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# The Bystander's Tale: Gil Courtemanche's *A Sunday at the Pool in Kigali* and the Rwandan Genocide

MICHAEL KEREN

WHEN IT COMES TO GENOCIDE, most of us are bystanders. The bystander is someone present but not involved in an event demanding involvement, such as an individual ignoring a street fight or a nation-state refraining from humanitarian intervention. The role of bystander is unrelated to the specific conditions of the event. Whether we have full information about the genocide or just scattered information, whether it occurs close to home or in some remote country, whether we have the will to intervene but not the power, or the power and not the will, we cannot escape a degree of responsibility for genocide.

Gil Courtemanche's *A Sunday at the Pool in Kigali* (2003) is a novel about the Rwandan genocide of 1994, in which an estimated eight hundred thousand Tutsis were brutally murdered within a period of three months by the Hutu-controlled state with little to no interference by individuals, states, or international organizations. The novel joins a long list of works on the Rwandan genocide: books by journalists and scholars such as Linda Melvern's *Conspiracy to Murder* and Philip Gourevitch's *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will be Killed With Our Families*; eyewitness accounts such as Immaculee Ilibagiza's *Left to Tell*; reports by international organizations such as the Organization of African Unity's "Rwanda: The Preventable Genocide"; legal documents such as the minutes of the United Nations' International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda; films such as *Hotel Rwanda* and *Sometime in April*; documentaries such as "Triumph of Evil" and "The Last Just Man"; J. T. Rogers's play *The Overwhelming*; and many others.

These lengthy reports, learned treatises, detailed accounts, horrific pictures, earthshaking testimonies, retrospective reflections, and works of fiction and art attempt to cope with the hard questions raised by the events of spring 1994. What motivated a small, poor state in Africa

to plan, execute, and devote substantial resources to the butchery of fifteen percent of its citizens? What accounts for its success in killing, over a three month period, close to a million people with machetes and other simple weaponry? What went through the minds of those who killed, raped, and tortured men, women, and children who were often their next-door neighbours? What went through the minds of those who sold the Hutu regime the machetes? What kept the international community silent? What explains the stonehearted policies of France, Belgium, Great Britain, the United States, and other signatories of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights? How could United Nations officials stay idle in face of detailed information on the genocide that came in on a daily basis? Why did other international organizations, NGOs, missionaries, and human-rights watch-groups turn out to be so ineffective? And why did the world media devote so little attention to the Rwandan genocide?

The answers will always remain partial, for no investigative report, eyewitness account, scholarly study, legal procedure, or work of art can fully represent genocide. The cruelty of the perpetrators, the fear of the victims, the cynicism of officials, the voice of hate radio, and the sights and smells of the killing fields will always be hard to grasp. Courtmanche's novel does not provide more answers than other works on the Rwandan genocide, but it stands out because it sheds light on the bystander's role. This explains the interest the novel sparked in Canada following its publication in French in 2000 and in English in 2003. Novels such as Franz Werfel's *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, Primo Levi's *The Monkey's Wrench*, or Eli Wiesel's *Night* have been very effective in bringing the reality of genocide to the attention of large publics. Courtmanche's novel, however, has become a national bestseller not only because of the decision by the author, a Montreal journalist, to use the genre of the novel to convey the story of a genocide (Sullivan) but also because *A Sunday at the Pool in Kigali* is, to a large extent, the bystander's tale; as such, it hit a nerve in Canada, a country tormented by its failure to make a difference in Rwanda.

Canada has long been engaged with the controversy over the failure of UN forces to slow or halt the genocide. Some have criticized General Roméo Dallaire, the Canadian commander of United Nations Assistance Mission in Rwanda (UNAMIR), for sticking to rules and procedures when bold action was needed; others have emphasized the

impossible position Dallaire found himself in, lacking the experience, authority, and capability to make a difference in the crisis. Whatever one's stand in this controversy, it has sensitized Canadians to the Rwandan genocide and made them realize the magnitude of the international community's failure to prevent it.

In his memoir, *Shake Hands With The Devil*, Dallaire wrote that "the international community, through an inept UN mandate and what can only be described as indifference, self-interest and racism, aided and abetted these crimes against humanity" (Dallaire 5). These words resonate with Canadians, who have always taken pride in their country's international peacekeeping missions and were, therefore, bewildered in the 1990s when these missions failed in Somalia, Rwanda, and the former Yugoslavia. These failures led to revisionist conceptions of peacekeeping among Canadian historians (Richler) and to a shift in the public image of the peacemaker from saviour to bystander. "The traumatized peacekeeper, an important Canadian icon," Sherene Razack wrote, "is a man who bears witness to the savagery and who is overcome by it" (10). Many Canadians concurred with Dallaire's summary of the tragedy and felt they too had "watched as the devil took control of paradise on earth and fed on the blood of the people we were supposed to protect" (Dallaire 7).

Courtemanche is also very critical of the failure of Canada and other members of the international community to intervene in Rwanda; however, he insists it was not the devil we were watching that spring of 1994 but real people killing other real people. This is a central assumption made by the author, which turns the Rwandan genocide from an event occurring "out there," on a different planet inhabited by devils, to one occurring in the political reality we are part of and share responsibility for.

In this novel, the Rwandan genocide does not occur in the "heart of darkness," Joseph Conrad's 1902 metaphor for the Congo. When Conrad's narrator, the steamship captain Marlow, sails to Africa, he leaves civilization behind: "The rest of the world was nowhere, as far as our eyes and ears were concerned. Just nowhere. Gone, disappeared; swept off without leaving a whisper or a shadow behind" (Conrad 57). And Conrad's main character, Kurtz, the European colonialist, is the manifestation of evil. "His was an impenetrable darkness. I looked at him as you peer down at a man who is lying at the bottom of a precipice

where the sun never shines” (99). Conrad’s readers thus join Marlow in an adventurous journey to Africa where they observe the manifestation of evil before returning safely to the shores of Europe where they can indulge in what Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe has ironically called “those advanced and humane views appropriate to the English liberal tradition which required all Englishmen of decency to be deeply shocked by atrocities in Bulgaria or the Congo of King Leopold of the Belgians or wherever” (Achebe 214).

Achebe accused Conrad of making Africa “a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity” (215). This critique is not without foundation; cultural historians have shown that the myth of Africa as a remote, dark continent devoid of recognizable humanity had strong roots in Western thought (Brantlinger). This myth can still be detected in reports on the Rwandan genocide at the end of the twentieth century. For example, in 1995 journalist Philip Gourevitch went on a series of trips to Rwanda in which he gathered testimonies about the genocide. His reports, published in the *New Yorker* and later in book form, reflect his difficulty in telling the story from other than an outsider’s perspective. As he admits, “I took Marlow’s condition on returning from Africa as my point of departure” (Gourevitch 7). He realizes there is a difference between what happened and what he imagines to have happened and settles for the latter; he writes that the horror as horror interests him “only in so far as a precise memory of the offense is necessary to understand its legacy” (19). In other words, we are faced with reports that frame the genocide in the familiar terms ingrained in our memory (mostly derived from the legacy of the Holocaust) while leaving out much of the specific reality.

This is where *A Sunday at the Pool in Kigali* comes in. Courtemanche disapproves of his fellow journalists who, “ignorant as tortoises” (254), arrive in Rwanda after the genocide to produce quarter-hour human interest pieces and who are led by local guides “from one common grave to the next” (234). Having not been in Rwanda himself during the genocide, Courtemanche realizes the difficulty in representing the horrors from the perspectives of the perpetrators and victims. He does, however, provide a rather authentic account of the events by constructing the character of Valcourt, the ultimate bystander, who lives in Rwanda “without getting involved or taking sides in anything” (60).

By telling the Rwandan story from Valcourt's angle, Courtemanch puts a mirror to his own face — and to ours.

Once we observe the events from the bystander's perspective, they no longer occur within the “heart of darkness” but become part of a mundane political reality. In what follows, I show some of the insights we gain from this novel on that reality and especially on the political context of the Rwandan genocide, its dynamics, its rhetoric, and the international response to it. I then comment on the novel's contribution to the question of the bystander's responsibility.

### The Political Context of the Genocide

Conrad's Kurtz, the product of an era in which the colonial project was treated with fascination even by its critics (Fulford and Kitson), has a romantic aura. Kurtz is identified with “vigorous action” (Conrad 89); he is part of “the heavy, mute spell of the wilderness” (94); and he is seen as a “remarkable man who had pronounced a judgment upon the adventures of his soul on this earth” (100). Courtemanche's Valcourt, on the other hand, is anything but vigorous. He is, rather, a product of the postcolonial context in which this novel (and the Rwandan genocide) is set.

The novel's events unfold in Kigali after independence and include the obligatory civic symbols of decolonization: Constitution Square, Development Avenue, Boulevard of the Republic, and Justice Avenue. The colonial past is mentioned at length, but the tale is about evil stemming from present realities, not from past memories. This is what “post-colonialism” refers to here — a condition in former colonies affected by the colonial past but not identical with it. It is a condition of social, economic, and political patronage influenced by a nexus of local and global agencies (see Ball, Loomba).

The story begins at the pool of the Hôtel des Milles Collines (known as “Hotel Rwanda”) where we meet a collection of cultural representatives, including “international experts and aid workers, middle-class Rwandans, screwed-up or melancholy expatriates of various origins, and prostitutes” (1). The author describes the “artificial paradise” (2) that emerges when global agencies concerned with “development” launch projects that enrich corrupt elements inside and outside the country but that are mostly irrelevant to the Rwandan population.

Postcolonialism is a new game, and the players do not resemble their colonial forefathers; their skin is of all colours, and they often come to Africa to assist rather than to exploit. Valcourt is a clear example. A Radio-Canada producer, he has been commissioned to establish an educational television station in Rwanda that would spread information on preventive medicine, hygiene, and dietary matters. To the Canadian development agency financing the project, this activity was expected to lead to “democracy and tolerance” (17), but the Rwandan government would not allow the disclosure of undesirable information about the conditions of its citizens, and Valcourt ends up sipping beer for two years at the pool in Kigali.

Valcourt is no colonialist, and his attraction to the land does not stem from an economic or political interest in, or from a fascination with, Africa. He is an actor in a new postcolonial scene which lacks the romantic glory that has sometimes been associated with colonialism: “Valcourt was as arid as a desert, like dead earth that rejects seed. He was being eaten away by the hopelessness of living, the malady that afflicts only those who can afford the time to think about themselves. Valcourt was dead though alive” (87). This barren existence stems from the replacement of Valcourt’s Québécois identity with the identity of a global citizen; his situation is almost surreal due to the futility of the postcolonial project he is involved in: “The plot is heavy-handed and the characters behave as predictably as in a TV soap opera” (14). Many development initiatives in Africa are hopeless. A third of Kigali’s adults are HIV positive, but at the hotel pool we find the president’s nephews, one of whom — a former political science student in Quebec — organizes death squads, while the other controls the sale of condoms donated by international aid agencies. The abolishment of colonial rule, according to Courtemanche, has not helped the African people. Globalization provides new opportunities for some local forces but not for the masses. A powerful Rwandan just back from Paris, for instance, is recognizable by his sporty outfit, sunglasses, a crocodile attaché case, and an import license for some product of secondary necessity in his pocket; he will sell the product at a premium price.

The author describes the well-intentioned yet ineffective policies of international organizations, which result in poverty and misery. The story of one AIDS patient shows the difficulty of complying with the dictates of the International Monetary Fund, which demands that the

sick pay for hospital costs plus the cost of food and nursing. Another story of a local entrepreneur shows the difficulties involved in micro-credit initiatives; he tries to sell anti-tuberculosis medicines only to find out that they are handed out by missionaries for free.

The hopelessness of the postcolonial project is illustrated by a love story between Valcourt and a twenty-two-year-old Tutsi girl named Gentile. Valcourt makes a commitment to save her, but it is clear from the outset that this commitment will not endure once things turn nasty. To him, Gentile is an exotic fantasy representing the vigour he misses in his life; to her, Valcourt represents the lover from the movies she likes to watch for the long kisses, bouquets of flowers, and men with broken hearts. In other words, the postcolonial relations are too illusionary to make us trust a foreigner's commitment to a local girl. Valcourt, and other agents of international agencies working in Africa, remain bystanders, "Close enough to talk about it, even to write about it. But at the same time so isolated with their portable computers in their anti-septic rooms, and in their air-conditioned Toyotas, so surrounded by little Blacks trying to be like Whites that they think Black is the smell of the perfumes and cheap ointments sold in the Nairobi duty-free shop" (44).

The author reminds us that these bystanders — missionaries, aid and development experts, NGO activists, and the like — have not prevented the outbreak of one hundred wars in Africa since the end of colonialism. Moreover, in order to advance their noble causes they often cooperate with corrupt regimes, support ruthless dictators, and refrain from taking sides in local conflicts, which turns them, according to the author, into collaborators. Such collaboration is not surprising when governments are involved, as, for example, when the Chinese government finances a highway allowing Rwanda's president to return from Kigali to his native region in comfort. It is more surprising when non-governmental bodies are involved, as in the case of Belgian nuns co-operating with the president's wife on the selling of babies for adoption. As one missionary tells Valcourt, there is hardly anybody who escapes the evils associated with the bystander's role:

There are thousands of us missionaries in Africa who have chosen the path of silence, staking our faith on our presence and endurance. . . . We're not the only ones who think this way. Your humanitarian organizations would rather collaborate with a dictator than



denounce him. . . . If I could testify before a court, I would have all the members of this government put in prison, plus at least half the international experts from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank who, without the slightest scruple, feed the insatiable appetites of all the dictators in Africa. (162)

The social, economic, and political reality in Rwanda, then, is not seen as a simple extension of the colonial condition but as part of a new reality in which global and local agencies — committed, in theory, to development of the African continent — fail to save it from sickness, hunger, and genocide. By placing the events in this postcolonial context, the novel turns the death of Africans from a local to a global matter and the Rwandan genocide from an event occurring “out there,” in a remote country in Africa, to an integral part of our political world. No country today, Courtemanche writes, belongs only to its soldiers and rabid patriots; occurrences in any country affect the entire world. As one drunk Tutsi warns Valcourt when the genocide begins, “You still don’t understand. Good little Westerner that you are, all tied up with fine sentiments and noble principles, you’re witnessing the beginning of the end of the world” (62).

### **Dynamics of the Genocide**

At the beginning of the novel, we read about jackdaws as big as eagles and as numerous as house sparrows that caw all around the gardens of the Hôtel des Mille Collines. Such early warning signals of terrible things to come accentuate the vulnerability of the victims and the weakness of the bystanders. This is the chronicle of a death foretold; nothing will save Gentille, the Tutsi waitress, from torture and death. We are led into the genocide very slowly, and with every step it becomes clearer how helpless she is and how useless Valcourt becomes. (He ultimately finds his way to Nairobi while she is forced to stay behind).

This is as much the story of Valcourt, the bystander, as of Gentille, the victim. Courtemanche avoids the tendency, found in several writings on the Holocaust (see, for example, Dinur), to place the events outside the sphere of politics. On the contrary, the atrocities occur in a very real political setting, and that raises important political questions: Why are decisions to commit ethnic cleansing carried out so precisely and enthusiastically? How could a few hundred men planning the elimination of a segment of humanity believe that the majority of the popula-

tion would agree to go along? How could they seriously believe that the people would agree, by the thousands, to turn into killers? And how could they have been so sure of it? Though they remain unanswered, we are forced to consider these questions from a concrete political foundation rather than as Achebe's "metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity" (215).

These questions become even more concrete in light of the description of the genocide as an interruption of a vibrant, colourful, resourceful way of life. The Kigali market is "a lurid, spectacular tableau saying in its fashion that an indestructible Africa exists, an Africa of close proximity, elbow-rubbing, small business, resourcefulness" (78). By placing the tale in such a scene of endurance and persistence, the novel makes the reader recognize the often forgotten fact that the victims, while already doomed by the time we read about their "orgy of colour and noise, of bustle and loud, cheery voices," have not been born to be victims but rather to play what the author calls "a concerto to life. Small life, undistinguished, ordinary, wretched, boisterous, simple, rough, dumb, merry, life of whatever kind" (78). In history books, documentaries, and reports by international organizations, we often see the perpetrators' faces while the dead victims are faceless. In this novel, the reverse is true; the vibrant noises of the market are silenced when two anonymous militiamen wearing caps of the president's party are twirling their machetes: "The market's cheerful, noisy anarchy had ceased, the way the birds in a forest fall silent when a predator creeps near" (81).

One of the rationalizations made by bystanders in horrific events is that they could not have known what was going on, but the author claims that information about the Rwandan genocide was readily available. A project of such magnitude, he explains, in which a government decides to liquidate a large part of a country's population, requires substantial planning and preparation, and certain signals could be detected long before the operation got underway. He describes, for example, trucks filled with militiamen beginning to arrive in the city: "They were being billeted in different neighborhoods with party sympathizers, and at night were throwing up roadblocks and checking the identity of anyone passing" (83).

The killers' intentions are not kept secret: "We're going to cut throats, chop, butcher. We're going to cut open women's bellies before the eyes of their husbands, then mutilate the husbands before the wives

die of loss of blood, to make sure they see each other die" (62). Nor do the killings take place in hiding. Courtemanche describes how hundreds of killers — like that little bearded fellow in a Chicago Bulls sweater with Michael Jordan's name on the back — are on the prowl and noisily carrying out their work. Many of the atrocities are committed by drunken hooligans, "Beers in one hand, machetes in the other, eyes rolling up in their sockets, legs unsteady" (37).

The perpetrators are often known to the victims. A neighbourhood roadblock, for instance, where a couple is brutally abused and killed, is manned by a dozen of their neighbours under the command of a policeman who happens to be a cousin. The scene resembles a suburban block party: "The men were having a ball at the roadblock. A radio with the volume on full was diffusing disco to the farthest corners of the neighborhood. Shadows danced and leaped crazily, silhouetted against the lurid light of two fires lit in big metal barrels" (94). The party ends, as many block parties do, without enthusiasm: "The two bodies looked like abattoir refuse, carcasses clumsily cut up by unskilled butchers. The men had had their fill of pleasure and violence" (97).

### Rhetoric of the Genocide

One of the strongest expressions of the bystander's role can be found in the lengthy dialogues between Valcourt and Hutu officials taking place while the atrocious events proceed without interruption. This is also where the dynamics of the genocide are effectively placed in the post-colonial context because the officials are all well-educated individuals versed in the political and legal language of globalization and skilled in using it as a tool of deceit and manipulation.

The decision to file a complaint with the police — only to face an official pouring himself a glass of beer and responding, "Name, address, profession, nationality and civil status, please" (104) — promises endless harassment rather than a solution to the problem. The author shows how mass murderers effectively manipulate dysfunctional bureaucracy. Witnessing the killing of a prostitute by a Belgian in the hotel and the cover-up of the murder by the Belgian Embassy, whose security people hijack the dead woman's body, Valcourt and Gentile go to the public prosecutor's office to lodge a complaint. In the novel's ironic language, "The assistant chief prosecutor received them out of respect for Valcourt, the citizen of a donor country and above all a neutral country

like Canada, a country that asked no questions and gave with its eyes closed, a perfect country in short” (73). The long sermon by the official indicates a deep understanding of the postcolonial soul; the emphasis is on democracy and the rule of law, but there is a willingness to compromise both in the name of relativism and political correctness. “We too are seeking the path to greater democracy,” he says, “even if we have not been practicing it as long as you. We too believe in the rule of law and practice it, although sometimes in our own ways that may surprise others but must be respected” (74).

We later learn that the official has gained this understanding during his studies at a Canadian university. This has not made him less ruthless, however, just more capable of manipulating the truth and doing so in a seemingly polite manner: “Since you are alone in wishing to go to law, as my learned colleagues say, I will ask you to remain here to comply with the formalities and answer the questions of our investigators” (77). The official’s use of such expressions as “my learned colleagues” or “we are rushed off our feet today” becomes petrifying when we learn who the colleagues are and why they are rushed off their feet: “From the next office came hysterical laughter. In the waiting room a group of militiamen . . . were amusing themselves hitting a teenaged boy. Some policemen were standing by, laughing. Three civil servants sat behind small school-type desks, slowly pushing pencils” (77).

The deceit and manipulation accompanying the genocide is not attributed to local officials alone but also to foreign consuls and journalists who help the Hutu government spread false versions of the events — either for political reasons or simply due to ignorance and laziness. And in contrast to the expectations raised by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, Courtemanche draws a gloomy picture of the likelihood of learning the truth even after the massacre ends. When Valcourt bribes the Hutus who fled the country in order to meet the sergeant who imprisoned Gentille, Valcourt encounters the same deceitful rhetoric as before. The sergeant, who has now been promoted to lieutenant by the government in exile, does not even remember the affair: “He was a handsome man who looked you straight in the eye and never raised his voice. Why care about the disappearance of a single person when an Anglo-Saxon Protestant plot was going to eliminate every last living Hutu?” (252).

According to this novel, then, there is little chance for the victims

of ethnic cleansing to have their “day in court,” even in an age of open information. This state of affairs is largely due to the apparent ease with which false rhetoric is used to conceal the worst criminal offenses. When faced with authentic documentation spelling out in detail his abuse of Gentile, the lieutenant, we are told, does not even flinch; he just opens another beer, spits, and makes long speeches about the plot he and his comrades had to fight off. As the author concludes, “propaganda is as powerful as heroin; it surreptitiously dissolves all capacity to think” (253).

### **The International Community**

The author singles out three international actors for their roles in the Rwandan genocide: foreign governments, the United Nations, and the world media.

The role of the Belgian and French governments is well known. Courtemanche describes the colonial era when the Belgians brought European racism to the region and disrupted the coexistence between Hutus and Tutsis. European racism has not been diminished with African independence or with globalization. The author contends that it was racism that led Belgian, French, and Italian forces to evacuate white foreign nationals from Rwanda when the massacre began, leaving all others to die: “Make no mistake, says a priest when the foreign troops are about to arrive, they’re not coming” (224). Through supplies of arms and military advisers, the French are described as feeding the inhumanity of the killing of hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children. Occasionally, we are reminded of the sources of weapons used in the massacre: Chinese machetes, Uzi automatic rifles (courtesy of Israel, arriving via France and Zaïre), or French grenades that travelled via Cairo through Zaire.

The explanation given by this Québécois author for the French role in the genocide is both political and cultural: “In the great designs of the great powers, these Rwandans were of negligible weight, people outside the circle of real humanity, poor, useless types whom the glorious French civilization, with monarchical arrogance, was ready to sacrifice to preserve France’s civilizing presence in Africa, a presence already threatened by a major Anglophone plot” (95). The combination of political interest and cultural arrogance is manifested in the character of “Madame the consul,” the French consul who is more concerned with

her golf tournament than with the murder of a cardinal — a murder she is actually helping to cover up.

While UN officials are not directly accused of active collaboration, one of the most negative characters in the novel is the unnamed Canadian general commanding the United Nations troops in Rwanda. In a review of Dallaire's *Shake Hands With the Devil*, Courtemanche admitted his difficulty in handling the similar character, the UNAMIR commander, in the novel — especially after he learned of the general's attempt to commit suicide over his failure to stop the genocide ("Nightmare Diaries"). But in the novel, he takes a harsh position vis-à-vis the unnamed general: "Meticulous, legalistic, a civil servant and exemplary bureaucrat, as virtuous as 'le Grand Machin' itself (as General De Gaulle was pleased to call the United Nations). What he knows of the world is airports, the grand hotels of Brussels, Geneva and New York, and strategic studies centres. Of war, he knows what he has seen on CNN" (12).

This description makes the general a symbol not only of the UN but of the entire postcolonial project. Many of the behaviours attributed to the general — rightly or wrongly — in this novel can be seen as illustrations of the contemporary international community's failure to act on behalf of persecuted minorities in the Third World; he adheres to routine when bold decisions are needed and settles for empty rhetoric that helps rationalize failures to engage in humanitarian intervention when necessary. An example of such rhetoric can be found in the following statement made by the general: "The international community would not remain indifferent, but for the moment the UN forces could only intervene peaceably, in the hope that their presence alone would bring those responsible for these excesses back to reason" (222).

Much of the international community's indifference is blamed on the world media; Courtemanche shows the discrepancy between the events taking place on the ground and their representation in the media. When the besieged refugees in the Hôtel des Mille Collines begin to drink the pool water, the media is not troubled:

That day in its major international bulletin CNN spent twenty seconds on the recurrence of ethnic problems in Rwanda, giving assurances, however, that foreign nationals were safe. Even the perspicacious BBC said little more. Radio-France Internationale talked about recurrent confrontations and ancestral tribalisms, wondering

if Africans would ever be able to rid themselves of their ancient demons that kept provoking the most dreadful atrocities. (226-27)

Courtemanche claims the media's failure to report accurately and responsibly on the killings was partly due to the primitive methods used by the killers — the results do not look good on television. When the massacres begin, one Rwandan says,

We'll have the savage efficiency of the primitive and the poor. With machetes, knives and clubs we'll do better than the Americans with their smart bombs. But it won't be a war for television. You won't be able to stand fifteen minutes of our wars and massacres. They're ugly and you'll think they're inhuman. It's the lot of the poor not to know how to murder cleanly, with surgical precision, as the parrots of CNN say after their briefings from the generals. (63)

CNN and other media outlets have never been known for insightful reporting on Africa. “The media don't show dead bodies cut up by men and shredded by vultures and wild dogs,” Valcourt says: “They show the pitiful victims of drought, swollen little bellies, eyes bigger than TV screens, the tragic children of famine and the elements — that's what moves people” (111-12). When Valcourt sends off an article on the looming genocide to a dozen newspapers, only one — a small Catholic weekly in Belgium — accepts it for publication. He recalls that he himself had not been sensitive to cries of alarm during the drought in Ethiopia in 1983; he arrived there to report on the situation only after the famine had already triumphed. In one of the hardest statements made in this novel, Valcourt notes that the disclosure of the atrocities of 1994 probably will not change the nature of reporting on Africa because “it takes ten thousand dead Africans to furrow the brow of even one left leaning White” (111).

## Conclusion

The mix of genres in *A Sunday at the Pool in Kigali*, which is both a novel and a chronicle of events, takes away from its value as a literary work; the narrative is burdened with names, historical facts, and lengthy explanations that are more common in work by journalists than novelists. The value of the novel, however, lies in its unique perspective. Through the character of Valcourt, a journalist, Courtemanche, a

journalist himself, highlights the role of the bystander in the Rwandan genocide. And since this bystander role was played by most individuals, governments, and international organizations involved in the events of 1994, the questions raised in this novel are widely applicable.

The main question is that of responsibility. Once atrocities committed around us are seen as occurring not in some remote planet but as part of our own political reality, we share in the responsibility for them. This is so even when we lack the power to change the course of events, which is frequently the case. As this novel illustrates, preventing a well-planned, well-orchestrated massacre covered up by manipulation and deceit is close to impossible, even for international agents facing a relatively weak state. On the other hand, powerless actors may not be excused from their responsibility. This point is often overlooked in public and media discussions. In the Canadian discourse on Roméo Dallaire, for example, the general's supporters point out how little power he had, while his critics claim he had the power but failed to use it (Clark).

Responsibility, however, is not merely a function of power. Valcourt, who is both well-intentioned and powerless, reflects the complexities involved. Although he does everything in his power to save Gentile, he feels responsible when he fails. This feeling goes beyond well-known survivor guilt (Boyajian and Grigorian) or the tendency to become an "ethical bearer of truth and responsibilities to the victims of human rights abuses" (Gigliotti 85). Valcourt bears a clear ethical burden, which greatly problematizes the bystander's role.

The complexity added here to the bystander role is quite timely, because researchers of genocide have recently argued that the way bystanders were treated in the past must be updated. Tony Kushner, for example, calls for a more nuanced study of Holocaust bystanders:

Put bluntly, we like our bystanders to be as bifurcated as the categories of victim and perpetrator . . . this is a dangerous if understandable development. For rather than nuancing our understanding of the complexity of human responses during the Holocaust, the bystander category is in danger of aiding the tendency to see the subject in Manichean terms, as a symbol of mass evil alongside much less prevalent absolute good (with the emphasis put on the latter to enable hope for the future). (Kushner 60-61)

Kushner believes that a widening of the bystander category is called for.



While in the past, a limited number of people were bystanders to the Holocaust and did not act, in today's genocides, everybody falls into that category. The bystander is no longer an easily distinguishable type. In an age of almost instant global communications, Kushner writes, "we are all co-presenters witnessing, even if only through the media, the genocides, ethnic cleansing and other manifestations of extreme racism that besmirch the contemporary world" (60).

Ethicists concerned with responsibility have generally accepted this widening of the bystander category but have not given up the attempt to attribute varied ethical obligations to different bystander types. In an article on the responsibility of bystanders in Bosnia, for example, Arne Johan Vetlesen admits that today, for every person directly victimized by genocide, there are hundreds, thousands, perhaps even millions of bystanders who are cognizant of the events through the mass media. Vetlesen distinguishes, however, between passive bystanders and bystanders by assignment — that is, professionals who, by formal appointment, are situated closer to the scene of the genocide and can thus be attributed greater responsibility: "Responsibility for what is now unfolding . . . must also be seen to rest with the party not itself affected but which is knowledgeable about — which is more or less literally *witnessing* — the genocide that is taking place" (521).

It is the blurring of such distinctions in *A Sunday at the Pool in Kigali* that contributes to an updated thinking about the bystander's responsibility. There were simply too many forces that stood by when Hutus massacred Tutsis to allow us to single out certain officials. In a chapter titled "Silence," Linda Melvern surveys the international actors that should be accountable for the genocide, and the list is seemingly endless. From start to finish, she writes, all governments continued to recognize the interim government of Rwanda as legitimate, and international organizations allowed its representatives to serve in such bodies as the UN Commission on Human Rights. She tells about the major role played by British prime minister John Major and American President Bill Clinton in shaping a passive policy toward the crisis and in abandoning UNAMIR. Melvern also talks about the press, especially in Great Britain, which described the mass killings as incomprehensible to outsiders and as unamenable to reason: "The newspapers described 'hopeless, helpless horror', taking place in a relatively unknown country, far away" (268).

But none of these forces could have been so successful in preventing intervention in Rwanda were it not for world public opinion that settled for the framing of the crisis as a tribal war in Africa. The global, postcolonial world of the late twentieth century, while no longer fascinated by far-away continents, largely adopted the early twentieth century's "heart of darkness" metaphor; this allowed the genocide to go on for three months as if such killing was unavoidable and influenced the search for the sources of evil in some metaphysical sense when it was over. In this novel, however, evil is seen as political rather than metaphysical, and the burden of responsibility shifts to all citizens of the new global world.

What, then, can be done in a world in which we may recognize our responsibility to halt the atrocities we hear about on an almost daily basis, but we also know how little power we have to make a difference? It is Gentile who raises this question in the novel. At one point, Valcourt regains his vibrancy and begins to ply his trade again, trying to explore "what's hidden behind the bogeymen, the monsters, the caricatures, the symbols, the flags, the uniforms, the grand declarations that lull us to sleep with their good intentions." "Can't we do anything?" (116) Gentile asks timidly. Valcourt admits that very little can be done but that it is still one's duty to stay, observe, denounce, and report. Realizing that his efforts to knock at embassy doors and bring denunciations before the representatives of established powers had only been futile agitation, Valcourt nevertheless believes that he must continue recording the events so they are not forgotten. Courtemanche is aware that this minimalist task is less than heroic and that its success cannot be assured. Valcourt, he concludes, "would write for those willing to read, speak to those willing to lend an ear, even half an ear, but that was all" (117).

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