



Marginalised Narratives of the Rwandan Genocide: An Interview with Giorgia Doná

25 years on from the Rwandan genocide, Giorgia Doná discusses her extensive field research examining the genocide's untold stories.

Q. Your book, *The Marginalised in Genocide Narratives*, is released this month. Based on twenty years of research, the text presents a rethinking of the Rwandan genocide's social history. What research methods and conceptual frameworks fed into the book?

The Marginalised in Genocide Narratives adopts a narrative approach to understand violent conflicts and offers a timely reminder of the necessity of rethinking genocides' social histories. There is a tendency in conflict and genocide studies to downplay the role of narratives as meaning-making interpretive frameworks and the value of narratives in explaining the gradations of political and ethnic violence. By contrast, this book affirms the centrality of narratives for understanding genocides and their strategic use in the foundation of the post-conflict nation-state and in personal meaning-making processes. The book problematises dominant histories of violence that reproduce the dichotomy of victim and perpetrator, and shifts the focus to give visibility to the stories of social actors who are usually excluded or marginalised to understand the lived spaces of violence and its enduring legacy.

While narratives are intrinsically partial, fragmented and contradictory, in post-conflict societies political elites appropriate narratives to form a 'single story' by enacting a process of inclusion and exclusion that authorises the visibility of certain stories in the public domain and, equally important, censors or relegates others outside the official space of narrativisation. The single story functions as the master-narrative, a coherent frame of reference that is used to

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interpret the past, guide social action in the present and envision the future of the nation.

The constellation of genocide narratives framework introduced in the book offers an alternative view to the single story master-narrative of genocide that prevails in national accounts of conflict and genocide. The singular nature of such a story actually comprises a convergence of multiple narratives whose relationships are constantly renegotiated, shifting and in dialogue with one another. The constellation of narratives forms a network of interlinked narratives that converge to form a master-narrative, a coherent frame of reference that is used to interpret the past, guide social action in the present and imagine the future. A comprehensive narrative framework integrates national and personal narratives in the constellation of genocide narratives that both speak to the unequal power of narratives and visualise their interdependence. As individuals are exposed to multiple, sometime competing narratives about history, they make decisions, conscious or otherwise, about which aspects of these narratives to appropriate and which to discard through narrative engagements. Those stories, constructed or internalised, provide interpretive meaning-making anchors for individuals to articulate their historic consciousness and navigate more than one political landscape.

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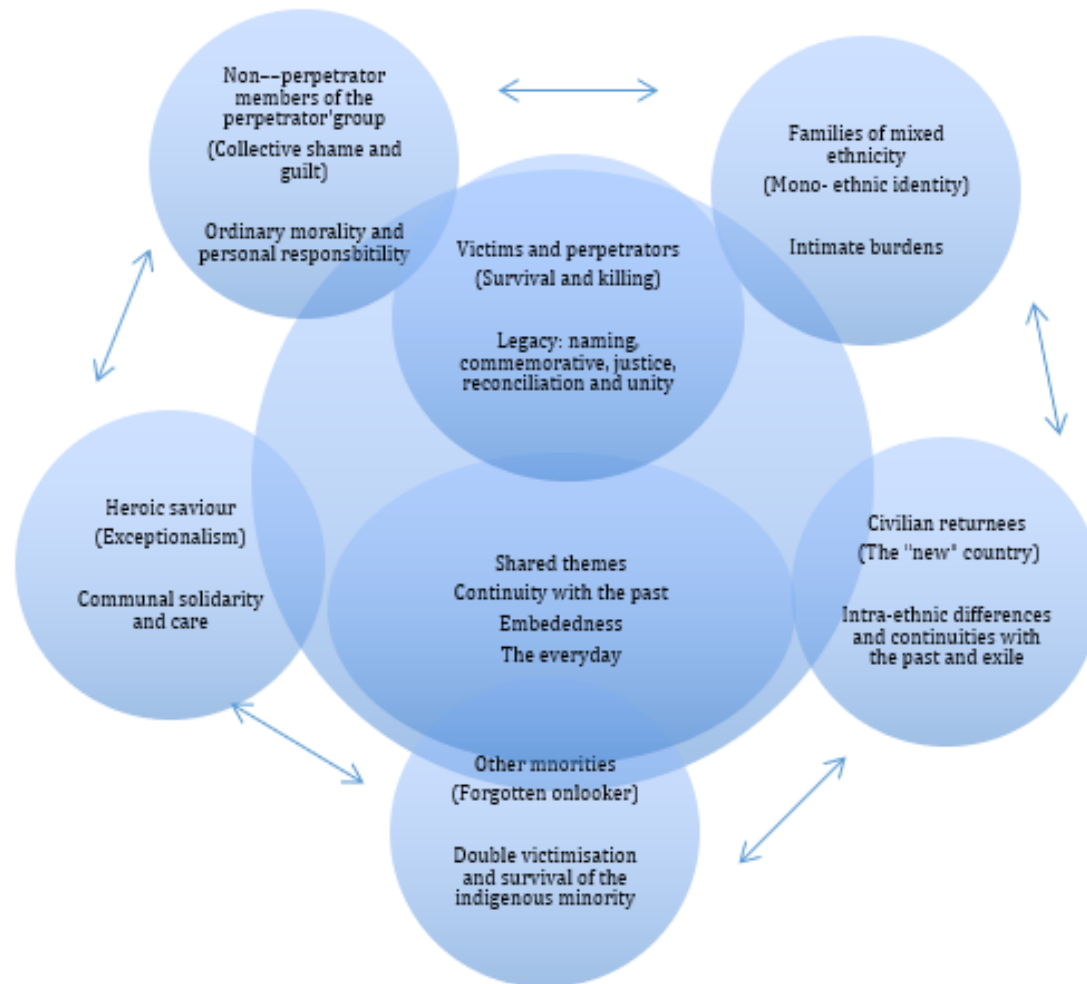
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Conducting research in politicised post-conflict societies calls for an understanding of the power of narratives as research data and as a method of investigation and analysis. Adopting a multi-level narrative methodology that addresses the value of multiple narrative framings for understanding genocides, the multi-level narrative approach used in the book considers

different kinds of stories and integrates primary and secondary sources that connect the personal and the national, inclusive of official policies and legal documents, published personal testimonies, interviews, group discussions and participant observation in Rwanda and the diaspora. Narrative interviews conducted with more than 60 Rwandans in the country and the diaspora about their family lives before, during and after the genocide are used extensively in the book because they specifically speak from the perspective of marginalised subject positions (families of mixed ethnicity, non-perpetrators, rescuers, minorities and returnees).

Q. Researching a post-conflict environment is almost always difficult and there is a high risk that such environments may have a psychological impact on researchers. What are some of the ways for researchers to deal with living and working under very difficult circumstances like those found in post-conflict Rwanda?

The book traces my personal, social and narrative engagement with Rwanda over almost a quarter of a century: with the country and its national project, with Rwandans I have met inside the country and within the diaspora, and with Rwanda as a scholarly field of study. The long gestation that precedes the completion of the book stems from an initial sense of uneasiness felt while living in post-genocide Rwanda that I could not articulate, and that developed as an aspiration to reach out to listen to other stories while witnessing the national narrative being consolidated, and sensing that those stories were being further removed. It took me more than a decade for the project of collecting the testimonies of marginalised social actors to materialise in the form of a planned undertaking. Bringing these stories in dialogue within a

theoretical framework proved challenging not only intellectually but also emotionally, as I struggled to go back to the material whose content continues to bring back memories of my life in the country.

In an article titled “The psychological impact of working in post-conflict environments: a personal account of intersectional traumatisation” published in 2014 in the *Journal Intervention*, I argued that researchers and practitioners can encounter various forms of trauma when working in post-conflict environments, and that these intersect. Having listened to personal narratives of violence by genocide survivors, rescuers, separated children and refugees over time would classify me as a researcher exposed to vicarious trauma. However, long term residence in Rwanda and exposure to low intensity warfare, insecurity, social and criminal violence ranging from threats to personal safety to road accidents, would be described as exposure to primary traumatisation. Additionally, distress for the safety of colleagues and research participants, being confronted with the murder of a friend would be described as secondary traumatisation. In post-conflict contexts, primary, secondary and vicarious processes of traumatisation are closely interrelated.

The ways in which researchers deal with living and working under difficult circumstances and researching sensitive issues can be manifold, ranging from avoidance, emotional distance to a stronger sense of commitment, the development of intimate trust as a response to being placed in an environment of mistrust, and a greater appreciation of what matters as opposed to what may appear to matter in personal and social life. The presence of safety nets and support networks is also important to reduce feelings of vulnerability, isolation and insecurity.

Q. What do you feel are the dominant narratives of the Rwandan genocide's social history?

The year 2019 marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Genocide against the Tutsi. The book traces the formation, transformation and consolidation of the national master-narrative of the Genocide against the Tutsi that has become the dominant narrative, to show the processes through which it has become the foundational narrative for imagining the nation in the post-genocide period.

The dominant narratives of the Rwandan genocide's social history focus on the testimonies of the core protagonists of ethnic violence - the victims and perpetrators - and the on-going significance of their reconfigured designation as *rescapés* and *génocidaires*. They also focus on the centrality of the antagonist narrative themes of survival and killing, in the articulation of post-genocide interrelated national narratives, specifically naming, commemorative, justice, reconciliation and unity.

The national genocide narrative's foundational trope of victim(s) and perpetrator(s) is strengthened by narratives about other social actors that are relevant for the prevailing force within the national imagination: the attribution of collective shame and guilt to non-perpetrator members of the perpetrator group for the actions carried out by killers within the group; the representation of the exceptionalism of the heroic rescuer; the narrative of mono-ethnicity that forces individuals from ethnically mixed backgrounds to identify with one group only; the theme of the forgotten Other that relegates minorities to the role of onlookers; and that of belonging and proxy victimhood of the returnees from the diaspora.

Q. Your book is about foregrounding the marginalized narratives of the genocide. Which untold stories of the Rwandan genocide does the book examine?

The Marginalised in Genocide Narratives tells the stories of a diverse range of social actors whose experiences of genocide are shaped by their specific positionality in society: members of the perpetrator group who did not commit atrocities, families of mixed ethnic backgrounds, communities of rescuers, minorities and returnees. When their marginalised personal stories are placed within the constellation of genocide narratives, they acquire the historicity and relationality that is given to public narratives. Together, previously unspoken narratives tell another story and interject another viewpoint on the social history of the genocide.

The uneasy predicaments of non-perpetrator members of the perpetrator group, the majority of the Rwandan population, are shaped by the public narrative of moral culpability that leads to collective guilt and shame. Their narratives contrast and resist this national representation. Non-perpetrators distance themselves from the world view of the *génocidaires* and break down the correspondence of (Hutu) ethnicity with *génocidaire* to reveal other identities and relationships that are expressed through the image of the ordinary, honest and caring individuals, who rely on peacetime social relations and norms to interpret and cope with the chaos of violence and reposition themselves in the post-genocide landscape.

The analysis of the celebrated yet ambivalent public image of the heroic rescuer, which gives prominence to individual heroes rather than communities, construes their actions as exceptional and thus an exception to the norm, and

removes them from their cultural and social milieu. The emphasis on heroic rescuers obscures the existence of communal protection and marginalises the role of helpers in rescue and resistance efforts. Collective rescue challenges divisive ideologies to reveal narrative themes of care and solidarity. Individuals reframe heroes as ordinary people and rescuing actions as common-sense behaviours that are embedded within existing values and cultural traditions.

The complex positionality of families of mixed ethnic backgrounds whose members belong to both the *rescapé* and *génocidaire* groups is also unpacked. The public narrative renders invisible the 'mixed' dimension of their identity and forces them into one group or the other. The public erasure of the 'mixed' element of such familial identities marks a contrast with the stories of inter-ethnic individuals and families by showing that these protagonists are profoundly marked by the national politics of ethnicity and as a consequence bear a burden that affects their intimate personal and family lives. Members of families of mixed ethnicity engage with the public narrative of the invisibility of their 'mixed' affiliation and forced identification with one group by reclaiming elements of their 'mixed' identity.

The attribution of 'onlooker' to genocide that is applied to Rwanda's foundational Other, the Twa, is also explored. From their lower subject positionality and its derivation from their historic marginalisation, the Twa minority constitute a notable, core presence within the Rwandan nation as its original inhabitants, and as such were involved in different roles in the genocide and suffered disproportionately the consequences of conflict. Notable also is the reconfiguration of this minority group's survival in the post-genocide period through a narrative of indigenous survival that is distinct to that of the genocide survivor. The Twa's historical experience of discrimination,

vulnerability and lack of progress, all of which were features that were exacerbated by genocide losses, war, exile and poverty, signal temporal continuities between the past and the present.

The variety of experiences and viewpoints of Tutsi civilian returnees are exposed against the backdrop of the official discourse of the foundational genocide master-narrative promoted by the Tutsi political elites in which the Tutsi civilian is present as victim by proxy. As most of these civilians were abroad when the genocide took place and returned to Rwanda after its end, their narratives engage with the legacy of the genocide and also introduce new themes of historic mobility and belonging, exile and home, return and adaptation. The 'new' Rwanda that they inhabit and continue to shape borrows, transforms and re-adapts elements of national tradition and exile. By bringing 'back' new religions, languages and norms learnt abroad, civilian returnees shape the trajectory of the 'new' Rwanda through continuity with their refugee past.

In addition to specific narrative themes, shared themes are also identified across social groups, connecting their stories together to tell another story. The untold narrative of 'continuity, embeddedness and the everyday' can be summarised as follows: individuals rely on continuities with the ordinary, everyday past and on pre-genocide norms, values and relationships that were embedded in socio-cultural contexts to interpret and guide their actions during violence and make sense of their reconfigured subject positionalities in the post-conflict period. If the genocide denotes a fracture in society and a temporal rapture of ordinary life, with the post-genocide period being often heralded as a new beginning, in reality continuities with the past persist as ordinary people interpret and cope with life in conflict by drawing upon familiar

norms, depending on existing social relations and relying on values by which they lived prior to the genocide.

In the contested spaces of the appropriation of history, whereas political elites appropriate the distant past to forge a new nation, the marginalised appropriate the recent past that is expressed in their everyday lives – moral values learned from parents or at church functions or familial and friendly relationships that were established through regular visits, participation in ceremonies and neighbourly conversations – as a means of interpreting and enduring the chaos of violence that left many of them vulnerable in the present and uncertain about the future. Furthermore, in contrast to the de-contextualised single genocide story, the untold stories speak of decisions taken and actions carried out during genocide that were embedded in collective social, cultural and religious milieux. This chronicle from below is a timely reminder of the need to revisit the Genocide and expand its social history.

Q. Why do you feel these voices and stories have been marginalised, while others have been privileged?

In post-conflict societies in which the struggle for power and the quest for legitimacy is at stake, political elites tend to promote a single narrative story. The exercise of control of the past and its narrativisation is a primary concern of power holders who craft, propagate and nurture ‘single public narratives’ that legalise censorship of alternative views, that is achieved through a process of inclusion and exclusion through which political elites authorise the visibility of certain stories ‘in’ the public domain and, equally important, censor and relegate others ‘out’ of the official space of narrativisation. Those narratives

that support or strengthen political elites' ideology are included and promoted while those that challenge, contradict or fit uncomfortably within the single story are excluded.

The untold stories of the marginalised offer a viewpoint on the social history of the genocide that differs from that of the almost totalising violence exposed in the public domain of the single story. Individuals respond to the fracture provoked by the genocide by reclaiming the everyday; they respond to public claims of new beginning by telling of continuities with the past; and they respond to essentialised representations of genocide by making reference to existing socio-cultural formations. The stories of Rwandans who fit uncomfortably within the national narrative because of their subject positionality reveal social and narrative continuities that disrupt national discourses of ruptures in time, between past ('old' pre-genocide) and present ('new' post-genocide) Rwanda. These stories challenge the overlap of ethnicity with the social categories of victim and perpetrator by identifying other kinds of intersections that remain unofficial. They document the legacy of the genocide on both the narrative and social life of the nation and its people in post-genocide Rwanda.

Q. Twenty-five years on, has the marginalization of certain narratives effected Rwandan society and politics and, if so, how?

The inquiry into the way in which narratives of the past are framed in the present is of critical significance to an understanding of how societies recover from violence. In this respect, the formation of the genocide narrative, and its configuration as a foundational national narrative, is central to understanding the way in which the 'new' Rwanda functions and imagines itself. Thus, the

marginalisation of certain narratives has had profound effects on Rwandan society and it has been instrumental in the creation of specific politics and political spaces.

The legacy of the genocide narrative in post-genocide Rwanda is twofold: the genocide impacts on both the narrative life and social life of the nation and its people. The narratological legacy of the genocide is evident in the ways in which the genocide as an event was transformed into the Genocide against the Tutsi narrative that became the foundational narrative of the nation. Naming the genocide narrative spurred into existence related narratives, of commemorative, justice, reconciliation and unity. It is this national master-narrative that framed the rewriting of the history of the nation, guided the interpretation of the present and consolidated the vision of the 'new' Rwanda. The genocide master-narrative was critical not only in shaping the narrative legacy but also the legacy of the genocide on the social life of the country. Narratives have socialising and mobilising functions. The genocide master-narrative was used to frame the planning and implementation of national programmes of justice, reconciliation and unity in the post-genocide period.

For the marginalised, those whose stories sit uncomfortably within the official master-narrative, an important legacy of the genocide was the restricted opportunity to articulate their voices and the need to manage silences in their narrative lives. Silences, omissions and secrets are part of the everyday life of ordinary citizens in post-genocide Rwanda. A key legacy of the genocide narrative is its power to make the narration of certain stories political and politically sensitive.

The legacy of the genocide is played out in the dialectical relationship between uniformity and multiplicity. The dominance of the single story of genocide, the

single identity of the *Banyarwanda*, the single model of the 'new' Rwanda as a strategy for promoting unity and reconciliation, is contrasted by the marginalisation of certain stories that speak to the multiplicity of social identities and the presence of multiple frames of reference to interpret, respond and articulate the legacy of violence. Unless aspects of the past that have been shelved are reopened and multiple narrative strands are allowed to surface, the single story is likely to be contested, in private when public contestation is not possible, hampering the prospects of long-term peace and stability in society. National reconciliation and unity is best achieved not by denying differences but by acknowledging that there are more of them.

Image credit: [Andy Wallace/Flickr](#).

About the interviewee

Giorgia Doná is Professor of Forced Migration and Refugee Studies, co-director of the Centre for Migration, Refugees and Belonging and Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. Her research focuses on forced migration and refugee movements, violence and society, child protection and psycho-social assistance, with a geographical focus on Central America and East Africa. She has held positions at the Oxford University's Refugee Studies Programme, the Child Studies Unit of University College Cork, Ireland, and the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Giorgia has undertaken consultancy work for UNICEF, governments, and non-governmental organisations, and her research has been funded by, amongst others, the European Community, the Leverhulme Trust, the UK Department for International Development and the UK Department of Health.

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