# Getting Close to Rwandans since the Genocide: Studying Everyday Life in Highly Politicized Research Settings

Susan Thomson


African Studies Review, Volume 53, Number 3, December 2010, pp. 19-34 (Article)

Published by African Studies Association
*DOI: 10.1353/arw.2010.0058*

# Getting Close to Rwandans since the Genocide: Studying Everyday Life in Highly Politicized Research Settings

Susan Thomson

**Abstract:** Research with people in highly politicized research settings illuminates the gap between the images that most African governments strive to represent and the sociopolitical realities of everyday life. This article discusses the opportunities and challenges of doing research in postgenocide Rwanda and is a useful resource for researchers contemplating their own projects under such conditions, whether in Rwanda or elsewhere. It discusses the importance of creating personal relationships and meeting people on their terms, as well as such topics as the identification of the research site, building rapport and trust with respondents, safeguarding anonymity and confidentiality, and working with local research assistants and partners.

**Résumé:** La recherche menée avec des collègues dans des milieux de recherche hautement politisés met en lumière l'écart entre l'image que la plupart des gouvernements africains veulent se donner et les réalités socio-économiques de la vie courante. L'article examine les opportunités et les difficultés liées à la recherche menée au Rwanda à la suite du génocide, et se veut une source première utile pour les chercheurs contemplant leurs propres projets dans de telles conditions, que ce soit au Rwanda ou ailleurs. L'article contemple l'importance de créer des liens personnels avec les sujets de la recherche; de travailler avec des partenaires et un assistant de recherche locaux ; d'organiser des rencontres avec des gens ordinaires selon leurs propres termes, y compris le choix des sites de recherche, et l'établissement d'un rapport de confiance avec les personnes interrogées pour protéger l'anonymat et la confidentialité de ceux-ci.

Despite the ethical and practical challenges of doing micro-level ethnographic research in highly politicized settings, there is a dearth of academic literature on the practical difficulties of conducting such research, and a particular absence of guidance on when and how to work with politically marginal or socially vulnerable individuals.[1] By definition, ethnographic

*African Studies Review*, Volume 53, Number 3 (December 2010), pp. 19–34
**Susan Thomson** is a postdoctoral fellow in contemporary politics at Hampshire College. E-mail: sthomson@hampshire.edu

research means that the researcher "gets close" to people's everyday experiences "through exposure to or involvement in the day-to-day or routine activities of participants in the research setting" (Schensul et al.1999:91).[2] In highly politicized environments—meaning those in which government exerts considerable control over sociopolitical discourses and seeks to control what people can say about the government and its policies—getting close to people's everyday experiences is all the more challenging, especially when the investigator brings foreign identities to the encounter.

Without analysis of the demands and challenges of designing and implementing a micro-level ethnographic project in highly politicized environments, the fieldwork of scholars and practitioners alike cannot benefit from the "hands-on" experiences of colleagues who have conducted research in similar settings. The stresses and strains of identifying effective research strategies are left to the individual researcher, often on an ad hoc basis, without any connection to praxis. This can put the researcher as well as collaborators, research subjects, and assistants at risk. Since research on the social and political realities of life after violence is important and necessary, fieldwork that is informed by the examples of those who have already carried out such work allows researchers entering the field to make informed decisions about when, where, and how to do research with marginal or vulnerable people. By *marginal* I mean individuals over whom power is exercised but who do not exercise power themselves. By *vulnerable* I mean those individuals who, due to adverse economic, social, and political factors, have no adequate emotional or physical protection from the government, which in turn makes it difficult for them to anticipate, adapt to, resist, and recover from state-led interventions in their daily lives. Vulnerable individuals rarely have the personal resources and autonomy to shape their own lives and livelihoods. Simply stated, they lack individual agency.

In the hope of encouraging other researchers to conduct micro-level ethnographic field research in highly politicized settings, I provide an overview of my own research design, highlighting the difficulties I confronted interviewing Rwandans who occupy the lowest rungs of the socioeconomic hierarchy, along with the tactics and strategies I employed to keep the research process on track. Specifically, I argue that field research in highly politicized settings is necessary and possible with careful preparation, a willingness to meet with people on their own terms, and careful attention to creating the personal relationships necessary to ensure that research participants have confidence in you and your research methodology. This is sometimes easier said than done, particularly as some universities appear reluctant to endorse research in highly politicized and other difficult environments. However, with careful planning and a willingness to work with Institutional Review Boards (IRBs), I believe that research in difficult settings among vulnerable individuals is possible and morally compelling.[3] In the past decades the work of scholars such as Fujii (2009), Ingelaere (2010), King (2009), Malkii (1995), Scott (1985, 1990), and others has demonstrat-

ed that ordinary people can provide important insights about the function of state power. It is nonetheless important to remind researchers of ethical ways to bring peasants into academic analyses of politics in order to both understand and explain rural society in meaningful ways.

The analysis that follows draws on my own experiences of field research in rural Rwanda for a period of six months in 2006. The discussion is also informed by my experiences during an extended period of residence after the 1994 genocide, first as a human rights monitor for the United Nations Human Rights Mission for Rwanda (1997–98), and later as a lecturer at the Faculty of Law at the National University of Rwanda (1998–2001). The article proceeds in three parts. First, I provide a brief summary of the purpose and general design of the research. In the second section, I discuss the specifics of whom I spoke with and where. This section reviews my strategies for gaining access to the remote rural world of Rwanda as well as the challenges of working with local government officials. Finally, I consider the "how" and "when" of research by detailing my interview procedure and protocol, notably the mechanisms I used to protect my participants throughout a research process that relied on the translation and transcription of individual narratives from Kinyarwanda to English.

## Understanding Everyday Life in Postgenocide Rwanda

The purpose of my research was to allow peasant Rwandans to express themselves as individuals, in their own words, as they seek to reestablish livelihoods, reconstitute social and economic networks, and reconcile with friends, neighbors, and in some cases, family since the 1994 genocide. I aimed to compare everyday life since the genocide with life before (see Thomson 2009a), and also to study the ways in which politics affects and engages the lives of real people—by speaking to them directly rather than relying on the information provided by local elites and international actors. Through life history interviews and participant-observation, I documented the power relations that structure the everyday lives of Rwandans, notably the exercise of state power in pursuit of the government's goal of establishing national unity and reconciliation. I employed the concept of "everyday acts of resistance" to dissect the multiple and overlapping structures of power that Rwandans resident in the south of the country confront in their daily lives. I then triangulated the oral data gained through interviews with careful historical and empirical analysis. In tracing the subtle and indirect resistance of ordinary Rwandans, from a variety of subject positions, to the demands of the policy of national unity and reconciliation, my research provides more than a bottom-up approach to disentangling the various forms of subjugation in postgenocide Rwanda. It also facilitates analysis of ways particular forms of subjugation produce the appearance of individual compliance. A careful look at what may appear to be trivial matters—remaining silent, laughing at the wrong moment, or playing dumb—can pro-

vide important insights into the dynamics of power in contexts of coercive state authority.

My commitment to documenting and analyzing everyday acts of resistance to the government's policy of national unity and reconciliation meant that both my participants and I were at risk of reprimand from the government. The RPF deals harshly, and without haste, with any Rwandan or foreigner who questions its commitment to ethnic unity as the basis of peace and security. Opposition politicians, civil society organizations, and ordinary folk alike can easily find themselves declared enemies of the "new" Rwanda and accused of harboring genocidal ideologies or of promoting ethnic divisions.[4] Such accusations mean that individuals can lose their jobs, be harassed or intimidated by state agents, find themselves in prison without charge, be forced to flee the country, and in extreme cases, disappear or be found dead. For foreign researchers who interrogate or who challenge the RPF's version of how the genocide happened, or question its vision for the "new" Rwanda, the penalties are also swift. The government revokes research permits and asks researchers to explain their findings and/or exit the country, and it denies them return entry; informants are harassed or intimidated, and police shake down research assistants for information on the research design and methodology.

Yet for most of the ordinary Rwandans I consulted, ethnicity is not their most salient identity marker. They spoke about the daily hardships of being poor, landless, and food insecure, their inability to send their children to school or to access medical care. Among my participants the daily average household income was just 50 FRW (U.S. $0.11) per day. With rare exception, they were were thin, clearly suffering from malnutrition, barefoot, and dressed in ragged clothing, which in many cases was the extent of their wardrobe. Their faces were weathered, and they usually appeared older than their biological years. Women suffer the additional indignity of struggling with men at the household level for resources and personal power. None of the Rwandans I consulted had formal schooling past the third grade. My research also found that for ordinary Rwandans the policy of national unity and reconciliation is a source of additional hardship in their daily lives and their perceived compliance with its dictates is tactical rather than sincere. This runs contrary to the official government version of Rwanda as a "nation rehabilitated from the scourge of genocide" (interview with senior representative of the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission, Kigali, 2006).

After seven months, my research raised such concern among senior government officials that I not only had my research permit revoked, but I was also ordered to undergo "re-education" and told that my research "was not the kind of research the government needed." According to officials at the Ministry of Local Government, I was "wasting" everyone's time talking to "peasants about politics," had clearly been "brainwashed" by my interviewees, and needed to be re-educated about the "true successes of the

government in achieving peace and promoting reconciliation" (executive assistant to the Minister of Local Government, Kigali, 2006; see Thomson forthcoming). Ironically, far from convincing me of the RPF's commitment to peace and security for all Rwandans, my re-education process gave me first-hand experience of the government's control tactics as well as a front-line look at its strategies to ensure that its vision of Rwanda is the only one represented within and beyond Rwanda.[5] It also raised myriad additional challenges in my research, not least of which was determining whether or not I still had the consent of the Rwandans who participated in my project to publish the material I had gathered.

## Where and Who: Layers of Access

Before my research was stopped, I received all the necessary documents, including my research permit from the Ministry of Local Government (MINALOC). My permission letter, signed by the minister and addressed to all of Rwanda's five provincial governors, allowed me to travel in rural areas and instructed local officials to facilitate my work. I carried the letter at all times, since it quickly became apparent that local officials and ordinary people alike wanted to see it before they would talk to me. I also could not approach any villagers until the local official had given me official permission to interview "his people," as one of them expressed it (interview, Gikongoro, June 2006). At first I scoffed at the idea of wasting my time talking to these officials, but I learned quickly that the local people themselves would not speak to me without my having paid the requisite courtesy visit. In effect, the research permit from the ministry protected the local official, who needed to know that I had central permission to be in his neck of the woods, and the official permission from the local official protected the ordinary folk.

Of course, my own participation in these procedures ran counter to the usual scholarly guidelines, according to which one ensures one's academic independence and integrity by not being seen by research participants as sympathetic to, or having a relationship with, local officials. But acting ethically requires an appreciation and understanding of the research context, and in this particular case the field conditions required a reformulation of the original research design to ensure that all parties knew what I was doing, when, and with whom. I also had to reject my IRB's standard of objectivity in the sense that my sympathies for the plight of ordinary Rwandans were not concealed. I believe that as researchers we cannot be neutral or objective if such a stance displaces our aim to understand and explain local realities. At any rate, once the officials' preliminary permissions had been received, they all but ignored me—it seemed that I was left alone on the assumption that the local people had nothing to say that was of any interest. At the same time, my interactions with the officials allowed me to bond with the local people, as we could share how much we both did not like meeting government officials.

In order to get the fullest possible picture of public opinion, I chose not to decide in advance where I would carry out my fieldwork, but rather to follow the social and political networks of individuals. Before receiving permission from MINALOC to enter rural areas in Rwanda, I had already identified two local partner organizations that were willing to sponsor my research. One of these partners had close ties to the government and provided a representative who accompanied me to meetings with government officials and other state actors. The other partner offered advice on carrying out research in remote rural areas.[6] In gaining access to ordinary Rwandans through their personal networks, I was able build relationships with the individuals. This snowball method provided one hundred and sixty-seven names. I contacted ninety-five individuals, of whom thirty-seven agreed to participate. In addition to these individuals, I spoke to or observed approximately four hundred Rwandans in the course of their daily lives. As the links among individuals were revealed, my project took me across much of the southern part of the country and into other regions, from my base in Butare to Cyangugu in the west, north to Gitarama and northwest to Kibuye and Gisenyi. For example, the first participant in the research was born in Southern province, and her experiences during the genocide took place in the area where she had grown up, just south of Butare town. In sharing her life story with me, she spoke of family, friends, neighbors as well as her interactions with government officials before and after the genocide. Some of the experiences were positive, others negative. Regardless of the quality or nature of the relationship, I tried to follow up with each of the named individuals.

As it happened, all of the individuals who shared their life histories with me identified their ethnicity in the course of our time together. But I did not question them explicitly on this topic and did not base my research sample on ethnicity, as individuals had lived or died during the genocide on the basis of their ethnic identity as perceived by state agents. Another reason that I avoided discussion of ethnicity was that the policy of national unity and reconciliation (2003 Constitution of the Republic of Rwanda, articles 13 and 33) makes such a topic illegal. I also did not want to frame individual experiences of the genocide in ethnic terms. Instead, I sought to gain the widest possible representation of participants regardless of ethnicity, and across diverse forms of identity, including kin, friendship networks, class, and gender.

I kept fieldnotes of observations and informal conversations, which I prepared every evening. Formal interviews with state authorities yielded seventy-nine hours of recorded material, while my life history interviews yielded just more than three hundred and forty-eight hours. In order to ensure that I had full informed consent of participants, I first met with them to show them the voice recorder and demonstrate how it worked. As a general rule, I do not advocate the use of voice recorders unless such a preliminary meeting is possible, since few people understand initially that it provides a permanent record of the conversation. In the end, thirty-three

of my thirty-seven participants allowed me to record our formal conversations.

Two key factors explained the willingness of Rwandans to allow their stories to be captured digitally and stored for eventual publication by a foreign researcher. First was my willingness to assign value to what they had to say. I took an interest in the whole person, not just the stories of life before, during, and after the genocide. I spent most of my time building human relationships. This meant that I accompanied mothers as they went to pick up their children from school. I visited people at medical clinics and even carried one sick child on a makeshift stretcher to the local clinic. I watched and learned as men brewed *pombe* (banana beer). I also shared their sorrow about the genocide and their feelings of despair. I cried and laughed with them; I went to funerals, weddings, and christenings. I boiled watery tea, and collected firewood. In other words, I let trust and emotional engagement be the foundation of the research process and the relationships that I developed with each of the individuals who participated in my project.

I was only interested in what individuals were willing to share. I tried to live, as much as a white foreigner possibly could, as ordinary Rwandans live, albeit in Butare town. I walked everywhere, often barefoot, and took public transportation only when I had to go any extended distance. I traversed distances of less than 10 kilometres on foot; my translator for the day would often meet me at the agreed upon site rather than walk. This gave me a certain cachet as it became evident to many people that I was ready and willing to travel considerable distances on foot over steep hills, on hot humid days, as well as during the rainy season to meet them where they lived and in the context of their daily activities. Some of the most revealing conversations took place in the hills surrounding the valley where I lived, where I went for a walk every evening after dinner. During these walks I always met a broad cross-section of Rwandans, some of whom were formal participants in the life history aspect of the research. My broken Kinyarwanda was usually a source of delight as people stopped to listen to the *mzungu* (white foreigner) struggle with their language. When I ran into participants outside the formal interview setting, I did not greet them unless they greeted me first. This was out of respect, as questions about how and why we knew each other would inevitably arise. Sometimes, I was met with shouted greetings, such as "I forgot to tell you this when we met last time," or "Now you can come and meet my sister who I told you about. . . . "

My willingness to meet people where they live and work was also appreciated by all participants once the initial breaking-of-the-ice had been completed and we began to know each other on a personal level. If someone suggested that we meet at 4:00 a.m., before others could observe our conversation and before they became preoccupied with daily activities, I did so. These early morning rendezvous assured those individuals that I was committed to understanding as much as I could about their everyday lives, and they eventually provided an additional layer of trust as individuals realized

that I would protect what they told me in our formal meetings in which the recorder was present. When the government stopped my research, almost all of the individuals who had participated came to see me at my residence (some traveling over 100 miles) and revelled in the irony that I had been "arrested" for talking to them. I had "become one of them." Almost all of them, upon hearing that the project had been stopped by the government, let me know, either in person or through family and friends, that they were "glad" to have participated. The words of Jeanne, a Tutsi widow of the 1994 genocide, are emblematic:

> The problems we have aren't just because we are poor. Our problem is that, as peasants, we have no say in governance. We respect our leaders because that is our culture. Those who speak out can really get in trouble. That is what happened to you. You made it easy for us to speak out about our problems and the officials got really nervous and decided to stop your work. I am glad to be part of your research and I came to tell you in person that you are doing a good thing. If the government has noticed you among all the white researchers we see in [Butare] town, then I need to come and tell you to keep working and do your best when you get back to Canada. (Interview, Huye, 2006)

Just a week before I left the country Joseph, another Tutsi survivor of the genocide, stated, "My government knows what it will like and not like. You now know better what it is like to fear because of them. It's good for you because now you know even better what we feel when the [local government official] comes to visit" (interview, Butare, 2006)

The second factor explaining people's willingness to talk to me was that I, as a foreign researcher, was able to create a forum for ordinary people to talk about their lives. Several participants saw this as important to avoid future violence in Rwanda; others felt a sense of pride that a foreign researcher would spend so much time with them. Many voiced a feeling of anonymous security in sharing experiences with someone with no formal links to Rwanda. The sharing of secrets structured many of my interactions, and for many of the people who eventually decided to let me record their life stories, the recognition that I was serious about listening to them meant that people "outside Rwanda" could learn about their everyday struggles and perhaps "another storm like the genocide" could be stopped and their children "won't have to suffer like we are" (fieldnotes, Musanze, 2006). The emotional value of speaking frankly to a foreigner was expressed clearly by Olive, a Hutu widow of the genocide:

> I am glad you have come into my life. You gave me a safe space to share my inner thoughts. It is not always safe in the new Rwanda to share what you really think. I had that with some people before the war. But Rwandese, we need secrets, we don't share easily. But with you, I shared and my heart

> feels lighter. You understand because you want peace for all of us, even poor people like me. I am stronger because I met you, because we shared. (Interview, Butare, 2006)

Most individuals were aware of the role of psychotherapy in promoting emotional well-being since the postgenocide government had organized posttraumatic stress counselling units for survivors. "Therapist," therefore, was a role I could not escape—many individuals confided their troubles and heartaches to me, and some even asked during the long walks to and from interview sites if their behavior was "normal." In anticipation of the trauma that I expected to hear about, I had spent six weeks in Rwanda in October–November 2005, prior to fieldwork, participating in a trauma-counselor training session organized by a local nongovernmental organization. I also lived with genocide widows in a homestead run by Rwanda WomenNet that had been built to provide a safe home for widows of the genocide who were too traumatized, too poor, or too old to return to their home communities. Nevertheless, since I am not a therapist, these exchanges required special tact. An open-ended interview format seemed the most advisable, combined with the goal of allowing participants to direct the content of the interview according to their comfort level and willingness to speak about some topics and not others. Common sense and intuition were important here, as was a willingness to sit with and listen to participants regardless of the content of the conversation and its relevance to specific research questions. As researchers, we must act beyond the ethical imperative of doing no harm; we must display empathy, look out for the emotional safety of our interviewees, and respect individual choices to remain silent on some issues.

Buoying my formal and informal visits with ordinary Rwandans was my working knowledge of Kinyarwanda and awareness of the cultural norms and codes. Before arriving in Rwanda I worked with two of my eventual translators to discuss key concepts and to strengthen my understanding of their nuanced meanings to Kinyarwanda speakers. A book of Rwandan proverbs (Crépeau & Bizimana 1979) helped me understand euphemistic comments about, for example, cows, drums, cooking pots, and warriors. I often sat in on animated and lively discussions about what a particular proverb meant to a particular person and why. While my primary interest was in how proverbs govern the boundaries of acceptable speech, I also gained considerable insight into rural life, including gender roles and intergenerational differences, as well as some usually closely guarded secrets about social mores, domestic violence, and political authority. Some examples are "only the people of the same social rank can confide in one another" (*akali muu nda y'umututsi umuhutu ntakemenya*); "authority has the right to respect" (*utazi umwami amukeza alyamye*); and "one who doesn't know how to obey does not put himself under someone else's order" (*iyabye ingare ntiba inja*).

Throughout my fieldwork I tried to remain alert to the inevitable biases and entrenched opinions of my two local research assistants. It is important

for researchers to appreciate that local partner organizations and research assistants can influence the neutrality and objectivity of participants. Local people, whether elites or ordinary folk, have already established their take on their sociopolitical realities and are unlikely to waver from it. As much as researchers want to work with assistants who know the local landscape, it is important to keep in mind that everyone comes to the table with a specific subject position. This is where pre-fieldwork preparation, including knowledge of the history of the conflict as well as an understanding of the current political climate, was necessary in helping me identify not only potential risks to participants and interviewees, but also potential bias. I also had to appreciate my own role in the local "information economy," by which I mean the way in which information circulates among and between local actors and to what end. Research involves making choices about which voices are heard and whose knowledge counts, and in order to provide a nuanced and contextualized account of everyday life from the bottom up, I had to understand the context that shaped the communications.

## Who and When: The Life History Approach

Life histories have long been recognized as a valid means of knowledge production as postpositivist research has become increasingly legitimized in the social sciences (see, e.g., Cotterill & Letherby 1993; Reinharz 1992; Skeggs 2002). The knowledge produced from life history interviews of Rwandans does more than just reflect the realities of everyday life; it also challenges taken-for-granted beliefs, assertions, and assumptions of life before, during, and after the 1994 genocide. In other words, the life history interview offers a fruitful method to access the externally invisible "infrapolitics of the powerless" (Scott 1990:xiii).

Initially I made contact with potential participants alone, discussing in Kinyarwanda, or sometimes in Kiswahili, the possibility of our working together. Once the participant and I had established a formal working relationship, the next task was to determine which translator would accompany me to the first interview. Part of my research design that worked particularly well was giving participants an opportunity to choose the translator they wanted to work with. Almost all of the assumptions I made about who would want to work with which translator turned out to be incorrect. For example, in one case I presumed that a Tutsi woman who had been raped during the genocide would want to be interviewed by a woman translator who had also been raped. Instead, she opted for the young man who had returned to Rwanda after the genocide because she felt she would feel less ashamed to "tell a boy" who would not know much about her life before or after the genocide and who had no knowledge of her personal ties or alliances.

I worked with four research assistants to transcribe what the voice recorder captured before translating the material into English for possible

publication. No member of the research assistance team was mentioned by name in my fieldnotes, and the discussions with each of them about whether or not to acknowledge their individual contribution to my research resulted in an added level of respect between team members and me. We were all aware of the politically sensitive nature of the research, and the assurance of confidentiality led to increased trust and rapport between us. The assistants also chose not to meet one another, preferring to transfer files through me. I initially balked at this idea, but quickly realized that it was an additional safeguard that would protect my participants should the government interfere in my project. My team consisted of a male returnee whose family had been exiled in Congo in the 1960s and who was born abroad and did not experience the genocide directly; a man who lived through the genocide as a young teenager; a woman who was raped during the genocide and lost her entire family; and a woman who survived the 1995 attack at Kibeho and lost several family members after the genocide officially ended in July 1994. Two of the assistants were of mixed ethnic heritage, with one Tutsi and one Hutu parent. Both women were mothers, as were many participants, and we were able to share experiences of motherhood and continue our discussions about our lives long after the voice recorder had been turned off. None of this postinterview material is quoted in the research, but it did result in a deeper and more nuanced interview process as we spoke about topics that might have been off-limits without this personal rapport.

Obtaining the informed consent of participants was a challenge. Like the ordinary people I would meet and talk with in the street or in the hills, most of the "formal" life history participants were illiterate and unable to understand the concepts associated with informed consent. I had two ways of dealing with this. First, I always explained my presence as a foreign researcher and that I was particularly interested in how national unity and reconciliation processes were progressing for specific individuals. This approach invariably resulted in anecdotal evidence about a friend, relative, or associate of the person I was speaking to—the genocide touched everyone in Rwanda, even those who returned after 1994. Even the most nonchalant beginnings to a conversation, like "Did you see the Arsenal [soccer] game last night?" often resulted in a story of someone who had to deal with the local authorities in pursuit of unity and reconciliation, as individuals wanted to know what I was doing in Rwanda and why. Second, with the life history participants, I tried to make it clear that their voices (in the form of text) would be quoted at length and verbatim and that it was my job as the researcher/writer to contextualize their stories within broader social, political, and historical trends in Rwanda.

Anonymity during the research process itself was virtually impossible, but with the life history participants I followed similar safeguards to those I used with my assistants to ensure that Rwandan government officials would

never be able to identify them, should they ever want to, either during the research itself or afterward, as a consequence of any of my publications. I never used the names of participants during the interviews, nor did I type or write their names in the transcripts or fieldnotes. Where a name might appear in an audio recording, I blanked it out before the transcription was made by a member of the research assistance team. My choice to use a digital voice recorder made erasing select parts of the file manageable and did not compromise the overall integrity of the recording. I also blanked out any information that could be used to identify a participant, such as the names of relatives or friends, associational memberships, or names of towns, churches, or memorial sites.

No two interviews were the same. Some lasted for hours, and included sharing a drink or a meal with the individual and his or her family while others lasted only a few minutes. The first interview always began with the question, "How did you grow up?" Subsequent interviews would pick up a theme from our previous discussion, unless the participant had something specific to share. Participants often responded with a long narrative about either the genocide itself or its aftermath: where they were, whom they were with, what they saw, what they heard, and how "everything" changed after "that." Others spoke about their trauma; still others about the experience of living with HIV/AIDS. Some spoke at length about killings they had performed or witnessed. Most complained about increasing poverty. All spoke about a loss of personal safety and increased fear and insecurity in their home communities since the genocide.

I never asked specific questions about individual experiences during the genocide as a matter of respect and to ensure that the individual remained in control of the conversation as much as possible in the power-laden relationship between a foreign researcher and an ordinary Rwandan. Some revisited narratives about specific acts of violence during the genocide at the beginning of subsequent meetings, which further facilitated analysis as each meeting revealed slightly more or different information. Sometimes subsequent meetings would be gripe sessions, in which the participant would complain to me about a friend or relative, or the abuses of an "important person," meaning someone higher up on the social ladder. Stories of the excesses of local officials or the lack of morality of religious leaders would often fill our conversations.

I never took notes, opting instead for an active listening approach that allowed me to focus on what was being said, or not said, observing body language and nervous habits and listening for possible denials or revisions from our previous interviews. The interpreter would prepare the Kinyarwanda transcription before each meeting, and we would arrive with the printed page in hand to show the participant the result of our previous interview. Only a handful of participants could read, so most listened to what he or she had said before the interpreter transcribed it into English,

and I encrypted the file to a password-protected Adobe Acrobat file that was uploaded to a secure storage site every evening. I kept no files on my computer any longer than necessary. At this point, I would destroy the paper copy and erase the voice recording. All participants listened to themselves early in the research, many enjoying hearing themselves for the first time, and most made corrections, or refined comments they had made at our previous meeting. While most participants stopped listening to the material from previous meetings as we moved away from topics dealing with the genocide and the postgenocide government, I continued this process throughout the research, relying on six voice recorders and a secure process of translating and transcribing the interview material.

Multiple meetings with the same participants made it possible not only to revisit events, but also for both parties to the research relationship—researcher and researched—to develop relaxed interactions. I sometimes used photographs, usually from local newspapers, as a prompt (a technique learned from Helen Codere [1962]). The research was entirely open-ended, with few closed questions posed, except to clarify. I spent almost one hundred hours with each team member poring over the interview material, carefully working through meaning and context to ensure that the translations were as accurate as possible.

I did not pay any of my participants directly for the time spent in interviews, although I did provide sodas and tea and sometimes we would share a meal if appropriate. There was an in-kind payment for every participant, however, as I provided 2500Frw (approx. CN$7) phone cards for use at public call boxes in the event that an emotional crisis connected to the interview manifested itself afterward. This rarely proved effective as the counselors often did not have enough credit on their cell phones to accept incoming calls, and some participants just sold the cards "to get a little something to eat" (interview with a Tutsi widow, Gaseke, 2006). Others refused to talk to "a stranger" about their deepest secrets and were "disappointed" that I would offer a phonecall instead of just staying with them and "sharing a bit" (interview with a Tutsi widow, Sovu, 2006).

I did not verify the narratives that were generated through the life history method, except to ascertain the commitment of the individual speaker to his or her own life story. Instead, I acknowledge that the individual narratives are historically situated and enmeshed in relationships of power. In addition, I understand that each narrative is shaped by each person's selective and often self-interested memory. Some elements of what was narrated to me may actually constitute something that happed to a friend or relative of the speaker, or vice versa. For example, among survivor women it was common to learn early in our relationship that the sister or neighbor had been raped during the genocide. Sometimes, later on, the individual would report that in fact she was the person who had been raped during the war. I am also aware that my role as author and researcher is critical, and a core

assumption driving my use of the life history method is that the material gathered is mutually constituted. Together, the researcher and researched bring the life history stories to life; the text is coproduced.

## Conclusions

Micro-level ethnographic research in highly politicized research environments is challenging for a variety of methodological and ethical reasons as researchers encounter the difficult and often dangerous work of undertaking empirical research in locations where the political situation is tense, socioeconomic devastation is the norm, and the experience of having lived through violence is still fresh in the minds of local actors, combatants, and civilians alike. Upholding the imperative of "doing no harm" is intensified in highly politicized environments where the general unpredictability of events is often compounded by a climate of fear and insecurity for many local residents. Researchers always need to be conscious of and seek to minimize potential risks to those they study both during the research process as well as after it has ended. Micro-level ethnographic research after mass violence or conflict among marginal and vulnerable populations further amplifies the usual challenges of fieldwork: Identifying the research site, building rapport and trust with respondents, obtaining informed consent among a representative sample, safeguarding the anonymity and confidentiality of all research materials, instituting an appropriate interview protocol for respondents (including special mechanisms for traumatized individuals), and working with local research assistants and translators all take on a heightened importance in postconflict environments.

It is critical to gather information on the terms and conditions of those who participate in your research project, and to determine ways of remediating the power relations inherent in the research relationship. It is the responsibility of the researcher to design and then conduct research in a thoughtful and appropriate way. The completed or on-going research methodologies of those who have already conducted research in difficult settings are an important first resource.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the Rwandans who agreed to participate in my research project as well as my research assistants and translators (all of whom requested anonymity) for making this publication possible. I also thank Yolande Bouka, Danielle de Lame, Bert Ingelaere, Jude Murison, Carla Suarez, Lars Waldorf, and five anonymous reviewers for their instructive comments in developing this article, as well as Ralph Faulkingham and Ella Kusnetz at the *African Studies Review* for their editorial patience and support in bringing this article to publication. I also thank the Canadian Consortium on Human Security, the Faculty of Graduate Studies at Dalhousie University,

the International Development Research Centre, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for financial support.

## References

Codere, Helen. 1962. "Power in Ruanda." *Anthropologica* 4: 45–85.

Cotterill, Pam, and Gayle Letherby. 1993. "Weaving Stories: Personal Auto/biographies in Feminist Research." *Sociology* 27 (1): 67–80.

Crépeau, Pierre, and Simon Bizimana. 1979. *Proverbes du Rwanda*. Tervuren: Musée royale de l'Afrique centrale.

Fujii, Lee Ann. 2009. *Killing Neighbors: Webs of Violence in Rwanda*. Ithaca, N.Y. : Cornell University Press.

Ingelaere, Bert. 2010. "Do We Understand Life after Genocide? Center and Periphery in the Construction of Knowledge in Postgenocide Rwanda." *African Studies Review* 53: 41–59.

King, Elisabeth. 2009. "From Data Problems to Data Points: Challenges and Opportunities of Research in Postgenocide Rwanda." *African Studies Review* 52: 128–48.

Malkki, Lisa. 1995. *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Nordstrom, Carolyn. 1997. *A Different Kind of War Story*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Pottier, Johan. 2002. *Reimagining Rwanda: Conflict, Survival and Disinformation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Reinharz, Shulamit. 1992. *Feminist Methods in Social Research*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Republic of Rwanda. Legal and Constitutional Commission. 2003. *The Constitution of the Republic of Rwanda*. Kigali: LCC.

Schensul, Stephen, Jean Schensul, and Margaret LeCompte. 1999. *Essential Ethnographic Methods: Observations, Interviews, and Questionnaires*. Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press.

Scott, James. 1985. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

_____. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Skeggs, Beverley. 2002. "Techniques for Telling the Reflexive Self." In *Qualitative Research in Action*, edited by Tim May, 349–74. London: Sage Publishers.

Sriram, Chandra Lekha, et al., eds. 2009. *Surviving Research: Doing Fieldwork in Difficult and Violent Situations*. London: Routledge.

Thomson, Susan. 2009a. "Resisting Reconciliation: State Power and Everyday Life in Post-genocide Rwanda." Ph.D. diss., Dalhousie University.

_____. 2009b. "'That Is Not What We Authorised You to Do . . .': Access and Government Interference in Highly Politicised Research Environments." In *Surviving Research: Doing Fieldwork in Difficult and Violent Situations*, edited by Chandra Lekha Sriram et al., 108–23. London: Routledge.

_____. Forthcoming. "Re-education for Reconciliation: Participant Observations on *Ingando*." In *Remaking Rwanda: State Building and Human Rights after Mass Violence*, edited by Scott Straus and Lars Waldorf, 480–92. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Wood, Elizabeth Jean. 2006. "The Ethical Challenges of Field Research in Conflict Zones." *Qualitative Sociology* 29: 373–86.

## Notes

1. Research that highlights the specific challenges and opportunities of working with individuals who have lived through conflict and violence has received limited attention in the literature, although some publications are beginning to fill the void. See, for example, Nordstrom (1997); Sriram et al. (2009); and Wood (2006).
2. Throughout the article, I do not refer to "informants" or "respondents" but rather to "participants" to acknowledge the important role of these participants in sharing the knowledge that has made the production of this text possible.
3. In my own research, going through nine drafts of my ethics proposal to the IRB at my home institution was invaluable in safeguarding the evidence I gathered during fieldwork, as well as my own safety and that of the Rwandans who agreed to participate in my project. Approval from the Research Ethics Board (Human Subjects) at Dalhousie University to conduct my research was received in April 2006 (project # 2005-1257). Unfortunately, Dalhousie's REB did not grant permission to interview prisoners who allegedly committed acts of genocide until August 2006, and my research was halted by the government three weeks later.

   There are some valuable online resources that allow researchers to work with other scholars who have already successfully undertaken research in difficult settings. See, e.g., the "Field Research and Ethics" link on the States and Security Program Web site: www.statesandsecurity.org. Researchers can also look for subject-specific ethical guidelines such as those prepared in 2006 for working with children living in armed conflict, available from the Refugee Studies Centre: www.rsc.ox.ac.uk.
4. International journalists coined the phrase "the 'new' Rwanda" in July 1994 to explain the monumental changes in Rwandan society envisaged by the RPF-led government of national unity and reconciliation (see Pottier 2002). The RPF leadership then picked up the phrase in some of its policy documents, and the speeches of senior government officials, notably President Kagame, to justify its policy choices. For example, "In the 'new' Rwanda, we do not tolerate ethnic divisionism of any kind. Those who preach it will suffer the consequences . . ." (executive secretary of the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission, speaking on Contact FM, Kigali, April 2006).
5. I discuss the experience of having my research permit revoked and its impact on my research in Thomson (2009b) and my re-education camp experience in Thomson (forthcoming).
6. I do not identify my local partner organizations by name for fear of creating problems for my research subjects, my research assistants, and representatives of those organizations.