moral revulsion toward rape as an instrument of power might lead one to assume that responsibility for this form of violence would be fairly easy to assign; but, as Mookherjee shows, matters are rarely so straightforward. The rape of some 200,000 women by the West Pakistani army and its local East Pakistani collaborators (*Razakars*) during the Bangladesh war of 1971 resulted in a difficult aftermath to the conflict, in which the moral essence of the raped women (*birangonas*, meaning “brave women” – a public title given by the state) was publicly characterized and contested, largely to the exclusion of their own complex life trajectories. Mookherjee aptly describes a “double helix of attraction and repulsion,” in which the Bangladeshi state tries to promote a narrative of the *birangonas* as war heroines – expressed and policed by social workers and doctors intervening in the processes of abortion and adoption – that eulogized them as victim–heroines who suffered and struggled in the course of the war. This was a narrative with a political and emotional purpose in the face of a catastrophic number of rapes. Women needed to be able to take up their roles as citizens and workers, wives, and mothers. Disciplining public sentiments toward those who had been subjected to rape became an essential part of the post-war project of state-building. Agents of the

state, however, were unable to suppress a popular and persistent counterpoint to their narrative, one that depicted the *birangonas* as figures of mistrust and suspicion, that associated rape with promiscuity and prostitution, and ultimately casts them as traitors, whose sexuality and whose wombs acted in opposition to the project of the nation. As a result of this ambiguous formulation, they stand somewhere between – or beyond – victims and perpetrators. The missing feature of both these strands of narration is women's own capacity to communicate their experience, a project to which Mookherjee herself contributes.

The essays included in this book offer a variety of accounts of how narratives in the aftermath of mass atrocity are created and contested; to these, Ronald Niezen adds a consideration of the digital landscape of contested knowledge, with the state-sanctioned weapons of disinformation, censorship, and hacking pitted against digital witnessing, meta-data analysis and authentication, and legally-oriented digital archiving, in Chapter 9. Niezen presents this phenomenon with a focus on Syrian Archive, a digital platform for the collection, verification, and storage of visual evidence of war crimes in the Syrian conflict and a precursor to more intense and immediate digital witnessing efforts now taking place in Ukraine. The Syrian Archive's mission takes on the monumental task of exposing crimes as they happen, collecting, verifying, and preserving digital evidence of genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity, and in the process, systematically undoing state campaigns of disinformation and denial. The Syrian Archive project continues to gather evidence of war crimes in the heat of the conflict. It is as though the reference point for this contest is an imagined future criminal trial that assembles competing stories of guilt and innocence, victim and perpetrator. But the accused in this case are the Syrian and Russian governments, intent on sowing confusion, polluting the knowledge ecosystem, and making it all but impossible for public consumers of information to distinguish fact from fiction. In these circumstances, the Archive serves another purpose: The affirmation of witnesses. Although the store of digital material the Archive has assembled cannot be used against those responsible for Syria's war at the highest level (who are protected by conditions of impunity in international law), it takes some of the burden away from witnesses of struggling against torrents of disinformation and, in doing so, makes room for them to narrate the experience and costs of a war that targets civilians. At the same time, gruesome footage, a powerful tool of accountability, understandably encourages simplified accounts of armed struggle. Are we asking too much of those viewing digital visual

evidence to consider the finer points of history and of *mens rea*, the motivation behind conflict, while watching a video of a child struggling for breath after a chemical attack?

Sometimes hints about how shifts in narrative can effectively address violence can be found by analyzing efforts at post-conflict intervention that did not fully get off the ground. In Chapter 10, Leigh Payne offers an account of the unsettling effects of confessions of violence by armed left guerillas or revolutionary fighters in Argentina. By confessing to the abuses that they committed or condoned, the two former revolutionaries that Payne profiles aimed toward a full accounting on the left for its role in past violence. Curiously, however, these confessions did not unseat dominant narratives of the left's innocence and victimhood. Any impact they had was short-lived. Why? Payne explains that the *timing* of the confessions limited their effect. Contentious debate over the left's violence was possible in the past and not in recent years because the early period of post-conflict was safer – the left did not fear that admitting to atrocities would fuel backlash from the right. Time, in this sense, did not heal all wounds. Paradoxically, in the later period, under circumstances in which the right had reconsolidated its political power, the confessional narratives from the Argentine armed left had a tendency to reinforce, rather than reduce violence as a solution. The prescriptive dimension to this observation highlights the need for urgency in thinking self-critically, to reflect broadly on the motives and consequences of violence, and to use circumstances of political advantage to condemn those parts of the (temporarily) dominant power's past that deserve condemnation.

To provide a line of flight out of these conundrums, in Chapter 11, Dan Shapiro and Vanessa Liu direct our attention to underlying identity conflicts, specifically to the challenge of negotiating emotionally charged disputes over symbols. These conflicts often turn into zero-sum battles over identity. To escape this problem, the authors emphasize the importance of creating an inclusive narrative in which parties reshape their relational identity – who they are in relation to one another. This entails building new forms of affiliation with each other while respecting each other's autonomy. This paradoxical move toward and away from each other creates the context needed to generate an inclusive narrative. Case studies of the Macedonia Naming Dispute and the US Confederate statues controversy illustrate this practical method for intervention in symbolic conflict, demonstrating that the pathway to positive peace requires relational transformation and an inclusive narrative that promotes mutual connection and security.

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