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Power and Rhetoric's Role in the Rwandan Genocide

“The question is, how can forms of identity and identification of such scope—ethnic labels that are abstract containers for the identities of thousands, often millions, of persons—become transformed into instruments of the most brutally intimate forms of violence?”

-Arjun Appadurai

One of the most significant questions of our time, brought to light by the revered ideologist Arjun Appadurai in his essay, *Dead Certainty: Ethnic Violence in the Era of Globalization*, implores contemplation of the process wherein a mere social categorization transcends its origin as an intangible concept, giving rise to massive, fatal consequences. To an American, genocide is an abstract concept foreign to the life lived in pursuit and service of the American Dream. Americans miss the big picture. Distant from and unaware to the facts of pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial African history, many Americans still assume Africa is filled with underdeveloped, warring tribal cultures. This perspective succeeds in turning many a blind eye to the structuralized social hierarchies pre-existing within these cultures and more relevantly the cultural wounds inflicted by Western imperialist powers like Germany, Belgium and France. In their gamble with power and pursuit of self-benefaction, these nations irreversibly altered the greater political paradigm once inherent to Africa, imposing a new collective consciousness—one bound by the constraints of social categorization—for the many people across this continent.

In Rwanda, two opposing tribal groups, the Hutus and the Tutsis, struggle violently for conquest, for empowerment, and to imbue their collective self with distinct identity. Fostered during the 19th-century

European conquest, these mounting struggles have nurtured explicit definitions of Hutu and Tutsi. Born from insecurity and uncertainty stemming from favoritism during imperialistic rule, these ethnic labels create a desire for certainty attainable only through acceptance of severely categorical identities. Using Appadurai's observations—on how the powerful voices in Rwanda's traditionally oral society successfully used communication channels for spreading rhetoric bent upon creating specific identities dependent on nativeness—as a hypothetical anchor, the complex conditions that conceivably nurtured explosive racial violence in our globalized era are easier to grasp. Further, by exploring theories from anthropologist Liisa Malkki's studies on exiled Hutu refugees in *Purity and Exile* and European colonizers' role in shaping social categories and instilling antagonism through favoritism in Philip Gourevitch's *We wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with our families: Stories from Rwanda*, foreigners, living within utterly different social constructs themselves, can more deeply understand how and why these ethnic labels may have converted to motives for merciless violence in Rwanda.

In April 1994, an estimated 800,000 Rwandan Tutsis died within a 100-day period, slaughtered by their Hutu neighbors and relatives. This is not an isolated, reactionary incident. This kind of wide-scale operation does not simply happen overnight. It stems from highly orchestrated politics involving “propaganda, rumor, prejudice and memory”, bent on obtaining and controlling power (Appadurai 305). As Appadurai discussed in his work on identity, “forms of knowledge [are]...associated with heightened conviction...capable of producing inhumane degrees of violence”, thus this gruesome event grew from a developing certainty (305). Using the aforementioned rhetorical tactics centered on alleviating all painful uncertainty by defining the self through rejecting and eliminating the “other”, those pulling the strings fostered and enforced a conviction based in purity and autochthony—as the theorist Peter Geschiere defined it, “to be born from the soil”—to justify murder while keeping their hands relatively clean (2). Looking for certainty, belonging, success and protection, normal folk butchered their neighbors in villages and towns all across their homeland. This methodical population control

owes its success to Rwanda's long-term integration of social constructs organized by necessary relationships to the land into everyday hegemonic identities. Thus, it seems the genocide arose neither from Rwanda's mid-20th-century independence nor from European colonialism in the late-19th century.

Instead, as anthropologist Liisa Malkki and her research sources argue, "a castelike hierarchy of categories...formed" that "centered around cattle clientship" in ancient times when Central Africa's inhabitants first organized cultural groups and interacted with one another socially ("Historical Contexts" 25). Though most scholars agree that the quantitatively reliable historical evidence pertaining to central Africa's development proves meager—thereby challenging accurate study—most call the area's first inhabitants the Twa. Known as forest dwellers and hunters, these people lived simply until the Hutu, an agriculturalist group, filtered into the land to co-exist among them. Since the Twa lived nomadically and represented only a minority within the population, they posed no threat to the Hutus' agrarian subsistence, allowing the two groups to exist peacefully, while some oral traditions suggest the Hutu "constituted relatively decentralized, 'minor polities'" controlled by kings (Malkki, "Historical Contexts" 21). The Hutus later adopted this historical perspective, suggesting that they helped to build Rwanda as a civilized, social community through its institution of early politics that promoted peaceful interaction with the indigenous Twa, to support arguments that they had natural rights to the country because they birthed it. Over time, a third group called the pastoral Tutsi migrated into the territory, which then primarily bore Hutus. This "large-scale movement of persons" brought with it a different social and economic structure, so the Hutus initially tolerated and adapted to the Tutsi methods for existence because they needed the same land and natural resources to prosper (Appadurai 308). Adopting the Hutus' historical view as a reference point, Malkki draws from the comparative study of Burundi and Rwanda by Lemarchand, which discusses cattle clientship's development in Rwanda. On questioning how a minority group like the Tutsi so easily attained dominance in the region,

Lemarchand adopts the "more widely accepted explanation...that the Tutsi used their cattle as a lever of economic power...[in] a special form of cattle clientship, or cattle contract...[to acquire] sovereign political rights over their Hutu clients" (qtd. in Malkki, "Historical Contexts" 25). To Lemarchand it seems the contract began as a more fluid and symbiotic relationship centered on "mutual dependence" involving "the exchange of cattle for agricultural products"; however, the cattle's substantial value and importance far outweighed crops, eventually tipping the scales to favor the Tutsi pastoralists (qtd. in Malkki, "Historical Contexts" 26).

Whether or not this relationship was purposefully intended is practically untraceable, as Philip Gourevitch points out in his journalistic account of the Rwandan genocide and its aftermath, *We wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with our families: Stories from Rwanda*. To him, the theories on original settlers are solely traditional legends passed down as what Malkki deemed "mythico-history", developments of historical lineage with a moralistic emphasis ("The Mythico" 54). Each group wove their own tale explaining their origins and why they were the favored race: the Hutu claimed moral privilege to autochthony because they first settled and brought civilization to the Twa in Rwanda, while the Tutsi believed they were the chosen people, given cattle as a valuable gift by a heavenly power in order to prosper (Gourevitch 47-48). These mythico-histories became important later in the 20th century when the Hutus overthrew the Tutsi rulers and the new politicians emphasized their authentic origins rooted in the land, creating, as Appadurai discussed in his discourse on identity, an "uncertainty...about whether...[the Tutsis] really [were] what they claim[ed] or appear[ed] to be or have historically been" (308). Yet, despite their differing originations, Gourevitch noticed the Hutu and Tutsi groups' intermingling in circumstances relating to marriage, religion and politics, for they shared the same language and land. Nevertheless, because these cultural labels connected directly with their life's work, Hutus were associated with farming and Tutsis with the cattle they shepherded. Unfortunately, "this was the original inequality: cattle [were] a more valuable asset than produce...so the word Tutsi became

synonymous with a political and economic elite” (48).

From that point forward, stemming from necessity and convenience, these two groups remained tied together by “*buhake*”, a mutually dependent “cattle contract” relationship—the Hutus reliant on the Tutsis for providing precious cows and the Tutsis dependent on the Hutus for tending land so that both groups might mutually prosper from its harvest (Malkki, “Historical Contexts” 26). Yet, the Tutsis’ economically superior position, based on cattle control, granted them ample social advantage. Associating them with the cream of the crop because of their privileged political and financial existence, thus separating themselves from the rest of the commoners, the Hutu majority considered the Tutsis excessive outsiders that needed removal. Using Appadurai’s ideas on the conditions for uncertainty as a reference for Rwanda’s partisanship, as long as the favored Tutsis persisted in Rwanda, the working class Hutus would always harbor “uncertainty creat[ing] intolerable anxiety about [their] relationship...to state-provided goods” since these “entitlements [were] frequently directly tied to who ‘you’ [were] and thus to who ‘they’ [were]” (308). In spite of this social imbalance, the class separation eventually expanded into a tiered hierarchy centered on a single Tutsi king, called the “*Mwami*” (Gourevitch 49).

The first colonial invasion by the Germans in the late-19th century confirmed this political structure; however, history predating these events is completely unknown and therefore “dangerous” because history inherently centers on groups vying for power, and as Gourevitch states, “power consists in the ability to make others inhabit your story of their reality” (48). Essentially, from within a society shaped around oral traditions, the victors automatically procure a monumental advantage. Whether achieved through extermination, banishment or surrender, the conqueror survives as the only source left to narrate the tale. In Rwanda’s case, the ruling Tutsi, laxly managed by the Germans and Belgians, controlled the information flow; therefore, they held the creative and economic power to emphasize their own overriding narrative. Yet, when Rwanda secured independence and the Hutus took over, the new political rulers—savvy to the vast populace’s habits and desires—relied on oral

methods, specifically through radio transmission and printed articles, to espouse purist Hutu beliefs and slowly normalize subversive, violent views for the Rwanda audience. Reaching its height in the year before the genocide occurred, 1993, national radio stations like the Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM) and Radio Rwanda began spouting radical Hutu ideals, taking propaganda straight from the extremist newspaper *Kangura* while also functioning as a hip, entertaining radio outlet for Rwandans, especially the youth population (Gourevitch 99). Mixing doses of racist propaganda with popular music caused the listeners to inadvertently absorb and incorporate the ideas into their own personal schemas (Gourevitch 100).

This clever political tactic is vitally important, but when analyzing the exact motivation for the genocide and questioning what could spur a whole population to zealously murder, one must consider two things: the Hutu power’s constant labor to remain in control and the subversive rhetoric they employed to condition the masses to do their dirty work. Maintaining their power necessitated sustaining high violence and opposition levels to prevent the population from co-existing neutrally, lest that lead to benevolence and independence. To achieve this situation, the Hutu elite bombarded the public with rhetorical messages via newsprint and radio that maligned the Tutsis. Yet when questioning, as Appadurai stated in *Dead Certainty: Ethnic Violence in the Era of Globalization*, “the transformation of neighbours and friends into monsters” (316), it’s essential to note that in Rwanda’s case “verbal propaganda and mass-mediated images...literally turn[ed] ordinary faces into abominations that must be destroyed” (316). Through the repeated emphasis on Tutsis as “the other” in relation to the heavily emphasized true and pure ethnic aspects inherent in Hutus, the radio broadcasters and newspaper writers associated Tutsi with non-human qualities, comparing them to cockroaches needing squashing. By dehumanizing their enemy, while supporting a collective self-identity rooted in autochthony, the Hutu power figures and pawns justified the Tutsi slaughter by convincing the masses to “let me kill you before you kill me”, thereby acting preemptively in self-defense (322). Additionally,

as Gourevitch pointed out, the authoritarian government rationalized the violence using an ideology explaining, “the logic’...of genocide was promoted as a way not to create suffering but to alleviate it” (95). This was already a main concern held by the Hutu individuals who endured serfdom under Tutsi rule, as well as the poorer individuals who resented the Tutsis’ prevalent prosperity.

In recollecting the events leading up to the genocide, both Malkki and Gourevitch, as well as their peers, sought to gain understanding and to clarify the underlying motives of genocide and its effects upon identity. Both ran up against entirely fallible human accounts with notably lacking physical evidence. Delving to understand these central African people, both authors felt exposed to the whim of their interviewees. As Malkki describes in *Purity and Exile*, she relied on the varying stories from the Burundian refugees in Tanzanian camps who actively defined themselves through the “ordering and reordering of social and political categories...[,]historical events, processes, and relationships..., reinterpret[ing] them within a deeply moral scheme of good and evil” (“Historical Contexts” 56). During Gourevitch’s visits to Rwanda, only a year after the ‘94 genocide, he interviewed a mix of victims, perpetrators and key political figures. In recalling the fresh circumstances, these subjects struggled to analyze the situation themselves, just mechanically responding to topics hoping to grasp some shallow “understandings, ways of thinking about the defiant human condition at the end of this century of unforeseen extremity” (183). Aspiring to cope with trauma, the Burundian refugees actively participated in recreating their own history to benefit and bolster their self-identity as Hutus. Within their present condition, isolated and displaced from the land connected to their history, the refugees “emphasized the boundaries between self and other” essentially defining themselves “as that which ‘The Tutsi’ [was] not” (Malkki, “The Mythico” 54). The Rwandans, on the other hand, did not have that luxury. The situation trapped those left alive on the same homeland soil where the mass murdering occurred, which by then bore no resemblance, physically or socially, to its formerly peaceful existence. Taking a different approach, Appadurai sought to understand

precise ethnic violence, carried out by “ordinary persons against other persons with whom they may have—or could have—previously lived in relative amity” by discussing the effect that globalization had in fostering uncertainty amongst people who experienced an influx of diversity within their formerly sheltered cultures (307). Trying to conquer these social ambivalences, villagers found certainty in “ethnic labels and categories...produc[ed] by...state policies and techniques” like purist rhetoric “to generate large-scale identities, which [became] significant imagined affiliations for large numbers of people” (306). Comforted by a community that shared origins, these people blindly absorbed the violent discourse enunciated by their leaders, which drew the foreigners as “ethnic enemies” (312).

Looking at all three theorists’ studies, though, it seems that Malkki’s and Gourevitch’s approaches were somewhat similar in their specificity, while Appadurai’s study analyzed the more global situation, drawing from several regional examples and sources for support. Malkki studied idealized identities and their effect upon people’s actions and upbringing, and Gourevitch focused on Rwandan stories about persisting after the bloodbath and conflict narratives from the genocide, combined with an overriding assumption that foreign powers’ role in supporting the genocide was vast and purposeful. Appadurai, on the other hand, attempted to answer his own question regarding the phenomenon of personal and brutal ethnic violence occurring all over the African continent by looking at the larger social picture instead of at an isolated event. Nevertheless, the link that connects all the diverse incidents discussed by the theorists is the prevalence of globalization, which brought major changes to the societies it invaded, thus inciting a theme common in all the areas: uncertainty of the self in regards to a foreign threat. More specifically, Appadurai points out that dangerous certainty—what he deems “dead certainty”—often occurs through the adoption of radical, violent propaganda dispensed by those in power, who convince people to kill other designated races in order to affirm their own identity (322). Despite Malkki’s and Gourevitch’s difficulty at gaining insight from the current generations—who either work hard to repress and

change their collective narrative or remain jaded from bearing utter social upheaval—and Appadurai’s conjecture that a rising globalized economy caused foreign infiltration, displacement and incertitude, it’s pertinent to discuss what impact the colonial powers played in situating Rwanda for disaster.

Upon entering Rwanda after the 1884 Berlin Conference, the Germans discovered a powerfully exclusive feudal system that paid them no mind. Yet, a year later the influential Mwami Rwabugiri, by far the most ambitious and sectarian Rwandan king, died, and the Germans observed Rwanda’s social structure crumble in a politically turbulent climate as the remaining royal Tutsi clans fought over power (Gourevitch 54). The formerly neutral foreigners set up camp and commenced direct rule by the Germans. Akin to the Hutus’ reliance on Tutsis for cattle, the ruling Tutsi—desperate to remain in power over the Hutu majority—cooperated with the Germans to receive assistance. Gourevitch describes this relationship as a “dual colonialism”...whereby the “Tutsi elites exploited the protection and license extended by the Germans to...further their hegemony over the Hutus” (54). Infatuated with the Tutsi minority’s rule over the majority population, as well as their more European features, the Germans furthered the distinctions between the two races so that once Belgium took over after World War I, the divisions were clear-cut (54).

Similarly fascinated with the natives’ politics and physique, the Belgians applied systematic tests to categorize people based on physical features like hair, bone structure and height. Favoring the Tutsis’ appearance, which they deemed fitter for ruling than laboring, the Belgians issued ethnicity cards to organize all citizens into either racial category. Dealing with insecurities and confusion themselves, European colonizers could not differentiate between the highly diversified, pluralist tribes, so they categorized people by shallow, physical traits that to them were more manageable. Yet, in doing this they transferred their contempt for variety onto the people by forcing them to mold to certain ethnic definitions, which with the absence of their former social fluctuation, made conforming obligatory (Gourevitch 55-56). Drawing from Malkki’s

study, Appadurai discusses her observation that these “earl[y] colonial efforts to reduce the complex social differences among local ethnic groups to simple taxonomy of racial-physical signs” dramatically favored the Tutsi population by giving them powerful and lucrative positions within society (309). This favoritism eliminated the more fluid and equalized cattle clientship relationship in which the two groups coexisted somewhat peacefully, sharing the same land. Instead, it developed into a racial caste structure whereby the Hutu, resembling feudal slaves, were required to work the land. The Hutu resented their suppressed position, so a “theme of secrecy and trickery pervaded Hutu ideas about the Tutsi elite” and as victims, they viewed their rulers as “thieves who stole the country” (313).

Over time, as the Tutsis became increasingly comfortable in their lush lifestyles, they feared losing their privilege. To avoid incurring the hatred they heaped upon the Hutus, the Tutsis followed Belgian orders to oversee Hutu “forced labor, which required armies of Hutus to toil en masse as plantation chattel” (Gourevitch 57). By the time the Belgians left in the mid-20th century, the identity cards and supreme Tutsi reign admonished all chance for Hutus to advance in social class or attain any local control. This racially divided indoctrination, supposedly supported by scientific and logical data, abolished the previously dynamic social hierarchy resonant within Rwandan culture (57). In result, Gourevitch argues, “on either side of the Hutu-Tutsi divide there developed mutually exclusive discourses based on the competing claims of entitlement and injury” (58). In this orally focused society, as the cattle clientship relationship diminished, newer generations grew up with racial divisions that influenced their self-identity. Tutsis enjoyed what they understood as genetic privilege and Hutus felt subjugated, having experienced the “large labels” of racial heritage “[become] unstable, indeterminate, and socially volatile”, so they rallied together under historical “origin” stories that defined the Tutsis as outsiders, thereby granting them the autochthony and authentic self-identity they deserved (Appadurai 322). After undergoing racism and classism for so many decades, Hutus rebelled and took power after Belgium withdrew, giving Rwanda its

independence. Both sides endured much upheaval and violence in the process, but once the Hutu president Juvénal Habyarimana took office in 1973, he implemented an extreme systematic cultivation centered on rediscovering Hutu identity (Gourevitch 69).

Under his rule, Habyarimana favored and protected his race thereby letting the Hutu political power assert its rhetorical dominance over the masses. This idealist discourse fully actualized in 1990 when the president's wife, Madame Agathe, gathered Rwandan covert extremists, known as the "*akazu*", to brainstorm developing a newspaper filled with Hutu propaganda (Gourevitch 85). Initially created to mock a rival newspaper, *Kangura* eventually expanded into a forum for rhetorical discussion centered on vilifying the Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) (Gourevitch 86). Additionally, the newspaper printed articles like "The Ten Hutu Commandments" that served to "articulate a doctrine of militant Hutu purity" by defining the essential and good ethnic qualities (Gourevitch 87-88). Most striking amongst these rules is the eighth commandment that states every Hutu's duty is to "stop having mercy on the Tutsis" (Gourevitch 88). Building upon the logic that all Tutsis were "innately skilled in the arts of deception" the Hutu power erased the Tutsis' humanity, framing them as latent Rwandan spies apt to use manipulation and bent on bringing about the common people's failure (Appadurai 313). In a zealous desire for power, acceptance and retribution, Hutus soaked up this immensely popular propaganda and rhetoric because it solidified their right to flourish unrestrained, enjoying life without foreign interference and control. Throughout this time the Hutu extremists, fondly called Hutu Power, commissioned jobless youths for military "civil defense", calling them the "*interahamwe*—'those who attack together'" (Gourevitch 93). Rallying the unmotivated boys around acceptance, while using incentives like offering free beer and teaching inclusive tactics that spun military drills as popular acts, Hutu power built their military base by brainwashing youth into believing that Hutu purity and aggression was necessary and acceptable (Gourevitch 93).

As both Malkki and Gourevitch attempted, one can only try to study the complex situation through the people who experienced it.

Nevertheless, ascertaining the facts from a culture with an oral tradition dominated by power, desire, and rhetoric mars the effort and muddles the details of the truth. Even Appadurai, who only looked at a minute aspect of violence concerning people who lived in intimate proximity to one another, found difficulty in clearly defining and explaining genocidal acts, only claiming that "these actions indicate a deep and dramatic uncertainty about the ethnic self" (322). Adding to the trouble of gathering answers for the heavy questions relating to genocide is the "epidemic of shame...collusion of silence, and [the] violent need for forgetting" that occurs after the fact (322). Without the support and rationalization provided by propaganda pushers who used radio and newspaper communication as tools to instigate violence, the initial adrenaline rush and supposedly "cathartic" feeling disappeared and only the gross aftereffects remained. In this sobering state, left with hard reality and deadly consequences, the individuals who previously conformed to attain certainty experience a resurgence of uncertainty that only "add[s] underground fuel for new episodes of violence" as they try again to find themselves at any risk (322).

Yet, there are no easy answers for a chain of violence perpetuated and complicated with each new generation reacting to the brutal past. Looking at former times, this cycle is a cornerstone to the history of central Africa, but there is no specific side to blame. Using an "us versus them" dichotomy, all competing groups strive to empower themselves by justifying their actions and defending against the "other". Struggling for this power, both sides condone malice and reinvent the details of morality in order to improve their chance to prosper. In an ambiguous history with no clear-cut facts, physical features or inherent essence cannot define people—only their actions. Morality is a conception of humanity, relative to the society in which it functions. If the labels "good" and "bad" don't apply in these tempestuous realms then there are no innocents, just the ruthless and the helpless.

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