

BUILDING JUSTICE PODCAST



### **Building Justice Podcast Transcription**

**Episode 15:** *On Mass Atrocity, Memory, and Reconciliation in Rwanda*: a conversation between Dr. Nicole Fox and Dr. Danielle Slakoff

**\*\* This transcript was created primarily through transcription software. As such, there may be some inaccuracies in the transcription. \*\***

#### **[music intro]**

Musical intro lyrics: Company under construction, the function, justice for the human family we demand it. Justice, true freedom, equality is a must. Thus, decolonization of the planet. So bust this. People be the power now we're Building Justice. Pulling out divinations, now we're Building Justice. Welcome the planet to the Podcast, "Building Justice," "Building Justice," "Building Justice." Building is to add on, or to do away with.

#### **Danielle Slakoff:**

Welcome to Building Justice, a podcast by Sacramento State University's Center on Race, Immigration and Social Justice, also known as CRISJ.

We explore critical issues affecting our communities with the hopes of creating a healthier and more just world.

Your hosts for today are me, Dr Danielle Slakoff, and my colleague in the Division of Criminal Justice at Sacramento State University, Dr Nicole Fox, who recently authored a book titled "After Genocide, Memory and Reconciliation in Rwanda."

Thank you so much for joining us on CRISJ podcast. Dr. Fox—Nicole--welcome to the show, and thanks for taking the time to be here.

#### **Nicole Fox:**

Thank you so much for having me.

#### **Danielle Slakoff:**

Of course, and let's get right into it, I know that you have a very busy schedule and are about to go on a book tour. So, first, some of our listeners here at CRISJ may not be familiar with the Rwandan genocide, can you give our listeners a brief overview of what occurred?

**Nicole Fox:**

Yeah, so Rwanda is a small East African country that's landlocked, it's about the size of Maryland or Vermont.

And in the 1990s was in the middle of economic turmoil and in the midst of a civil war and on April 6, 1994, the president's plane was shot down and killed the President, along with many others who are on board and immediately afterwards, killings began.

8000 people were killed on the very first day in very intimate killings, most often by machetes, and people were often killed by people they knew: by neighbors and church members, school peers, community members, and the genocide was very well organized, with roadblocks setup so that people couldn't escape and hate radio was used to ensure that Tutsis, which was the persecuted group at the time and moderate Hutu, anyone who had relations with Tutsis were targeted and killed and during this widespread violence that lasted around 100 days, there was sexual and gender based violence, and environmental destruction.

And the world really stood idly by as well as the United Nations as about 1 million Rwandans were killed in about three months. And so the country really work to rebuild right afterwards. Trying to build in infrastructure that was destroyed and implement different transitional justice and judicial mechanisms, and one of the things that they implemented were memorials and memory projects, once these kind of everyday life functions were a little bit more stable.

**Danielle Slakoff:**

Wow.

**Nicole Fox:**

That's where the book takes off.

**Danielle Slakoff:**

Yeah that's, you know, like I said, some of the people listening may not know much about what happened, or may have more cursory overview, so thank you so much for sharing that and giving us that information. So, you mentioned your book "After Genocide: Memory and Reconciliation in Rwanda," I would love to know how you came to engage in this work and in this project.

**Nicole Fox:**

Yeah, that's a great question. I love questions like that, because whenever I meet other authors, I'm always curious about what twists and turns happened in their life, that ended up in these books.

So I grew up in a Jewish home, and we were taught from a young age, about memory and trauma and genocide and trauma. And when I was in college, I vividly remember the bombing of Fallujah and organizing with my friends to take buses were like over 100 UC Davis students, you know, took buses over to San Francisco to protest this in this emergency protest. And just feeling that power of collective action, and what it meant to be part of something, and to resist, and as that was unfolding, and I was also taking all of these women's studies classes and sociology classes, where I was learning about how war and political violence and conflict and also torture at the time affected communities long term and also the gendered impact of it, and so I think what really hit me there too was to understand that there was never a genocide or a war without rape, and that was something that really stuck with me, so when we were invading Iraq and Afghanistan that idea of killing of civilians and sexual violence, weighed heavy on me.

And so, I ended up going out East to do my master's and I did my master's thesis on intergenerational transmission of trauma from Holocaust survivors to their grandchildren, and kind of thinking about like, "How does memory change over time?" and then I got interested in in Bosnia. So I went to get my PhD in sociology to study Bosnia actually.

But on my first day of the semester, in my first class on, I think, "social policy for social change," I met someone who later became my, you know, one of my best friends in the whole world, a Rwandan women, and so I met her, and then I met more Rwandans and, over time, I got to know her and more and more Rwandans in Boston, and my interest shifted there, and so Rwanda became a very particularly interesting case for me because of their efforts to memorialize. But it really started with meeting a Rwandan who said, "stop studying Bosnia, study us."

**Danielle Slakoff:**

That's fascinating. So, to the listeners, we are colleagues and I would consider ourselves to be friends, but I had no idea that you meeting a friend was really helpful in kind of moving towards this.

Like so many feminists criminologists, you know, that focus on women at the center, I think it is really important, because we know as a field that hasn't been a focus historically, so thank you for sharing that. Like I said, I had no idea.

Okay, so what do you think I know you spent a lot of time in Rwanda and speaking with Rwandans about this issue, what do you think are the key takeaways from your work in Rwanda?

**Nicole Fox:**

Yeah that's a great one, and I think there's key takeaways for different audiences from the book, so one of them in terms of the people who study memory, so the people who study memory, think about collective memory as a social construction right, so the past is really constructed from the lens of the present, right? So, it's always changing and getting sculpted from the needs of the present or the political interests of the present, so what I've learned that might be helpful and interesting to those folks but also really important in terms of thinking about policies as well, is that micro decisions actually add up to really macro changes and macro-level narratives, and so what I mean by that is I studied the small decisions that memorial guides or museum guides made about whose story to include and why. Or, what pictures to include and why, and what I noticed, who to include in the testimonies and why--and what I noticed is that those stories and those decisions, they become cumulative into what becomes the larger story arc.

And that story arc actually really matters, because that's the story arc that the international community listens to, Heads of State hear, and also other survivors hear. And so, those little decisions were just "one person's left out here or there," add up to larger decisions and when someone doesn't see themselves within that narrative of their nation they're less likely to want to participate in some of these nation building activities or civic engagement or reconciliation programs.

And that can have really dire consequences on a nation that's trying to rebuild after a significant conflict or significant violence like genocide. So that's the first one, is that there's importance in studying those micro-level decisions because they affect the macro.

The second would be to feminist criminologists and what I would argue for any criminologists because everyone should care about gender.

And that is that gender—Genocide is gendered. So, women had different experiences in genocide, and this is not to say that women's or men's experiences one was better or worse, it was all terrible for everybody.

But it's important to recognize that the experience of that violence was different, and it was different because there were different norms in terms of division of labor. So, women were with their children, and had to make decisions on how to die, or when to die, or what to do, because, and they were with their children.

And men often weren't. There was also a division of labor. There were also gender norms which structured someone's ability to survive or not survive, or negotiate with perpetrators, or negotiate participation in violence. And, so that just changed the dynamics and to ignore that would be to ignore the kind of political economy of violence and the ecosystem in which this all occurs, and so, if we ignore gender or pretend that gender neutrality is the way that we want to see that, we miss a lot of really important things about it.

And with that, memory is gendered, and the aftermath, is most certainly gendered. And so that is one thing that I think is really important for feminist criminologists all know that, but, as we also know mainstream doesn't always recall that.

So that was something that was important.

In my book, and I come up with a term called the stratification of collective memory, and this is the process by which memory is stratified. And it means that, like, certain voices are elevated and others aren't in a situation in which the communities already quite stratified. So, for example, and this can have really, really dire consequences as well for reconciliation and civic engagement, but, for example, folks did not want to have sexual assault survivors talk about their experiences in public, because it was so traumatizing for the audience they believed.

And so that really stratified this collective memory, because sexual assault survivors were not put center but rather marginalized, and so what this meant is for like a lot of the folks who suffered some of the most horrific violence and still live in these very dire conditions, the stratification of collective memory really exacerbates social inequality and it kind of makes this memory unrecognizable for them.

But also, what I found is like, it's very hard to give resources to a group of people that you don't hear about. So their visibility makes that stratification even more. So, they also didn't want to highlight all these survivors who had severe mental health problems or lived in significant poverty, because those stories weren't uplifting.

So those, and so this has some pretty significant implications for thinking about victimology after atrocity crimes, and then the last one would be for like human rights or folks who are her trying to implement peace programs and thinking from like a methodology perspective is:

The last part of my book, I interviewed survivors about reconciliation, and so I wanted to know like -- how would you measure reconciliation? How do you think about it? What's it look like, what's it feel like? How do you see it? What would you, how would you know when you saw it? And, a lot of times reconciliation is as measured by these barometers or by the United Nations Human Development Index, and those are these really great, you know, quantitative measures that do give you a sliver of what's going on.

But they do also like miss part of what's going on, and so one part of my book really asks, and argues that there are limitations to measuring reconciliation in this way, and that it can be really helpful to measure in these like very micro, qualitative ways by asking some of the folks who are at the lower end of the social structure, and so what I found is that actually how they saw reconciliation was not by these human development measures as much, but by using the bus together like or knowing that if they got sick their neighbor would take them to the hospital, and so this provides this like really rich insight into reconciliation and it also showed us, it also shows us how that that type of qualitative is also shaped by generation and gender because you saw really the safety measure was really, really that

folks who were older generations talked about that a lot, or women talked a lot more about forgiveness, and they talked about more about how forgiveness wasn't possible.

Which is really interesting because that really goes against a lot of some of the social norms that that folks assume about women being these like very forgiving, the more forgiving gender, right? So anyways, those are probably the big takeaways. I hope that wasn't too long.

**Danielle Slakoff:**

No, no, not at all, I have so many follow up questions but I'll start with this first one.

Your first takeaway you mentioned sort of how certain stories were chosen and sometimes it was just one person deciding this. You see, you mentioned gender as being one lens through which some people were chosen and some weren't. What other, you know, attributes, did you notice for people maybe whose stories were not told?

**Nicole Fox:**

Yeah, so we talked about this a little bit and in the book there, there is a huge trauma problem, when I was there and I think it's decreased a little bit since I was there, but there's a fear and, to be honest it's a, you know, it's a valid fear of the audience having what could be thought of in America as like a post-traumatic stress response, but it's a trauma response. You know I'm not a doctor, so I would not diagnose it by any means, but it's a trauma response and, you know, someone gets a flashback they start like shaking, they're screaming, but the challenging part about that is that it can spread.

And, and I even went to commemorations in which that got very out of control, very fast, and so there's a real fear of allowing people's testimony to contribute to a situation in which that would happen.

So, but sometimes what that means is not allowing any testimony that talks about sexual violence, poverty, mental health, trauma.

**Danielle Slakoff:**

Right.

**Nicole Fox:**

You know anything, any of those, and so then you're slowly kind of marginalizing testimonies until you're getting, for the most part, you know, a male survivor who is flourishing in genocide's aftermath.

And so, which, which also we can't underestimate, the power of international aid, too, and how guilty international actors now feel for their inactivity and how that strain may also bring in aid.

It's so complicated.

**Danielle Slakoff:**

I was gonna say, it's so interesting because you think about our museums and how they're curated and even there like which stories are told, and which aren't.

And I think you're tapping into something really powerful and interesting about how history is made and told.

And you know, the genocide in Rwanda wasn't all that long ago and you're already seeing the testimonies that didn't make it.

**Nicole Fox:**

But there's also testimonies that made it, and I do want to draw attention to that as well.

I wrote an article about this, and also mentioned in my book, there are museums that discuss, or there are memorials, that discuss gender-based violence.

And, in some ways, Rwanda, also is like a beacon of light in in the sense of that because there are so few models of that, in such a short period of time.

So in 1994, Andrea Dworkin actually wrote this amazing article, I think that got published in Miss Magazine, I hope I'm correct, but I'm not 100%, and it's titled "Looking for the Women," and essentially she went to the US Holocaust Museum and couldn't find any women.

And she went to the archives, and there were no archives about women, there was no archives. And it wasn't until like the 90s, that there were actually books about the Holocaust and women, so like in some ways, Rwanda is like ahead if you're comparing it like that.

Because. like 50 years. But yeah, but I think that sexual violence comes with so much shame that that, in particular, is really hard to have in public spaces.

**Danielle Slakoff:**

Absolutely, yeah, thanks so much for sharing that, it's so fascinating. This topic, of course, is undoubtedly heavy talking about trauma, violence, sexual assault.

As researchers, we rarely get trained on how to deal with vicarious trauma that can sometimes occur when we are working and hearing the stories of survivors. I was just wondering if you could share with our listeners about your experiences with vicarious trauma and how that was for you as you engaged in this work on the genocide.

**Nicole Fox:**

Absolutely, and I really appreciate this question because, I actually wrote about this in my appendix and it's my favorite part of my book. But I had reviewers not like this particular part because of it.

**Commented [SDC1]:** remove Nicky's waterbottle comment here

And I think you're absolutely right, in that scholars are expected to like advance theories and talk really authoritatively about facts, and develop these like very precise methodologies.

And they're not supposed to like analyze themselves, and those that kind of like agonize over the ethics or their positionality or the emotional labor, risk like being called "sloppy."

**Danielle Slakoff:**

Right.

**Nicole Fox:**

or too emotional, or too involved, too involved, right, and really what I think this is, this is actually people who make those assertions are really complicit in a very gendered historical pattern of marginalizing women's scholarship and any work that appears feminine, as well as like the emotional labor that goes into knowledge production, so I think I think thoughtful qualitative research, and any type of research that is on violence, requires that, and I think studying people's lives come with like a grave responsibility, and especially if you're inserting yourself into someone's life that's a post conflict zone.

You know, there's a certain level of emotional and ethical work that that has to be in in there because you're witnessing people's past and you want to make sure that you're not inflicting any level of pain that you can help when you're interviewing them.

And you're interviewing people who have suffered so much. There's this great quote by Rebecca Campbell who studies sexual violence, and she says that qualitative research on rape, that we can't do any harm... It's something like, "We can't do any harm because, like plenty of harm has already been done." And, so I really experienced that and I, I want to have more conversations about that, because I think that brings better researchers.

So I had a lot of—I thought, a lot about my positionality as a white woman, as a white Jewish woman, an American woman, young, doing these interviews. And so happy to talk further about that, but I also did have some experience with secondary trauma and that occurred for years afterwards.

So I went to so many commemorations and for the folks in my book, I interviewed them multiple times throughout the calendar year, so I got to know them very well, so that we could build up rapport and trust and I ended up visiting many of them for years for over a decade afterwards, and I went to burials of their loved ones and commemorations. And on one particular day, I had been to like five funerals in the past five days, and then I had gone to a long commemoration where that trauma that I told you about had happened, and the next day, I was like, "I think I do need a day off," so I took the kids I was living with to the pool, and I kept hearing screaming like I did from that Commemoration, but there weren't anyone there, wasn't anyone there, that was from a commemoration.



And I just kept hearing it, and I would turn around and hear it, and I was having nightmares about the genocide, and I didn't have any kids at the time. And so, I told one of my friends, one of my best friends who's a priest in Rwanda about it and he's like, "you're having a secondary trauma, like you need to chill out and, like take a couple days off."

So I did, I have to say I still have nightmares. So there's certain boundaries now I put on my work like I don't watch any documentaries about Rwanda. It's too real to see the country, but there were also a couple questions or there's also a couple stories that women told me about their children. And they were so so horrific in how they died. And one was like, you know, there's a couple where I like cried with the women because I had known them for months and interviewed them multiple times and then heard these stories, which I won't disclose here, and there was a one where I like actually vomited after the interview, and it was so horrific, but my brain blocked it out, and like, which was amazing for years. And it came up when I had my first child. I remember the stories, and I remembered the stories when I had my second child, and every now and then I'll remember them again with my kids. And so it's weird how your brain remembers those.

**Danielle Slakoff:**

Absolutely and it's interesting how our brains, you know, try to protect us.

You know, and try to block that out, but it sounds like you had very visceral experiences of remembering, you know. And like I said, I think, as qualitative researchers, this just kind of gets skimmed over is like "oh it's just the price you pay for doing the work," and I think that there's something really troubling about that.

You know, I think that it's part of the work, you know, and so we should be supporting people and making sure that they're taking care of themselves, too.

**Nicole Fox:**

Right, and I also just remember thinking feeling so guilty, because I was like gosh I, I didn't live through this, and I'm feeling all of this, and they lived through it so like, I need to get it together. But it doesn't work that way.

**Danielle Slakoff:**

Right. Thank you so much for sharing that and I know for so many people listening, we have a lot of students and potentially people considering graduate school and research, you know it's important to hear this and to kind of instill what can happen, you know, when you do this research but still, how important the work is, you know.

**Nicole Fox:**

And there's also ways you can learn to mitigate it.

You know, you can have a really good mentor that understands. Exercise was just like so key to me kind of taking out some of that energy out of my brain, and there's so many ways, you can kind of figure out tools.

**Danielle Slakoff:**

Absolutely.

So, I would love to know where your work is going from here, I know you are just finished writing this book, you're about to embark on a book tour.

But if you wouldn't mind, you know, looking a little bit into the future, where is your work going from here? Is it along the same vein, or have you shifted a little bit?

**Nicole Fox:**

Yeah, this is such a fun question because I'm excited for my book talks, but I have been working on this book for so long, that I'm more excited about my future projects.

**Danielle Slakoff:**

It happens sometimes like that, and that's another thing listeners might not know, is sometimes it takes a while for your research to see the light of day. And so you've been in it for years

**Nicole Fox:**

A decade.

**Danielle Slakoff:**

A decade.

**Nicole Fox:**

Yeah, so this is great. So one of them is with a colleague of mine, Dr. Holly Nighth, and we're analyzing a different dimension of the genocide in Rwanda, we're talking to the people who saved other people.

So the rescuers, and so we now have, like, what we think is the largest qualitative dataset of Rwandan rescuers to date, so we've interviewed over 170 of them. We have like these three hour rich rich interviews trying to figure out what made folks save others when so many people didn't save, and we're hesitant to think it's a personality trait, but rather looking at like what were these contexts or what were their socialization like that changed it.

The second project is with a colleague Dr. David Cunningham, and we looked at the long legacy of the 1979 Greensboro Massacre, and we looked at the interviews that people who participated in the truth commission that occurred in 2005, their interviews in private and their testimonies in public, and how their narratives changed in those different spaces. And

So that's a really fun project that's actually coming to a close, we just got our article accepted.

And then the last ones with Dr Alexa Sardina, which is actually very connected to this project, where we're looking on the aftermath of sexual violence in America and healing through the memorialization, looking at the first sexual assault memorial in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and interviewing folks who visit that.

So, I mean, that says a lot there, you know, we were talking about the silence and right at the fact that it's 2020 and that's the first memorial in America so.

**Danielle Slakoff:**

Absolutely, that is, that is so interesting and it sounds like a lot of the work is still connected to some of these broader issues.

I'll say one last question, which is, you know, CRISJ--the Center of race, immigration and social justice--is focused on these global issues on an international scale, and I'm curious what you feel the view or--excuse me-- what the role is of social justice in talking about Rwanda, do you feel that that's at the root of this book?

**Nicole Fox:**

Yeah, I think it's really important for so many reasons. I mean, the survivors that I talked to you I often—and the rescuers, too, to be honest--I say, you know, "I am, I'm a teacher, I talk to a lot of students, what do you want them to know about Rwanda?" So, I mean, if my students are listening they'll say like I talked about Rwanda in the classroom, and there's a lot of things to say about Rwanda and one is, is talking about how important it is to intervene in violence, and that violence can be, you know, all sorts, that could be, you know, racial injustice or sexual violence or all sorts of various forms of violence that happen on a continuum, on college campuses, or in other contexts. So, I think one thing I've learned from Rwanda is how important that bystander intervention is.

And that it can save lives, and then also how important it is to let people share the stories and make space to share stories of what they've endured and how important it is for people to bear witness and receive those stories.

**Danielle Slakoff:**

Absolutely, I was just thinking when I was processing everything that you've shared today about the power of listening.

And how you've really talked about that so much today, so I really appreciate you, Dr. Fox, talking to me and talking with the CRISJ listeners about this, we hope that our conversation today sparks ongoing conversations around understanding, empathizing, and motivation to join the struggle for a better future for all.

Thank you so much for being here, Dr Fox, and thank you to our listeners, for being here as well.

**Nicole Fox:**

Thank you so much for having me. [musical outro begins]

Music Outro

All the penalties are no sense based on the Actions Act right now. Time for building justice. Justice.

