

Why the Rwandan Genocide Seemed Like a Drive-By Shooting: The Crisis of Race, Culture, and Policy in the African Diaspora

by

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Abstract

From the American perspective, the Rwandan genocide developed amidst a cultural and racial crisis of the 1990s. The American attitude towards the crisis in Kigali provides a complex historical case study on how race and culture have profound and often-ignored policy implications. Specifically, the lack of American intervention in Rwanda reveals the complexity race and policy in American history and the shared fates of Africans throughout the world. Taken as a whole, the domestic cultural background of the early 1990s, including the rise of gangsta rap, rioting, and the dilemma of “black-on-black crime,” collectively influenced American policy towards Africa at a critical juncture in the continent’s history.

Introduction

This essay addresses several cultural factors surrounding the absence of American intervention in Rwanda during the 1994 genocide. The assertion that the Rwandan genocide seemed like a drive-by shooting is not used to describe how the Interhamwe rolled down the streets of Kigali in a tricked-out 1987 Chevy Caprice, indiscriminately killing Tutsi bystanders. Likewise, the metaphor is not employed to describe the ruthlessness of the Interhamwe who mercilessly hacked thousands of innocent Tutsi women and children to death with machetes until the roads were plastered with bloodstained mud and the ditches clogged with severed flesh. The simile of a drive-by shooting is a reference to how many Americans perceived the horrendous tragedy in Rwanda against the immediate background of gangsta rap, racial strife, pervasive stereotyping, and cultural misconceptions. The goal of the essay is to present an international perspective on the relevance of Africana Studies as a tool in analyzing foreign policy.

Much of the Western world's public perception of Africa is filtered through cultural lenses and dominant political priorities. Equally dominant is a popularization of continental tragedies and catastrophe. Browse the bookshelf at any major bookstore and the small space dedicated to African issues will be overflowing with books addressing one crisis or another. Surrounded on either side you will run into healthy sections on African American fiction and sometimes, if you are lucky, you will encounter the non-fiction section neatly filled with works in African American Studies.

Many of those with an interest in the African world are delighted whenever attention is given to discussion of African people. However, the floor plan of modern mega-bookstores reveals a more complex issue that is rooted in the way that Americans perceive people of African descent. Similar to the way that the layout of the big-box bookstore sandwiches works on African issues between the alluring, exotic and often sensational works of African-American fiction, historically policymakers have confronted issues of the African with dramatic and often distorted dispositions.

In the last 15 years particularly, a "whack-a-mole" policy approach to the continent has emphasized the drama of sporadic crises and an infatuation with quick policy solutions for long-term problems. In many ways, this approach mirrors the history of policy approaches to African Americans. Substituting spotty reforms and pledging greater support, Washington has created a patchwork of irregular policies instead of employing a comprehensive policy approach to human rights issues in the continent that acknowledges the longstanding impact of colonial policies. This negligence is particularly troubling since modern Africa traces many of its most challenging problems to the trials of Western colonialism and neo-colonialism (Boahen 1987: 99-101).

The short-term, crisis-oriented approach to African policy is dangerous because it undermines the complexity of the issues and prolongs suffering through unnecessary delay and repeated mistakes. While the African experience is broad enough to demand a more nuanced analysis than it now receives, at a glance, one must concede that Washington's policy approach with regard to black Americans (i.e. Americans of African descent living in the United States, slave descended or otherwise) and black indigenous Africans reveals some shocking similarities.

Addressing similarities in apartheid and segregation, George Fredrickson's comparative work on white supremacy in South Africa and the U.S., has offered a distinctive and important framework on the global dimension of race. While an interesting amount of scholarly attention has been devoted to interpreting the survival of African culture in the United States and the Americas (Holloway 1990: ix-240; M'Baye 2002: 66-77; Stuckey 1987: 78-79), few have successfully attempted to incorporate findings on race, policy and culture into transnational analyses of the nation-state. Political scientist Anthony Marx's work, *Making Race and Nation*, is one example of such exemplary scholarship. Following in the strain of Fredrickson, Marx's work illustrates the complexity and persistence of variables of race and culture in the evolution of South Africa, Brazil and the United States (Marx 1998: 1-3).

Numerous works have examined the bureaucratic nature of American policy paralysis in Rwanda and the failure of the West to address this humanitarian crisis. L.R. Melvern's *A People Betrayed* (2000) is perhaps the most efficient work on the topic. Additionally, Lt. Gen. Roméo Dallaire's firsthand account, *To Shake Hands with the Devil* (2003), adds greater detail to the complexity of the crisis. Still, greater perception is needed to critically assess the American Rwanda policy decision.

Considering abundant parallels in race and foreign policy and the reciprocal relationship between political and popular culture in American society, we would do well to consider the American policy toward Rwanda in the context of the cultural wars of the 1990s. During this era, the American public and those in political office relied on televised trends in popular culture as major sources of information for agenda setting on domestic and foreign affairs (Hutson 1993:1-7; Collins 1990: 228-232). Deeply influenced by a myriad of cultural factors in the popular media alongside entrenched strategic interests, the State Department opted to simplify, downplay, and ignore empirical evidence for intervention in Rwanda. This essay does not attempt to explain the bureaucratic factors that led to this reaction but rather seeks to provide a more nuanced account of how race and American culture may have factored into the policy response.

During the 1960s, *New Yorker* journalist Richard Rovere suggested that American policy was moving in the direction of a “foreign policy” approach to the black American community. Well into the twentieth century, both communities (black American and Africans) were perceived as inferior and expendable. As a result of racist public perception and policy practices, Africans and African Americans with keen insights on policy issues saw their ideas dismissed as irrelevant to the American experience and sidelined in the geopolitics of the Cold War (Hayes III 2006: 435).¹

Considering the preceding dilemma, one must inquire to what extent have black-white domestic issues and perceptions of such shaped American foreign policy? Black Americans have a unique historical status since they are considered culturally American but are often treated as politically foreign. In other words, the collective interests of black Americans have long been perceived as diametrically opposed to the interests of mainstream Americans (Walters 2003: 12-16, 134-135). With regard to policy, black Americans share a similar fate with indigenous Africans because they are often portrayed as benefiting from social policy at the expense of Americans.

Political debate surrounding race policy from the 13th Amendment to *Bakke* has, well through the 1990s, emphasized zero-sum game scenarios where mainstream Americans (usually white) inevitably will lose out in any policy that collectively benefits the black community. Although African Americans are tax-paying citizens of the United States, in policy discussions the criticism of race-valued policies is repeatedly made in antagonistic terms. In these discussions, African Americans are considered fiscal and social liabilities of the United States. Thus targeted policies that benefited American blacks were interpreted as foreign aid projects—indirectly useful but not beneficial to the broader welfare of the United States. In this manner, American blacks have been relegated to a foreign place in American policy-making alongside indigenous Africans.

Also, considering the role of race in the parallel histories of Africans and African Americans, one must consider how these racial histories and contemporary dilemmas inform domestic and foreign policy. It is undeniable that the roots of the present American foreign policy in Africa historically stems from the transatlantic slave trade. As George White suggests in *Holding the Line: Race, Racism and American Foreign Policy towards Africa*, white supremacy, in policy terms or otherwise, derives its power from slavery (White 2005: 4). So the transatlantic slave trade should be a starting point for one who seeks to understand the current dilemma that blacks face in the diaspora.

Unlike many European nations, American “diplomacy” with Africa began with the slave trade; Americans had no significant history of dealing with Africans in trade as legitimate economic rivals as did their European counterparts.² In the long-term, modern policies became increasingly biased by this fact and the racial attitudes that gradually accompanied the rise of the transatlantic slave system.

Some studies of the American transatlantic slave trade have documented that a slaver contract was “Considered a Magnificent Triumph of Diplomacy” and the significance of the illicit commerce as a “Successful Stroke for Free Trade and Sailor’s Rights” (Spears 1900: 16-20). This instance alone raises concerns about the dubious nature of the “free market.” Given this dilemma and the growing bibliography of the parallel histories of colonialism and racial oppression, a strong case for the transnational application of Africana Studies in policy history is evident.

When we examine American involvement in the continent of Africa, in general, and Rwanda, in particular, we should consider two important sources: 1) The historical experience of African Americans and the factor of race through which Americans have historically interpreted the continent of Africa. 2) Popular culture as a mechanism through which many Americans receive information about black Americans and Africans.³ It has been argued that racial belief and customs that are most visible and potent are found in the popular culture of a nation (Spears 1999: 11-15; Gray 2004: 35-37). We must carefully examine these developments to understand the subversive influence of race and culture on American foreign policy.

A Vista of Race and Violence During the 1990s

While some point to the 1990s as the apex of multiculturalism in American society, a broader discussion of historical trends suggests that race relations actually worsened during the decade (Guess 1989: 9). An edited volume by Steven Tuch and Jack Martin entitled *Racial Attitudes in the 1990s* (1997), illustrates that conflict over racial issues had become more subtle but not necessarily less volatile. This was evidenced in a variety of debates over policy and public attitudes.

Perhaps none of these occurrences revealed the persistence of the volatility more than Rodney King and the 1992 L.A. Riots. The riots presented vivid contradictions of an intensively racialized nation where the colorblind language of the Reagan era met the stagnant realities of plight and despair in inner city ghettos. To many, the shock value of black rioting and black-on-black violence was overwhelming. It was as if people had slept through the 1960s and 1970s, dreaming about the promise of a colorblind society through the 1980s to be rudely awakened by the persistence of inequality and racial discord. Signs and symbols of the coming racial apocalypse of 1990s were readily accessible in the media but were glossed over and more often misinterpreted.

Technological improvements in news networks, as evidenced in the coverage of the Gulf War in 1991, gave Americans more immediate access to foreign and domestic developments than had previously been possible. The helicopter became synonymous with live coverage and in retrospect gave a bird's eye view of some of the most explosive race news stories of the decade. On April 29th of 1992, copter coverage broadcast the plight of the white trucker Reginald Denny, who was beaten mercilessly by black youth during the L.A. riots. A helicopter factored into news coverage in October of 1993 but in a different way. Foreign correspondents reported on the images of two fallen Black Hawk helicopters—both shot out of the sky by rocket propelled grenades in Mogadishu. Somali insurgents paraded a scorched American corpse through the streets of the city. The American public was outraged at the spectacle. By June of 1994, yet another hovering helicopter transmitted live coverage of would-be fugitive O.J. Simpson in a white Ford Bronco gliding up a California highway. All of these news stories were explicitly loaded with racial images and implicit interpretations. Collectively, these images and others in the popular media dramatically impacted the public perception of black violence and the role of American policy in addressing it (Larson, Savych and Arroyo Center 2005: 41).

In the midst of all the racial controversy of the era, the radical rhetoric of gangsta music both infuriated and informed the public perception of black culture. “Fuck Tha Police” by NWA (Niggaz With Attitude) soared in popularity between 1988-1989. NWA’s claim to fame emphasized the surreal elements of ghetto life in a way that most whites (and many blacks) had never experienced. Following on the heels of NWA, Ice T’s *O.G. Original Gangsta* emerged in 1991 and cemented the genre of gangsta rap firmly into American popular culture. It was popularized through a public relations campaign underscored by intense police resistance (Perkins 1996: 18; Ice-T).

A year later, Dr. Dre dropped *The Chronic* in December of 1992. An important song on that album, “The Day the Niggaz Took Over,” sampled news clips and sound bites from the L.A. Riots. It represented the politicization of black anarchy or at least posed a significant alternative to the way that the emerging sub-genre of gangsta rap was going to manifest itself. A verse by Daz suggests the unease by which gangsta rappers presented their lyrics as politically relevant but radically ghetto:

*Dem wonder why me violent and no really understand
For de reason why me take me law, in me own, hand
Me not out for peace and me not Rodney King
De gun goes - click, me gun goes – bang (Dre 1992)*

It was clear that the subgenre of gangsta rap was not willing to surrender itself to the simplistic categorization of the media. The broader genre challenged the boundaries of acceptable aesthetics and lyrics. In 1992, Public Enemy's own Sista Souljah was excoriated for posing a controversial rhetorical question suggesting white complicity in black-on-black crime. Her insight hinted at a failure for extensive and careful analysis of black policy issues. In an interview with David Mills in the *Washington Post*, Souljah attempted to address blatant inequalities in how black and white life was valued.⁴

I mean, if Black people kill Black people every day, why not have a week and kill white people? You understand what I am saying? In other words, white people, this government, and that mayor were well aware of the fact that Black people were dying every day in Los Angeles under gang violence. So if you're a gang member and you would normally be killing somebody, why not kill a white person? Do you think that somebody thinks that white people are better, or above dying, when they would kill their own kind?...Unfortunately for white people, *they think it's all right for our children to die*, for our men to be in prison, and not theirs (Souljah in Chang 2005: 394-395).

In an era when the American public found itself both fascinated and fearful of black violence, Souljah's question, enraged and disgusted many who never really understood what she said. The music was too loud. Deep racial prejudices and shallow perceptions of the message and meaning of the rap genre were already developed. In the wake of Ice-T's expected release of "Cop Killer," the radical politics embodied in the hip hop culture, combined with racial issues, raised public concern with black violence—not towards other blacks but towards potential white victims (Body Count 1992).

This was particularly important during the election year, as white mainstream voters were beginning to identify rap as a major moral issue and a battleground in the full-blown American cultural wars (Eisenstein 1994: 93-96). In June 1992, presidential hopeful Bill Clinton quoted Sista Souljah's comment out of context while attempting to center public opinion on the perceived danger and immorality of the rap industry (Lusane 1994:118-126). In the aftermath of this moral posturing, rap record sales continued to soar even as embroiled gangsta rapper Ice-T decided to drop the song "Cop Killer" from his album the next month (Nuzum 2001: 278-79; McLaren 1997: 150-51).

Although the public became increasingly concerned with the prominence of gangsta rap and its effect on youth culture, Congress did little to address the underlying source of its messages and instead opted for censorship. In March of 1994, one month before the Rwanda disaster, Congress was picking up the topic of gangsta rap in exploratory hearings to determine whether the genre was as lethal as *Newsweek* had claimed (M. Quinn 1996: 65; Keyes 2004: 163-64).

As Tricia Rose discusses in *Black Noise* (1994), rappers and black leaders both uncritically accepted the designation of increasing violence as an episode of black-on-black crime while failing to interrogate the deeper meanings of the nomenclature and its implicit reference to social pathology (Rose 1994: 140-45). In retrospect, some scholars of hip-hop culture suggest that cultural critics of the 1990s had it wrong. Gangsta rap did not cause the spike in violence that so many criminologists, politicians and community leaders were concerned about. As some now assume, gangsta rap commented on the urban plight already set in motion by destructive economic policies, post-civil rights fallout and institutional racism (Barnet and Burriss 2001: 154-55). The self-deprecating and graphically abusive content of hip-hop spoke to the black “underclass” experience and aspirations in 1990s America (Neal 2004: 363-364, 377-378).

The hard sayings and poetic proclamations of the gangsta rap subgenre developed significant problems and unintended consequences. Ironically, the shock value of the gangsta rap message desensitized American public to the meaning of the message and contributed to deep-seated racial prejudices in policy and in culture with repercussions spreading from ghettos of America to villages of Africa. As reporters covered "black-on-black crime" of another kind unfolding in Rwanda in April of 1994, it became evident that despite significant cultural and political differences between Africans and African Americans, the issues of black violence and the worth of black lives posed significant moral and political questions.

Beginning in July of 1993, Radio-Television Libre des Mille Collines (RTL) used the airwaves to incite the wrath of the Hutus against the Tutsi minority, calling for their immediate destruction (L. R. Melvern 2000: 70-71). Simultaneously, as many Americans attempted to shield their households from the violent and disturbing lyrics of gangsta rap on the radio through censorship, the same technology served as one the most important tools of inciting Hutu wrath against Tutsis in Kigali. In the United States, gangsta rap on the radio served as an outrageous function of social commentary; In Rwanda the broadcast of violent social commentary was used to initiate real-life massacres.

Precisely at the moment when the nonconformist, self-deprecating violence of gangsta rap was becoming a mainstream fare, a shift in American foreign policy towards Africa was also commencing. Similar to the ensuing Rwandan crisis, congressional hearings offered little examination of the historical and cultural themes of the gangsta wave that suggested, were complex cultural manifestations of long-term cultural, racial and economic factors (Gates 1990: A15(N); Quinn 2005: 21). Most were happy to condemn to the emerging thug archetype as immoral and one-dimensional. In refusing to search for deeper meaning and question the cause of violent lyrics, they reduced the complexity of the music to simple causes—ignorance and immorality.⁵

Why the Genocide Seemed Like a Drive-By Shooting

As the days in April passed by and the bodies piled up, the United States and most of the international community stood aghast as one of the deadliest genocides in the memory of humankind commenced, claiming the lives of nearly 1 million people. The American policy paralysis was a result of carefully calculated and highly politicized decision-making process but was also driven by some racial factors. In the words of Samantha Power, Washington had “come to expect a certain level of ethnic violence from the region. And because the U.S. government had done little when some 40,000 people had been killed in Hutu-Tutsi violence in Burundi in October of 1993, these officials also knew that Washington was prepared to tolerate substantial bloodshed” (Power 2001). While this is certainly true, the immediate climate of American pop culture further validated the decision.

A major fault of Washington was its inability to recognize the serious cultural, economic and psychohistorical effects of colonialism and racism. As with the rise of the gangster rap genre, Americans and much of the West simplified the cause of the phenomenon as well as the killings themselves. Similar to the rise of “black-on-black” crime and the gangster rap scene of the early 1990s, the Hutu-Tutsi conflict had deep historical roots partially stemming from policies of privilege and oppression during the colonial era—this was far from an ordinary beef.

Early European exploration of Rwanda and Burundi likened the Twa and the Hutu to monkeys but described the Tutsi as physically and intellectually superior (Prunier 1995: 5-9). In *The Rwanda Crisis* (1995), Gerard Prunier suggests that contrary to conventional belief, the Hutus, Tutsis and Twa were not ‘tribes,’ that they shared much in common with regard to Bantu language origins and coexisted within territory (Prunier 1995: 5). While this coexistence was far from a perpetual peace, war and religion often served as a “social coagulant” that bound Banyarwanda together to face their common enemies (Prunier 1995: 15; Destexhe 1995: 37).

The Hamitic theory espoused by the British explorer John Hanning Speke in his now infamous *Journal of the Discovery of the Source of the Nile* (Temple-Raston 2005: 17-19; Mamdani 2001: 80-84) formed the source of evidence from which German and Belgian colonial policies emerged (Prunier 1995: 9). While it is not easy for an outsider to determine the differences between the Tutsis and the Hutus, it was equally difficult to understand the aftermath of racialism as a factor in colonial era policies. When the *abazungu* (Europeans) extended dominance in the region, the pseudo-scientific writings came to have a deep influence on German and Belgian colonial policies.

The practice of indirect rule further empowered the elitism of the Tutsi minority as they were used by Europeans as agents of colonial exploitation (Newbury 1988: 53-59). Ultimately, race-driven views and eugenic-distorted administrative practices stemming from the Hamitic theory caused deeper divisions between the Hutus and the Tutsis.

According to Prunier:

The result of this heavy bombardment with highly value-laden stereotypes for some sixty years ended by inflating the Tutsi cultural ego inordinately and crushing Hutu feelings until they coalesced into an aggressively resentful inferiority complex. If we combine these subjective feelings with the objective political and administrative decisions of the colonial authorities favouring one group over the other, we can begin to see how a very dangerous social bomb was almost absent-mindedly manufactured throughout the peaceful years of abazungu domination (Prunier 1995: 9).

According to Destexhe, it was through the exaggeration of stereotypes and the support of one group against another that “colonizers reinforced, consolidated and ultimately exacerbated such categorizing.” Ultimately, the result of the 70-year process exploded in the era of Rwandan independence. While they were independent from political control of Europe, the imprint of psycho-social hegemony had been permanently effaced and created, in the words of Jean-Pierre Chrétien, “tribalism without tribes” (Destexhe 1995: 36).

In addition to the legacy colonial policies of racial preference, others factors also fueled the explosion of violence. New ideas stemming from the rise of mission schools, economic factors precipitated by the insistence of a coffee cash crop market, and density of the population in a very small area with minimal natural resources all contributed to the crisis (Ramsey and Edge 2004: 90). The Rwandan genocide illustrated some the deepest complexities of traditional African culture conflicting with the Western notions of race and policy in post-colonial Africa.

By the late 1980s more than twenty years after independence, Rwanda still lived under the shadow of racialist colonial policies, Mimicking the earlier colonial practices, Juvenal Habyarimana came to increasingly marginalize the Tutsi and Twa factions in state government. Among one the most controversial of practices, Habyarimana instituted an ethnic quota system in the civil service and educational system, thereby limiting Tutsi enrollment and enfranchisement (Mamdani 2001: 138-139). This greatly angered the Tutsi minority, who facing mounting tensions, engaged in civil war with Rwanda from Uganda in 1990. They rallied under the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) led by a U.S. trained Tutsi soldier, Paul Kagame.

By 1993, Habyarimana was growing weary of war and had been pressured to sign the Arusha Accords by the United Nations, which he did in August of 1993. Skeptics of the process doubted that the provision declaring the necessity for more cooperation between the two groups would be successful. It was not. On April 6 of the following year, Juvenal Habyarimana's plane was shot out of the sky, killing him and the president of Burundi. It is likely that Hutus of the Interahamwe killed Habyarimana (and sparked the genocide) because of his involvement in the Arusha Accords. At Arusha, Habyarimana was half-heartedly attempting to address a conflict that had deep roots in cultural traditions, colonial racialism and recent animosity. These factors were the most significant immediate causes of the genocide—all interconnected and equally important. Ultimately the assassination of Habyarimana was reduced in significance as a disconnected, although not isolated, act of violence. For this reason, Rwanda seemed like a drive-by shooting to the United States.

Secondly, the Rwandan genocide seemed like a drive-by shooting because of political "ping-pong" with the terminology. A month after the outbreak of violence, the State Department had connected the significance of the preceding passage and cited "substantial, circumstantial evidence implicating senior Rwandan government and military officials in the widespread, systematic killing" (Gati 1994: 1). However, they took a month of quibbling, postponing immediate intervention, to address whether the criteria for a genocide had been met according to the Geneva Convention. Alain Destexhe and others have argued for a sparse application of the term "genocide," considering that certain factors must be taken into account. In 1994, the U.S. justified non-intervention because there was not enough immediate evidence on the scale and method of the massacres.

Returning to Sistah Soulja's question, were white lives seen as being more important than black ones in a moment of international crisis? Was the reason for semantical fastidiousness rooted in the rationale of how could inaction be justified to prevent further risk to white lives—especially in a conflict in the 'hood' of Rwanda? Was the delay and emphasis on defining the nature of the crisis rooted in racial disinterest? For some African Americans, the inaction was clearly interpreted as racially insensitive (Leanne 1998: 18-20). At the onset of the killings, Western powers, including the United States, were more interested in simply removing their own citizens, not protecting innocent Rwandans. The quibbling over nomenclature, some argue, was a mere political ploy to keep the U.S. morally assertive while essentially inactive (Power 2001: "Bystanders to Genocide").

Ironically, it was the moral quagmire of defining the crisis and bureaucratic reluctance of intervention in Rwanda that led to a speedy NATO resolution of Kosovo in 1999. The same type of military action in Rwanda could have saved thousands of lives as evidenced by the efficiency (although controversial) tactical maneuvers in Kosovo. Destexhe emphasizes this inconsistency by suggesting that the atrocities in Bosnia were war crimes and probably crimes against humanity, but trivial to the definition of a genocide (Destexhe 1995: 18). He further notes, “We see what has happened – and continues to happen – in Bosnia as particularly remarkable because it is at the heart of Europe...”(Destexhe 1995: 18).

Other reasons why the Rwandan genocide seemed like a drive-by shooting were the recent history of major tragedies in Africa and the lack of relevance of these disasters to strategic interest of the United States. Some of the most destructive conflicts on the African continent were met with minimal policy commitment by American forces: Biafra (1968-71), Ethiopia (1984-85), and Sudan (1988). The Clinton Administration did choose to intervene in Somalia (1991-92). However, this decision was severely criticized and considered a major blunder by Congress and military personnel. Some argued that the United States had no strategic interest in Somalia and that sending troops to the country was simply a waste of resources (Mermin 1999: 115-17).

This policy consensus came from a complex combination of factors including commanders smarting from the two downed Black Hawk helicopters in Somalia in October of 1993 (with eighteen casualties), rioting blacks in L.A., and noxious gangstas on the airwaves. Each of these instances created cultural and policy barriers preventing the Clinton administration from greater military commitment in black Africa. The Somalia incident itself had sparked an extensive review of U.S. and U.N. humanitarian policy in Africa and the developing world known as Presidential Decision Directive No. 25 (PDD-25) (L. R. Melvern 2000: 191). PDD-25 outlined a checklist of criteria to make countries “eligible” for American intervention and strongly emphasized multilateral action under the auspices of the U.N (Destexhe 1995: 49).

Public opinion was largely misinformed by sensational coverage of black popular culture. Is it possible that these racial overtones hampered American support in Rwanda? Considering the dynamics of the racial binary in the United States, the American impulse has historically been to lump the cultural crisis of all blacks as stemming from the same source of racial inferiority. Africana Studies scholarship has challenged this paradigm by presenting the complexity and ingenuity of African people. The blitz of violent imagery, especially those that criminalized the black working class, made it very easy to conflate diverse and complex images of black violence into an uncomplicated stereotype—blacks = violent (Rome 2004: 4-7).

The final reason why the genocide was reduced in political significance to a drive-by shooting was because of public fascination with black-on-black violence stemming from gangsta rap in spring of 1994. Much of what Americans heard, saw and thought about black popular culture in the 1990s pointed toward violence, drug culture and, as Cornel West has characterized it, nihilism (West 25-27). The public was horrified as much as it was fascinated with violent developments. While the public desired protection and preservation, it relegated intervention and prevention to an afterthought.

The issue of black-on-white violence washed over all initial perceptions of the Rwanda conflict. The case had been similar in South Africa where American foreign policy had dictated that a lesser evil in the form of apartheid should continue to prevent the spread of black violence against the white settlers. Back in Rwanda threats of white oversight and the killings of a dozen Belgians initiated similar fears. The RTLM, a Hutu radio station, had called for the death of United Nations Lt.Gen. Romeo Dallaire—a white Canadian equally disgusted with the response of the UN to the crisis. From the American popular perspective at the time, whites under siege in Rwanda were comparable to white police persecuted by hoodlums in inner-cities. Allusions to a modern day Mau Mau were invoked via cultural symbolism. Americans undoubtedly drew parallels with white cops attacked by black gangsters and ritualistically killed in gangsta rap music over the air waves, not to mention the recent mutilation of American troops in Mogadishu.

If the racial context surrounding the violent, misogynistic, and offensive lyrics of gangsta rap had mobilized a censorship movement in the United States, the need for a radical action to censure the Hutu-controlled media could not have been clearer. Neither could the stakes of censorship have been higher. Radio Mille Collines (RTLM) –translated Radio of a Thousand Hills—was the country’s first radio station and a major catalyst for the genocide (Temple-Raston 2005: 233). Simone Monesabian, a former hip-hop journalist at *RadioScope* who served as a prosecutor in the Rwanda Media Trial, states, “If there was ever a textbook cases for broadcasting genocide, RTLM’s emissions after 6 April 1994 fit the bill—chapter and verse” (Monasebian 2007: 308).

Instead of confronting the cultural and historical realities of the trauma posed by both gangster rap and Rwanda, policymakers in both cases opted for censorship. In one case they sought to silence the radical medium, in the other they silenced themselves. In the early 1990s, American radio stations prodded by public interest groups and policymakers had censored the most appalling rappers of the gangsta genre before giving way to popular demand (E. Quinn 2005: 88-89).

With regard to Rwanda, policy gave way to silence and inaction, allowing the RTLM to incite violence and slaughter innocents. Had the French, U.N. or American forces had seized or destroyed the Radio Mille Collines transmitter, thousands of lives could have been saved (Otunnu and Doyle 1998: 197-98). Censorship played an important role in both scenarios where the wrong policy was pursued. What made the censorship of gangsta rap fantasy violence in the United States a greater priority than silencing the horrifically vivid real-life radio appeals to mass murder in Rwanda?

The domestic repugnance of gangster rap and the complexity of the social problems it described (combined with damaging racial stereotypes), fear of black violence, and ignorance of the psycho-social effects of racial policies, all made the developments in Rwanda appear like a drive-by shooting. The notion of “senseless violence” had crept in the public discourse with little analysis. Americans made the same logical extension to developments in Kigali. Ever struggling to realize the reality of race in American culture, they became increasingly constrained by it. To an innocent by-stander devoid of deeper analysis, the images from Rwanda and the pleas for intervention conflated nicely with recent developments in American popular culture. Few perceived the consequences of this unfolding terror beyond their own narrow perceptions of what this violence signified and from whence it came.

Conclusion

The drive-by shooting imagery is certainly a powerful metaphor in considering the plight of American ghettos and the genocidal killings in Rwanda. Consider the overarching logic of despair, confusion, and self-hate caused by decades of systemic discrimination. Collectively these factors presented a crisis of violence demanding that victims and perpetrators alike kill or be killed (Mironko 2006: 163-64).

In this drive-by metaphor, America and the international community sat in the back of a Chevy cruising past the unfolding atrocity at a speed slow enough to examine the gruesome details of each carnage but fast enough to justify not stopping to intervene. Unlike the gangstas from around the way, the America drive-by was characterized by the complicity of inaction. Like semi-automatic ‘gats’ in the gangsta fantasyland, thousands of fingers pointed towards Rwanda, victims were tallied, and the car kept rolling. In the aftermath of the second worst genocide in the history of the African continent, the world has ultimately realized that there are no joyrides on a drive-by—to ride along is to be an accomplice.

This discussion of the Rwandan genocide and the American reaction to gangsta rap beckons us to think carefully about how race in post-civil-rights America continues to affect the reality for millions of people of African descent in the United States and throughout the world. There is a difficult scene in the motion picture *Hotel Rwanda* when Colonel Oliver turns to Paul and says: “You’re fucking black! You are not even a nigger! You’re an African!” Despite this dramatized distinction of Western indifference to African tragedy, the complex and far-reaching influence of race in American society inevitably ties the fate of African Americans and indigenous Africans together into a common dilemma of “nigger” as Richard Pryor would have it.

If the “social bomb” of the inferiority complex referred to by Prunier has had such a demonstrably disastrous effect on the Rwandan Hutu population, why have scholars been so reluctant to continue addressing the longstanding psycho-historical effects of slavery, segregation, and racism in the United States? Furthermore, considering the myth of cultural inferiority that developed in Rwanda and the ensuing disaster, why have policy analysts and cultural historians largely failed to address the impact of some two hundred years of the experiment of cultural inferiority endured by African Americans? Most have been more willing to excuse social dilemmas as “pathological” and “senseless violence” than to interrogate the roots of these societal ills as a consequence of historical stereotypes and entrenched institutional racism.

Returning to those shelves of mega-bookstores to which I alluded in the introduction, scholars of the 21st century must confront the problem of relying solely on journalistic perspectives of Africa for information and policy analysis. In troubleshooting the roots of the Clinton complacency during the Rwandan genocide, one must deal squarely with how knowledge of African people (black American or otherwise) was acquired and processed. Unfortunately, the source of much of American knowledge about Africa (and arguably about black Americans) has been based on journalism and, increasingly, on popular culture. This is problematic because, as Fergal Keane suggests, these images leave us momentarily horrified but largely ignorant, prodding us toward ‘compassion without understanding’ (Keane 1996: 7).

If the media had done a better job at convincing policymakers of the magnitude of the massacres in Rwanda and the meaning of the message of gangsta rap music, there may have been a more judicious approach to both of these racial crises. Whether in dealing with thugs in Chicago or Kigali, outdated and uncomplicated stereotypes of black culture presented without deeper analysis of specific historical development creates racial insensitivity, ultimately diminishing the significance of human life. The fate of black Americans and Africans are inevitably tied together because of this racial dilemma.

Ironically, in the song “Killing Fields” from the *OG: Original Gangsta* (1991) album, gangsta rapper Ice-T characterized the ghetto and prison industrial complex experience for black Americans as genocide of sorts. In doing so, he conjured a prophetic vision of the developments in Rwanda three years later:

*They might not see us
Cuz if they catch us out there
They'll bleed us
Shoot us, kill us
Dump us in a dark ditch
Ya gotta get out! Why?
Cause the fields
Are where you die!
Escape from
The killing fields (Ice-T 1991)*

“Escape from the killing fields” in Africa and America will only come with a collaborative approach to the crises of the diaspora. Searching for alternatives to violence will only be achieved in creating policies and opportunities that respect human life, analyze and appreciate diverse cultural communities, and develop strategies that are mutually beneficial and protective. The role of the Africana Cultures and Policy Studies Institute (ACPSI) is to bring together these elements through projects and scholarship that illustrate the significance and resilience of the African world. In doing so, we can hope for a time when Ice Cube won’t have to “use his AK.” That day will be “a good day” (Ice Cube 1993).

Notes

¹ There is an important and growing bibliography on the role of race during the Cold War. See Thomas J. Noer’s *The Cold War and Black Liberation: The United States and White Rule in Africa, 1948-1968*, Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1985. Also see Mary Dudziak’s *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002.

² See John Thornton’s *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800* (1992) in which the author emphasizes the active role of Africans in developing transatlantic commerce. Pointing to the relatively par status of African and European manufacturing at the onset of legitimate trade, Thornton suggests that “Europe offered nothing to Africa that Africa did not already produce” (45).

³ A casual review of the history of American policy in Haiti, the Philippines and Cuba would reveal how American foreign policy itself was deeply impacted by public perceptions and popular culture (Melanson 2000: 250-51; McBride 2002: 213-17).

⁴ See Souljah quoted in Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005, 394-95.

⁵ Marc Anthony Neal and others have considered how a long-term historical analysis of gangsta rap places it in a trajectory of the "commodification of black dysfunction." Neal writes, "Because of precarious economic conditions, African-Americans are often forced to be complicit in their own demonization by producing commercially viable caricatures of themselves." See Marc Anthony Neal, *What the Music Said: Black Popular Culture and Black Public Culture*, New York: Routledge, 1999, 10.

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