*From Surviving to Living: Voice, Trauma and Witness in Rwandan Women’s Writing*, by Catherine Gilbert.Montpellier: Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée, 2018. 294 pages. ISBN 978-2-36781-268-7. EUR 27.

Catherine Gilbert’s *From Surviving to Living: Voice, Trauma and Witness in Rwandan Women’s Writing* (2018) presents a first book-length study in English on Rwandan women’s autobiographical writing about the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda. Gilbert’s research focuses on cultural responses to and commemorative practices of the genocide in which more than a million Tutsi, Hutu who opposed violence and Twa were killed by Hutu extremists. The monograph brings together complex questions about witnessing, narrating trauma, silence and learning to live again after genocide. *From Surviving to Living* received the SAGE *Memory Studies* Journal and Memory Studies Association Outstanding First Book Annual Award in 2019 in recognition of its contribution to the dialogue between trauma and memory studies. The monograph illuminates the potential of these fields and related theory to address and be complemented by Rwandan narratives.

Gilbert analyses written testimonies but her readings are extensively contextualised with insights gained from interviews with some survivor-witness authors and research into paratext and the production process. In bringing together these materials, Gilbert examines myriad points in time and thus the development of retrospective view of the genocide and its aftermath. Title *From Surviving to Living* captures the change in post-genocide experiences. In the preface, the author acknowledges the individuals’ different definitions for what it means to live beyond struggling with the everyday material existence, identifying that for Berthe Kayitesi living is about ‘control over her life’ and goals (19). Gilbert’s sensitive engagement with narratives recognises the heterogeneity of Rwandan women’s experiences.

Following an introduction that outlines the distinct topics and questions that the book engages with, particularly, in relation to the Holocaust and trauma studies, Gilbert’s monograph proceeds in five chapters. The first chapter focuses on the questions of who has a right or duty to bear witness and what the role of a listener is. Gilbert advocates for the reader and listener’s duty to receive and engage. She identifies the complexity of different positionalities across the labels of a direct witness-survivors, indirect witness and the reader or receiver of testimony. Scholastique Mukasonga’s writing offers Gilbert an example of testimonial writing by a Rwandan Tutsi who is a survivor of earlier cycles of ethnic violence but was not in Rwanda during the 1994 genocide (64–68). In highlighting the particularity of each individual experience of the events of genocide, pain and loss, Gilbert identifies that some testimonies suggest that the survivor-author’s suffering is somehow less than that of those who she encounters (71–72). Here Gilbert does not shy away from observing implied hierarchies of suffering, which are ethically and morally complex. The recognition of these comparisons of pain opens space for future discussion of how the reader can navigate such propositions.

In the second chapter of *From Surviving to Living,* Gilbert engages with trauma and narrative healing, observing limitations of the Western trauma approach. She finds that Rwandan women’s testimonies resonate with Madeleine Hron’s understanding of translation of pain to language and the idea of cultural translation (96). She observes that the state of merely surviving – the absence of healing – may be prolonged due to difficult material circumstances that do not leave space for narrative construction and creativity (92). This reveals the dominant understanding of trauma narration as idealised and based on post-violence stability and security not applicable to all Rwandan women. Here Gilbert challenges the (outside) expectation of healing.

The third chapter entitled ‘Collaborating with the Witness’ portrays testimony as a dialogue that can support narration but also may risk appropriation. This chapter explores Rwandan women’s distinct experiences of collaboration, with some being depicted empowering and others fraught with tension. Gilbert complicates Philippe Lejeune’s understanding of the roles of collaborators as ‘dictator/model’ and ‘recorder/writer’ (141) in her analysis of multi-layered relationships in which both parties hold different kind of power over the final product. The survivor has content, while the collaborators in these examples provide access to the publishing industry, and in some cases, expected structure and language of writing. The chapter overall proposes that the collaborator can function as an emphatic listener who mediates between the survivor and the Western audience, reducing the likelihood of rejection of her narrative. Gilbert’s insights raise questions about ownership and authenticity, addressing key concerns of the study of autobiographical writing.

The final two chapters of *From Surviving to Living* focus on the context of Rwandan testimonies about the genocide. Gilbert explores silences which may be internally or externally imposed on survivors and situates Rwandan women’s writing broadly within the aftermath of genocide in Rwanda and outside. These chapters unpack the legacy of genocide, particularly from the perspective of the testimonies challenging the Western ignorance and silence about suffering in Rwanda. While Gilbert recognises the positive contribution of narrative construction to healing, she observes that many of the women felt dissatisfied upon completion of their testimony and felt the need to repeatedly recount their memories (215). The women’s emotional openness and reflection over narration question the extent to which narrative healing as conceptualised by Judith Herman and Suzette Henke is applicable to Rwandan women. Gilbert also highlights the centrality of community, narrated and real, to the women’s experience of the aftermath of genocide. Rooted in Rwanda, this discussion demonstrates how the women’s testimonies reflect and negotiate the political and social dynamics of the aftermath of the 1994 genocide.

Throughout her monograph, Gilbert foregrounds the individuality of Rwandan women’s experiences of the genocide and its aftermath, questioning lenses and approaches that do not seem to accommodate this heterogeneity. The individuality of experiences however does not result in the isolation of the women’s voices since their testimonies form ‘a community of testimony’ (252–258). Gilbert observes that testifying contributes towards the women’s sense of belonging. However, this community of Rwandan solidarity does not relieve the reader unfamiliar with Rwanda from responsibility to listen and engage. Gilbert’s monograph thus clearly calls for the responsibility of the (Western) audience to find productive and ethical modes of encountering autobiographical writing from Africa.

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