

## Book and media reviews

# Perspectives about citizenship, human rights and reconciliation in the post-genocide period

Garnett Russell, S. (2020). *Becoming Rwandan: Education, Reconciliation, and the Making of a Post-Genocide Citizen*. New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press. 255 pp., \$28.95 (paperback) ISBN: 978-1-9788-0286-5.

### Reviewed by

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Garnett Russell is one of the most prolific scholars in human rights education, reconciliation and peace education in post-conflict societies. Russell has produced a number of publications in the context of Rwanda. Her most recent book, titled *Becoming Rwandan: Education, Reconciliation, and the Making of a Post-Genocide Citizen*, is to be applauded as a unique contribution to the complexities and ambiguities in education and policy in Rwanda in the post-1994 genocide period. The book investigates ‘the way the Rwandan state uses the country’s education system to promote peacebuilding and reconciliation in the aftermath of 1994 genocide’ (p.3). Russell critically reviews how the state has selectively positioned itself in global discourses about citizenship and human rights to draw together broader human rights legitimacy to Rwanda while simultaneously avoiding discussions of controversial issues. Russell uses interviews with government officials, policy makers and academics to demonstrate that even though the Rwandan discourse on human rights and reconciliation is prevalent in national and curricular policy documents, open discussion on human rights in the education system has been silenced.

The book consists of six chapters. The first chapter, an introduction, provides an overview of the history of education in Rwanda before, during and after the genocide. Russell also outlines the research design and methodology she has followed. In her second chapter she provides an insightful discussion on how the Rwandan state strategically employs the education system and global rights discourse to promote peace building yet avoids controversial issues of the past. In chapter three, Russell engages with strategies the state uses in the education sector to foster its problematic post-genocide peace-building project to create a 'new civic identity'. Russell points out that the use of ethnic terms (e.g., Hutu, Tutsi) are prohibited; however, she cautions that ethnicity 'continues to exist with real consequences, even when the government does not officially sanction its existence' (p.97). Chapter four is an extensive account of how the state draws on human rights discourses in some contexts and ignores violations in other ones. Using an analysis of national policy documents and interviews, Russell illustrates that more current and relevant violations of human rights in Rwanda are not mentioned in curriculum documents and not discussed in classroom settings. Instead, more general human rights such as gender equality are given privilege. Russell argues that the government promotes socio-economic rights and ignores violation of political and civil rights. In chapter five she uses a detailed analysis of national documents, interviews and school observations to illustrate how the Rwandan government uses education as one of its arenas to address the past. Russell argues:

...the manner in which the history of the genocide is taught, and reconciliation is encouraged in schools hinders discussions about the past and creates fear rather than social cohesion, impeding the progress of the regime's peacebuilding project. Moreover, the goals of the peacebuilding are decoupled from the lived realities of students and teachers in schools. (p. 177-178)

The narrative around the genocide did not unlock discussion on how multi-ethnicity and diversity could play a pivotal role in peace-building and reconciliation. Russell exposes contradictions, complexities and inconsistencies that face teachers and students in their anecdotal engagement with the genocide. Russell raises a question in chapter six: Are the global discourses in promoting citizenship, human rights and reconciliation efficient if they are diluted and reinterpreted at the local level? In her attempt to address this question, she makes a number of observations: Rwanda (under the leadership of the Rwandan Patriotic Front) has not fully succeeded in using global discourses to promote peacebuilding and reconciliation; the government has taken a political stance to engage in a selective and strategic application of human rights; the government forbids discussion of past injustices and human violations in the name of reconciliation resulting in a tension that concerns the 'nexus between genocide, reconciliation and ethnic identity' (p. 185). Russell argues that in discussions and education, the deliberate disconnect of Rwandans from the ethnic identities that led to the genocide is a

very serious concern when it comes to peacebuilding and reconciliation. In this chapter Russell highlights the fact that issues she raises in the book may be applicable to other countries in post-conflict contexts.

The book is well-researched - with participants from three districts in Rwanda, representing 15 secondary schools that are either government-run, private or religious. The findings are well substantiated, supported by apt interview excerpts, clear statistical tables and striking observation clips. Unlike many other books of this nature, Russell includes appendices of the survey she conducted, biographies of her participants, and details of data analysis instruments as well as the national documents she perused. The research is clear and is presented in an engaging manner. Overall, *Becoming Rwandan: Education, Reconciliation, and the Making of a Post-Genocide Citizen* is a pensive account of various perspectives about citizenship, human rights and reconciliation in the post-genocide context of Rwanda. This book will be an interesting and useful resource for educators, students, policy makers and researchers exploring peace education, citizenship education and human rights issues.