

Documentary Neo-Naturalism: Gil Courtemanche and the Rwandan Genocide

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RÉSUMÉ

Le roman de Gil Courtemanche, Un dimanche à la piscine à Kigali (2000/2003), pourrait être considéré comme un exemple de néo-naturalisme documentaire, à l'instar du récit fictif de la guerre franco-prussienne d'Émile Zola dans La Débâcle (1892). L'auteur Courtemanche et son protagoniste sont tous deux journalistes, et l'accent est mis sur le récit des observations faites avec des détails troublants au cours des premières phases du génocide rwandais. Dans un récit essentiellement à la troisième personne omnisciente, j'argumente que l'auteur a recours à une poétique du sexe, allant de la crise du sida au début du génocide. Ce dernier implique des mutilations, des viols et des meurtres perpétrés sur un peuple minoritaire identifié comme "Tutsi" par le groupe adverse - les extrémistes "Hutu" - dans le but d'anéantir le premier. Ce récit romancé pourrait également être considéré comme un exemple de "néo-naturalisme provocateur," de la même manière que Rita Schober a qualifié le roman de Michel Houellebecq de 1998, Particules élémentaires. Pourtant, le roman de Courtemanche porte les questions sexuelles à un niveau extrême de dépravation humaine, en les associant clairement à des comportements meurtriers, évocateurs de La Bête humaine (1890) de Zola. Même le genre du dix-neuvième siècle désigné par "littérature putride," une reprise du terme de Louis Ulbach (alias Ferragus) faisant référence à Thérèse Raquin (1868), peut être considéré comme pertinent.

ABSTRACT

Gil Courtemanche's novel Un dimanche à la piscine à Kigali (2000/2003) could be considered an example of documentary neo-naturalism, on the order of Émile Zola's fictional account of the Franco-Prussian War in La Débâcle (1892). Author Courtemanche and his protagonist are both journalists, with emphasis placed on recounting observations in disturbing detail during the early stages of the Rwandan genocide. I argue that, in a mostly third-person omniscient narrative, the author has recourse to a poetics of sex, from the AIDS crisis to the beginning of the genocide. This latter involves mutilation, rape, and murder enacted on a minority people identified as "Tutsi" by the opposing group – "Hutu" extremists – with the goal of annihilating the former. This fictionalized account could also be considered as an example of "néo-naturalisme provocateur," as Rita Schober has termed Michel Houellebecq's 1998 novel Particules élémentaires. Yet Courtemanche's novel takes sexual issues to an extreme level of human depravity, linking them clearly to murderous behaviors, as in Zola's La Bête humaine (1890). Even the nineteenth-century genre of "la littérature putride," as Ferragus categorized Zola's proto-naturalist novel Thérèse Raquin (1868), could be considered relevant.

In his Préambule, Gil Courtemanche addresses the ambiguous generic classification of his book, *La piscine à l'hôtel de Kigali* (2000/2003): “Ce roman est un roman. Mais c’est aussi une chronique et un reportage.”¹ Critics have debated this intermediary status, such as Michel Biron, who describes it as “un peu moins ou un peu plus qu’un roman.”² I put forward the view that Courtemanche’s *Un dimanche à la piscine à Kigali* should be considered as an example of turn-of-the-twenty-first-century neo-naturalist fiction, of which various types are emerging. Most obviously, I argue, this novel could be labeled “documentary neo-naturalism” since the author not only spent many decades as a journalist, but he also bases his fiction, with its journalist protagonist, on his own experience of real events related to the Rwandan genocide. The novel seems also to follow in the footsteps of Michel Houellebecq’s *Particules élémentaires* (1998), which Rita Schober has termed “néo-naturalisme provocateur,”³ with its explicit descriptions of sexual behaviors. Courtemanche’s novel, however, complicates the situation further, linking issues related to sex clearly with death and murder, as for example in Zola’s *Thérèse Raquin* (1868), labeled by one of his critics as “la littérature putride,”⁴ or in *La Bête humaine* (1890).

In this latter novel, Zola’s character Jacques Lantier in some ways recalls Césaire Lombroso’s *L’Uomo delinquente* and the notion of the “born criminal.”⁵ With an emphasis on the atavistic, Zola’s character is aware of “sa soif toujours renaissante de venger des offenses très anciennes dont il aurait perdu l’exacte mémoire, cette rancune amassée de mâle en mâle, depuis la première tromperie au fond des cavernes.”⁶ Zola references thus a psychological dimension of biological evolutionary theory, in a character who represents a throwback to a view of primitive humans and their ancestors as barbaric hunters, masculine rivals for the female mating partner, and ferocious protectors of their offspring. The impetus for genocide could be understood in this way. As is well-known, the word “genocide” is constructed from the Greek word for race or tribe, “geno-,” with “-cide,” the Latin word for killing.⁷ Therefore, the effort to annihilate an entire social group may be typically motivated by tribal allegiances and strategies for dominance, many of which have taken place in the distant past and, unfortunately, continue into the present.⁸ In the case

¹ Gil Courtemanche, *Un dimanche à la piscine à Kigali* [Montréal, Les Éditions du Boréal 2000] (Paris: Éditions Denoël, 2003). Henceforth all references to the 2003 edition of the novel will appear in the text parenthetically as page numbers only.

² Michel Biron, “Un poète, un journaliste, un romancier,” *Voix et images. Littérature québécoise* 26.5 (printemps 2001): 625-30. 628.

³ Rita Schober labels Michel Houellebecq’s *Particules élémentaires* “néo-naturalisme provocateur,” in her essay titled “Vision du monde et théorie du roman, concepts opératoires des romans de Michel Houellebecq,” in *Le Roman français du tournant du XXI^e siècle*, eds. Bruno Blanckman, Marc Dambre, Aline Mura-Brunel (Paris: Presses Sorbonne nouvelle, 2004) 515. Note that an entire “dossier” on Michel Houellebecq as neo-naturalist writer, has appeared in *Cahiers naturalistes* 70.98 (2024), under the direction of Aurélie Barjonet.

⁴ Louis Ulbach, under the pseudonym Ferragus, categorized Zola’s novel *Thérèse Raquin* as “La littérature putride,” in an article by that title in *Le Figaro*, 23 janvier 1868. See Émile Zola, Préface de la deuxième édition [1868], *Thérèse Raquin*, eds. Françoise Xenakis and Auguste Dezalay (Paris: Fasquelle, 1984) 11-17. 17.

⁵ Lombroso’s book went through several editions and translations, after its first publication in 1876. Zola likely read the French translation but made his own observations and read other authors as well. For a well-researched study of the connection between the two authors, see Nicolas Bareit, “*La Bête humaine* de Lombroso,” *Revue d’histoire littéraire de la France* 117.4 (déc. 2017): 933-46.

⁶ Émile Zola, *La Bête humaine* (Paris: Gallimard, “folio classique,” 1977 et 2001) 263.

⁷ See Gerard Mulligan, “Genocide in the Ancient World,” published 27 January 2013 on the website <worldhistory.org>, consulted 13 Feb. 2025. The term “genocide,” the author states, was invented in 1944 by Raphael Lemkin (1900-1959).

⁸ In 1948, in recognition of the World War II Holocaust, the United Nations adopted the most influential document setting down the modern legal notion of genocide: “Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of

of the Rwandan genocide, the conflict between Hutu and Tutsi groups became exacerbated and complicated through their common history and their exposure to Western colonial notions.

A few critics have labeled Courtemanche's novel "pornographic."⁹ Indeed, the novel's emphasis on the sexual nature of the catastrophic Rwandan genocide and the ostensibly gratuitous details of a few passages would warrant this label. The same could be said of the grotesque high point in Zola's *Germinal* (1885), for example, when the women of the mining community, take vengeance on the corpse of shopkeeper Maigrat, castrating him and triumphantly displaying the dismembered part.¹⁰ Chigbo Anyaduba uses the expression "pornographic imagination" in his chapter on Courtemanche's novel, again recalling the label given to Zola of "pornographe." Zola answers his detractors, saying he is waiting for someone to come to his defense with this answer: "Eh non, cet écrivain est un simple analyste, qui a pu s'oublier dans la pourriture humaine, mais qui s'y est oublié comme un médecin s'oublie dans un amphithéâtre."¹¹

Zola's idea of basing fiction on the observation of contemporary society with the objective of revealing "le vrai" – often uncomfortable, disturbing truths about human nature and institutions – corresponds to the intention of Courtemanche in writing *Un Dimanche à la piscine à Kigali*. Zola, in his preface to the 1868 edition of *Thérèse Raquin*, answers his detractors himself, anticipating thus his "scientific" and "deterministic" naturalist aesthetic generally operative in *Les Rougon-Macquart*: "J'ai choisi des personnages souverainement dominés par leurs nerfs et leur sang, dépourvus de libre arbitre, entraînés à chaque acte de leur vie par les fatalités de leur chair."¹² This approach to the novelistic undertaking is relevant in the case of certain hate-filled *génocidaires*; but during the genocide, this imperative to kill moved beyond the domestic/local situation and became a political imperative, involving a much wider demographic, as in any war. Here, the goal is to put an end to the sexual reproduction of an entire social/cultural group – typically considered "ethnic." Unfortunately, this is not an unusual situation in human history.

In his theorization of the representation of genocide, Sarr emphasizes the expression and representation of the *indicible* – the unspeakable –, and the challenge of defining a poetics and employing narrative modes for the representation of the unrepresentable.¹³ In this study, I have followed Sarr's suggestions of an approach to the literary representation of genocide, in Gil Courtemanche's novel: firstly, the identification in the novel of a poetics of genocide, which I suggest is a poetics of "sex" and related issues – in its heterosexual forms and range of purposes;

Genocide." Article II of the convention defined genocide as the "intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group." Qtd in Mulligan's article. The author cites the Athenian massacre at Helos (416 BCE) and the Roman destruction of Carthage (146 BCE) as early examples of what we could now term "genocidal."

⁹ For example, Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg, in her chapter 2, "Torture II: Citizenship," in *Beyond Terror: Gender, Narrative, Human Rights* (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2007) 57-86, uses the terms "pornotropes" and "pornotropics" – this latter to refer to the tropics as a destination for sex-tourism. See her section on Courtemanche's novel (75-83).

¹⁰ Voir Émile Zola, *Germinal* [1885] (Paris: Flammarion, 1968) 362-63.

¹¹ See Chigbo Anyaduba, Chapter 6, "The Rwanda Genocide and the Pornographic Imagination in Courtemanche's *A Sunday at the Pool in Kigali*," in *The Postcolonial African Genocide Novel: Quests for Meaningfulness* (Liverpool: Liverpool Univ. Press, 2020) 205-42. In his preface to the 1868 edition of *Thérèse Raquin*, Zola claims his detractors call him "un misérable hystérique qui se plaît à étaler des pornographies" and he waits for someone to come to his defense, with the comment quoted in the text (13).

¹² Émile Zola, Préface à la seconde édition de *Thérèse Raquin* 12.

¹³ Adiouma Sarr, Avant-Propos, *La Représentation de la tragédie humaine dans la littérature des génocides du XXe siècle* (Fredricton: The Channel Press, 2022) 7-20. 12-13. In his bibliography, Sarr lists Gil Courtemanche's novel, among others, but he uses Gilbert Gatore's novel *Le Passé devant soi* (Paris: Phébus, 2008) as a primary text for the Rwandan genocide.

secondly, the role of narrative point of view, with a third-person narrator most often giving a fictitious journalist's sometimes cynical perspective on the situation, especially in the precise milieu of the Hotel des Mille Collines in Kigali.¹⁴

In *Un dimanche à la piscine à Kigali*, the Canadian journalist, Bernard Valcourt, is making a film about the AIDS crisis in Rwanda, when stirrings of the disaster of the 1994 genocide are becoming apparent. Before the Rwandan president's plane was shot down on April 6, 1994, Valcourt already has friends and acquaintances among the international community and locals frequenting or residing at the hotel, or working there: international aid and development workers, hotel employees, including locals suffering from and/or spreading AIDS, bourgeois Rwandans, prostitutes – even the architects and major actors in the genocide.¹⁵

The horrors that continued uninterrupted during this period, in early 1994 when the AIDS crisis merged into the beginnings of the three-month genocide, are described mostly from the perspective of this outside observer with an emphasis on the sexual aspects of both. AIDS was rampant in this part of Africa – the result of intense and indiscriminate sexual promiscuity, seen here by many as an affirmation of life during challenging circumstances; whereas the perpetrators of genocide (mostly extremist Hutus) are shown using cruel acts of rape, torture, mutilation, and murder with the purpose of eliminating the sexual reproduction of the minority Tutsis, whose members included the ruling monarchical dynasty in pre-colonial times and beyond. Tutsis had been favored for leadership and educational opportunities during the Belgian Trusteeship. After the dynastic Tutsi monarchy ended in 1961, the first two presidents of the Rwandan Republic, Hutus Grégoire Kayibanda and Juvenal Habyarimana, reinforced the use of Belgian-instituted identity cards, showing patrilineal Hutu, Tutsi or Twa ethnic status,¹⁶ for their own political purposes. In the aftermath of the genocide, Rwandan author Benjamin Sehene (Tutsi) explains, “une poignée d’hommes politiques a réussi à transformer un mythe ethnologique en une telle haine raciale.”¹⁷

In Gil Courtemanche's novel, as in Houellebecquian neo-naturalism, there is an effort to point to the injustices and corruption in contemporary society. Yet, even in Houellebecq's shocking and depressing novel *Particules élémentaires*, there is a glimmer of optimism for a new race in a chimeric utopian future, recalling the hope offered the working class in the final lines of Zola's *Germinal*: “Des hommes poussaient, une armée noire, vengeresse, qui germait lentement dans le silence, grandissant pour les récoltes du siècle futur, et dont la germination allait faire bientôt éclater la terre.”¹⁸ In Gil Courtemanche's novel, which also attempts to understand the reasons for the crisis, the hope resides in a few brave and generous characters, who know how to live and/or die, or they affirm and enable others in this process; some are not immune to feelings of altruism or love. Examples in Courtemanche's novel would be Élise, the Canadian nurse, Victor the restaurateur and hotelier, and Émerita, the taxi-driver – whose roles will be elaborated further on.

¹⁴ Michael Keren emphasizes the journalist's “bystander” perspective on the 1994 situation in Rwanda, in his chapter 4, titled “The Bystander's Tale: Gil Courtemanche's *A Sunday at the Pool in Kigali*,” *Politics and Literature at the Turn of the Millennium* (Calgary: Univ. of Calgary Press, 2015) 69-88.

¹⁵ It is clear the architects of the genocide also frequented the Hotel des Mille Collines, as shown in the film *Hotel Rwanda*. While the perspective of the film has been called into question, other sources concur with this point.

¹⁶ In 1994, the approximate percentages of the total population for these three groups were as follows: 85% Hutu, 14% Tutsi, 1% Twa. See Roméo Dallaire (with Brent Beardsley), *Shake Hands with the Devil. The Failure of Humanity in Rwanda* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2004) 531, 534.

¹⁷ Benjamin Sehene, *Le Piège ethnique* (Paris: Editions Dagorno, 1999) 138. See also pp. 17-18, 23, 142.

¹⁸ Zola, *Germinal* 454.

Whereas, in Courtemanche's novel, sexually charged scenarios and violence are uppermost in his descriptions of events and characters just prior to the genocide and during its early phase, Rwandan author Scholastique Mukasonga emphasizes other tropes that circulated before 1994 to instigate pogroms against Tutsis in the area where she grew up: Bugesera. She references colonial terms for preparing the land for agriculture, which include "clearing the bush" or "chopping down the tall trees" or "eradicating the insects." Tse-tse flies were a concern in Mukasonga's region, but the use of the Kinyarwanda word *inyenzi* for cockroaches was ubiquitous throughout the country to refer to Tutsis.¹⁹ Before and during the 1994 genocide, these tropes were in constant use as slogans on the popular independent radio station Radio Télévision Libre des Milles Collines (RTL), to whip up the anger of the populace and incite them to kill Tutsis.²⁰

Before writing *Un dimanche à la piscine à Kigali*, Gil Courtemanche was a respected Canadian journalist (deceased in 2011) with many years of experience in Africa – including these two years in Rwanda – and, like his protagonist, Bernard Valcourt, he was making a documentary on AIDS when the genocide broke out. There is reason therefore to try to understand the perspective of a witness in giving an account of the early events of the Rwandan genocide. Through the omniscient narrator, the reader gains access to the protagonist's conversations with others, his observations, ponderings and opinions – and occasionally to the thoughts of another person. Near the end of the novel, there is a significant departure, from third person narrator to the first person, when the diary entries of the main female character Gentile are reproduced. In the Préambule, Courtemanche further explains his project :

Les personnages ont tous existé et dans presque tous les cas j'ai utilisé leur véritable nom. Le romancier leur a prêté une vie, des gestes et des paroles qui résument ou symbolisent ce que le journaliste a constaté en les fréquentant. C'est pour mieux dire leur qualité d'hommes et de femmes assassinés que j'ai pris la liberté de les inventer un peu. Quant aux dirigeants et responsables du génocide, ils ont conservé dans ce livre leur véritable identité.²¹

During his stay in Rwanda, Bernard Valcourt has therefore made connections, not only with other ex-patriots – French, Belgian, and especially Canadian – but also with Rwandans, from various walks in life and of various political persuasions, including those holding either Tutsi or Hutu identity cards. As mentioned, these encounters take place in Valcourt's place of residence, the luxury Hotel des Mille Collines, built in 1973, with its swimming pool; other locations in Rwanda figure as well, mostly in Kigali, given that the journalist has been following up on various HIV-positive candidates for his documentary.

In considering the "bystander" status of the main character, the question arises of the voyeuristic implications of the work of journalists and photojournalists who feature the horrors of war and conflict for public consumption, according to naturalist aesthetic norms.²² Zola implicated himself in graphic descriptions of mutilation and violent death, for example, in writing about the

¹⁹ See Scholastique Mukasonga, *Inyenzi ou les cafards* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006). See Frances Hemley, "Spectres of 'development': Francophonie, agricultural coloniality and genocide memory in Scholastique Mukasonga's *femme aux pieds nus* and *Inyenzi ou les cafards*," *Modern & Contemporary France* 29.2 (2021): 193-208.

²⁰ In Courtemanche's novel, the Kinyarwanda word *inkotanyii* (Tutsi warrior; and modern-day Tutsi soldiers) is incorrectly translated on p. 49 as *cafard*.

²¹ Gil Courtemanche, Préambule. *Un dimanche à la piscine à Kigali*.

²² See Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003) 102-03.

miners' uprising in *Germinal* (1885) or in *La Débâcle* (1892).²³ In fact, one of the local prostitutes in Courtemanche's novel, Bernadette, speaks of the uncomfortable situation for Rwandans, with outsiders present during this horrendous situation. She addresses Canadian expats Valcourt and Élise: "Pendant que nous mourons sous votre regard attentif, vous vivez, vous vous épanouissez. Je vous aime bien, mais vous n'avez pas l'impression, des fois que vous vivez de notre mort?" (232). Élise responds: "Mais même si Bernadette a raison, même si nous ne sommes peut-être que des voyeurs impuissants, même si nous vivons un peu de leur mort, comme elle dit, elle ne m'a pas convaincue de partir" (233).

As a journalist Valcourt knows that he may not be able to stop the conflict or heal the wounds, but what he can do is record what he sees and experiences, and tell the truth, providing a legacy especially for specific victims and for a few survivors. Moreover, Courtemanche and his fictitious journalist insist on their rejection of "objectivity" in journalism. They are "engagés," like Zola, in his defense of Alfred Dreyfus.²⁴ In fact, in addition to writing an article about the impending massacre, with only one Catholic journal accepting it in Belgium, Valcourt recognizes and acts personally on major injustices twice in Kigali. He addresses the appropriate authorities in Kigali, so that the guilty can be brought to answer for their infractions. Both times, he runs up against a brick wall – of feigned bureaucracy for political reasons or outright prejudice, on the part of Rwandan and European officials. As an outsider (and "bystander"), he has no right to point to irregularities in the host government or criticize the behaviors of its inhabitants or distinguished visitors.²⁵ These experiences make him feel powerless and he realizes that he will not be able to save a country, but he can try to save Gentille, his girlfriend (eventually his wife) and the little girl they will adopt, as he explains to Raphaël:

[J]e ne peux plus rien faire. Tout cela est trop énorme. J'ai essayé, le peu que j'ai pu. Au début, tu te rappelles, je voulais donner un coup de pouce à la démocratie avec la télévision. Puis, j'ai voulu me battre contre le sida en faisant un film. [...] Il me reste Gentille et l'enfant. Peut-être que je peux sauver deux personnes. (152)

As for the AIDS crisis, Valcourt's story begins with his support of Méthode, who is HIV-positive and dying. The journalist allows the sick man to occupy the second bed in his hotel room, so that his death will be, as the patient wishes, "une belle mort" (72). He will die "propre, soûl, gavé et devant la télévision" (61) ! Valcourt refuses to guilt these patients, despite the promiscuity that exacerbated the epidemic of AIDS in Central Africa, infecting entire households. A thread runs through the novel equating sexual relations with "life" even though they may bring "death."²⁶ The narrator records the thoughts of Méthode's mother at his bedside, showing her empathy:

²³ Like Courtemanche's novel, these two Zolian works are based on actual historical events, which the author researched thoroughly – a coal miners' strike in Anzin in 1884 and the Franco-Prussian war.

²⁴ As a Canadian journalist, Gil Courtemanche, like his protagonist, has been lauded for his refusal of objectivity. Martin Forgues, claims, for example : "Très tôt dans sa carrière, Gil Courtemanche a rejeté la neutralité comme jalon central d'un journalisme de qualité, un credo qui vient avec un lourd tribut à payer." See Martin Forgues, *Une juste colère. Gil Courtemanche, un journaliste indigné* (Québec/Canada: Éditions Somme Toute, 2016) 50-51.

²⁵ The two situations are as follows: 1) a prostitute is thrown out of a hotel balcony and onto an awning by an inebriated European visitor; 2) the rape of Cyprien's wife, their torture and murder, along with their sons, by the extremist Hutu militants, before the "official" start of the genocide. See comments further on.

²⁶ Élise, the Canadian nurse, "était une *professionnelle de la vie*, qu'elle avalait goulûment pour oublier *qu'elle ne côtoyait que la mort*. Elle offrait son petit corps dodu mais ferme à tous ceux qui lui rappelaient *la vie triomphante*" (75, emphasis mine).

La honte de la pauvreté, celle de la discrimination, de l'université interdite, de la bourse refusée, de la terre et de la maison si exiguës qu'il était vite parti pour la ville, la honte du mariage impossible pour cause de pauvreté et pénurie de logement, et puis une fille pour quelques brochettes et une bière, une fille pour oublier l'emprisonnement et la peur; une fille pour une petite jouissance rapide, ce n'est pas un péché, c'est une imitation du bonheur. (70)²⁷

At Méthode's burial, even le père Louis shows an understanding of the man's tragic situation, making the connection between his aborted search for "life" that resulted in his "death": "Tu n'as demandé à la vie que le plaisir de la vie, tout simplement. Et tu en meurs" (91).

However, this empathy detracts only a little from the naturalist elements of the narrative: the material and physiological details of the illness – diarrhea, fungal infections in the mouth, sores, tuberculosis, pneumonia, extreme weight loss – and the concerted efforts of Méthode's friends to give him one last ecstatic sexual experience before his death, when he will be euthanized by Élise, the complicit Canadian nurse.²⁸ Edward Keane notes, in referencing this scene, the extent to which "[s]ex and death are [...] entwined."²⁹

Most certainly the genocide itself, the conflict in Rwanda between Hutu and Tutsi, also has sexual ramifications. Valcourt – obviously the author's alter-ego – emphasizes the confusion of these two categories, since there has been so much intermarriage; and the ID cards Rwandans were required to carry based the determination of ethnicity on the father. In the novel, a long story about the ancestry of Gentille, exposes the confusion. Her great-great-grandfather, Kawa, who was Hutu, realized that under Belgian rule it was better to be Tutsi; for this reason, he made sure the appropriate marriages would take place, among his children, so that by the 1990s many of their children have the characteristics of Tutsis (stereotypically, tall, thin, fine-featured) and/or have Tutsi ID cards (252-53). The result is that Gentille, who carries a Hutu ID card, looks like a Tutsi. The interrelationships between these two hostile groups can result in tragic familial strife: one of Gentille's uncles, as leader of a Hutu militia group (Interhamwe), executes a niece, who is Tutsi (244-45, 255).³⁰

Furthermore, Courtemanche has a few characters in the novel – including Tutsis Landoald and Raphaël – concede that if the Hutus were not massacring the Tutsis, it would be the reverse (87-88, 141-42).³¹ The best illustration of the actual situation is that most often just the opposite

²⁷ The explanation given in the Western media for the AIDS epidemic in this part of Africa is also mentioned in the novel, where it is noted that the road from Mombasa to Kampala is called "l'autoroute du sida" (92). This route extends to Kigali, where the truck parking area is located next to the sector called Sodoma – the red-light district for prostitutes: "Tu [le camionneur] gares ton camion, tu gravis la colline de Sodoma pour boire quelques Primus et tirer un coup, et quelque temps plus tard tu te retrouves dans un trou sur la colline d'en face [le cimetière]" (92).

²⁸ Méthode calls this event "la Dernière Cène," but does not claim to be "le Christ" (72).

²⁹ Edward Keane, "Courtemanche, Gil. *A Sunday at the Pool in Kigali*," *Library Journal* (15 Sept. 2003): 90.

³⁰ This type of situation has been documented. The commander of the Interahamwe, Robert Kajuga, was originally Tutsi. The directors of African Rights refer to him as a "convert" to Hutu ethnicity and suggest he felt the need to prove his credentials by being particularly extreme. This information is based on his brother's testimony. African Rights (co-directors Rakiya Omaar and Alex de Waal), *Rwanda: Death, Despair and Defiance* [1st edition, Sept 1994] (London: African Rights, 2nd ed. August 1995) 56. Henceforth this edition of this work will be referred to as African Rights.

³¹ These two Tutsi men died in the genocide, according to Courtemanche (276). Landoald Ndasingwa was married to a Canadian woman, Hélène Pinsky; both were killed, with their children, on April 7. They were owners of Chez Lando hotel, bar and restaurant. Referred to as "Lando" in the novel, he was first vice-president of the moderate Liberal Party (before it split) and Minister of Labour and Social Affairs in the interim government. African Rights 87, 183.

was happening in Burundi, to the south, where the Tutsis held sway until just before and after the Rwandan genocide.³² Since Rwanda's independence from the Belgium Trusteeship (1962), the concomitant end of the Tutsi monarchy, and the inauguration of the Republic with Hutu leadership, there have been waves of "pogroms" against the minority Tutsis: for example just after independence and again in 1972-1973; and then, two decades later, "the final solution" – researchers on the genocide use this expression –, beginning in the early 1990s.³³

In the weeks before April 6, 1994, when the "official" genocide began, the fictitious Valcourt documents rumblings he hears of the impending horrors: from reported radio rants, in conversations with his poster-boys for AIDS, and with employees at the bar of the Hotel des Mille Collines, for example. Importantly, père Louis divulges the ominous contents of a conversation with Colonel Théonaste (Bagosora), known Hutu extremist and *chef du cabinet* at the Ministry of Defense.³⁴ The cleric learns roadblocks have been set up around Kigali, manned by the boisterous young men from the militia – the Interahamwe. This move is in reaction to the presence in Kigali of an authorized contingent from the invading largely Tutsi army of the Rwandan Patriot Front (RPF).³⁵

³² See Gérard Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis. History of a Genocide* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1995; for Chapter 10, 1997). This journalist and African scholar, begins his explanation thus:

[W]e have to remember that Rwanda and Burundi have been, since independence, the two opposite ends of a political seesaw. Their parallel – and, at times common – past histories, their comparable social structures, their constant and almost obsessive mutual scrutiny, fated them to be natural mirrors of each other's hopes, woes and transformations. It was largely the fear aroused in the Tutsi community of Burundi by the Rwanda massacres of 1959-63 which led to the construction of a Tutsi dominated political system in Bujumbura. It was the renewed fear caused by Rwanda-inspired Hutu restlessness in the late 1960s which drove Tutsi extremists to start the 1972 mass killings of Hutu intellectuals in order to deprive any future Hutu movement of its potential élite. In turn, it was the 1972 Burundi horror which led President Grégoire Kayibanda to think in 1973 that a demagogic persecution of the Tutsi community in Rwanda would help him prop up his faltering dictatorship. This paved the way for the Habyarimana coup instead. (198)

³³ In the novel, the narrator quotes a broadcast of the type heard on Radio Mille-Collines, just after President Habyarimana's plane was shot down: "Le travail ne fait que commencer. Cette fois, il ne faut pas s'arrêter avant qu'il ne soit terminé. [...] En 1963, ils n'ont pas compris malgré les avertissements qui leur coûtèrent beaucoup. Dix ans plus tard [1973], nous leur avons montré encore une fois notre puissance et notre droit sur notre pays, mais comme lorsqu'on coupe des vers de terre, les machettes n'ont fait que les multiplier et leur donner encore plus d'audace et de perversion. [...] Il faut éradiquer l'ennemi." (270-71).

In his autobiography, Paul Rusesabagina (Hutu) says: "My best friend, Gérard, was expelled from school in February 1973. [...] [I] became aware for the first time of the bloodline inside me that divided me from people that I loved." See Paul Rusesabagina (with Tom Zoellner), *An Ordinary Man. An Autobiography* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2006) 19. This is the year related fictionally by Scholastique Mukasonga (Tutsi) in her novel *Notre Dame du Nil* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012), when she was sent into exile. At the time, I was living in Rwanda as an ex-pat.

³⁴ African Rights 65.

³⁵ The RPF consisted largely of descendants of Tutsis who had been exiled in earlier decades to Uganda and were demanding a major role in the government of their ancestral homeland. Edouard Kayihura (with Kerry Zukus) explains this situation, in *Inside the Hotel Rwanda. The Surprising True Story... and Why It Matters Today* (Dallas TX: Benbella Books, 2014):

Called the Arusha Accords, the agreement was a set of five accords signed by the [invading] RPF and the government of Rwanda in Arusha, Tanzania, on August 4, 1993, ostensibly ending their war. But the Accords removed much power from the once-dictatorial Juvénal Habyarimana. Most of the power was vested into the Transitional Broad-Based Government [BBTG*], which would include the RPF as well as five other political parties that had formed a coalition government, in place since April 1992, to govern until proper elections could be held. (10)

An examination of the details of a selection of murders before and during the genocide reveals yet again that motives related to sex on various levels are uppermost in this account. Cyprien, Valcourt's HIV-positive friend, for whom "le sexe l'avait condamné, mais c'est tout ce qui le rattachait à la vie" (125), explains what is broadcast on the radio: "[L]e Tutsi est un insecte qu'il faut piétiner. Sinon, le Tutsi enlève ta femme, il viole tes enfants, il empoisonne l'eau et l'air" (122). After eliminating the important Tutsi leaders in Kigali, and moderate Hutus, who threaten the designs of the "Hutu Power" branch of the CDR (*Coalition pour la défense de la République*),³⁶ it was "open season" on all Tutsis. Tutsi men are targeted for killing, eradication as vermin, as rivals and possible combatants, but also for fathering Tutsi children; and Tutsi boys are targeted for the same reasons.³⁷ Tutsi women are raped, often serially, and sexually mutilated – punishment for appealing to Hutu men, and rivaling Hutu women: "La Tutsie, elle, ensorcelle ton mari avec ses fesses" (122). They are also faulted for giving birth to little Tutsi children. Most often, they are left to die a slow, painful death, as is the case for Georgina in the novel, Cyprien's wife. Little girls are sometimes raped³⁸ but often they are left alone, since they could grow up to become prostitutes at the service of Hutu men. Thus, Cyprien's little daughter is allowed to live, while his two sons are murdered along with their parents.³⁹

The members of the extremist Interahamwe militia often show no sympathy for other Hutu men and target them not exclusively for their moderate political leanings, but also if they show a predilection for Tutsi women, as does Cyprien, a former *camionneur* (truck driver). Valcourt and Gentile were with Cyprien and his wife the evening before, as the narrator relates. It is credible that the journalist Valcourt would be on friendly terms with HIV-positive Cyprien and would visit him in his home with Gentile. These relationships are developed in the narrative – as stated, to round out the local characters, many meeting with tragic outcomes. After dark, Cyprien accompanies Valcourt and Gentile back through two roadblocks that have been set up by the militia, with the pretense of checking the identities of people entering or leaving Kigali. The local police in Kigali and other official surveillance entities (i.e. the Presidential Guard, the Rwandan Army) are on alert, due to the authorized presence of members of the RPA.⁴⁰

*The acronym BBTG is used by Roméo Dallaire for the Broad-Based Transitional Government, which was never installed due to political impasse. As Lieutenant-General in the Canadian Armed Forces, Dallaire became, in late 1993, Force Commander of UNAMIR (United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda). See Dallaire 524.

³⁶ This was the Hutu extremist party, a splinter group of the MRND (Mouvement révolutionnaire national pour le développement), which refused to sign the Arusha Peace Agreement. The political party was formed in 1975 by then President Habyarimana, but changed its name and became the Hutu extremist party in 1993. See Dallaire 526, 535-36.

³⁷ Michael Barnett shows the timeline. At 8:30 p.m., on April 6, 1994, Habyarimana's plane crashed onto the grounds of the Presidential palace. Just 48 minutes later, the Presidential Guard erected the first roadblocks, and they were immediately joined by the Interahamwe. Shortly afterward, co-conspirators scattered in the city killing leading Tutsi and moderate Hutu politicians, based on lists prepared in advance. Michael Barnett, *Eyewitness to a Genocide. The United Nations and Rwanda* (Ithaca/London: Cornell Univ. Press, 2002) 97.

³⁸ See Chapter 10, "Rape and abduction of women and girls," in African Rights 748-97.

Thousands of Tutsi women were raped. Educated women and girls were a primary target. Many were abducted by soldiers, gendarmes, militiamen or common villagers and raped in their homes, in the bush, in a public building or publicly at a roadblock. Many were later executed. Some of the girls and women we interviewed suffered horrific physical tortures before they were raped. The rapists saw their victims as the spoils of the slaughter. [...] Girls as young as five have been raped. (748)

³⁹ Valcourt and Gentile, take the little girl with them, as their own, and they name her Émérita, after the taxi driver whose tragic story follows.

⁴⁰ The RPA (Rwandan Patriotic Army), the military component of the RPF.

The narrator recounts Cyprien's return walk home, which the journalist did not witness, back through roadblocks. At one near his house, Cyprian happens upon a group of young men, from the Interahamwe torturing and raping his wife, and then they attack him, too (128-30). This event is narrated in horrific, explicitly sexual detail – which Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg deplores as racialized and misogynist, given the source is an omniscient male narrator.⁴¹ However, the next day Valcourt finds the bodies and re-constructs what occurred, based on observable details – the wounds, the streams and pools of blood, the missing clothing items, the configurations of the bodies and body parts, not to omit the snoring, drunken militiaman fast asleep nearby, holding the bloody machete in his hand (136). In a similar vein, Zola took as his starting point scientific observation,⁴² following the lead of contemporary thinkers, including in recent explorations in the areas of Darwinism, psychology, and forensics. However, when Valcourt confronts the chief of police and militia boss, he hears an alternate version of the demise of Cyprian, his wife, and two sons. The false attribution of the crime to the RPF, given by the murderers themselves, has become official (137-38).

Another pre-April 6 death in the novel's account is that of the adult Émérita, the female taxi driver who picks up rides (and drops them off) at the Hotel des Mille Collines.⁴³ Courtemanche's novel provides a portrait of this woman, again following the author's stated objective of rendering his acquaintances as living, feeling beings. The daughter of a prostitute, Émérita has become a member of a fundamentalist Baptist church; she intones Bible verses and has sworn off alcohol and relations with men. One evening, however, at the bar in the Mille Collines, she finally accepts a drink and succumbs to the persistent innuendos of the bartender, Célestin. Those present, including Valcourt and Gentile, spend a few moments in joyous banter. The narrator points to these flights of delight in life, that gain the upper hand, even when ominous dangers lurk around every corner: "Tous ses amis, menacés, angoissés, perdus, malades, tous ses amis fêtaient la vie" (200). Later that evening, Émérita will indulge in a tryst with Célestin, everyone at the bar understands.

⁴¹ Goldberg refers to the focus in this novel on the combination of AIDS and the genocide "two specifically African specters of eroticized mortality" (76) and attributes this scene to the "fantastical omniscience of male pleasure in the face of racialized female ruin" (77).

⁴² "On commence, j'espère, à comprendre que mon but a été un but scientifique avant tout." Voir Émile Zola, préface de la 2ème édition de *Thérèse Raquin* (12). Addressing his critics, Zola defends his aesthetic approach: "Il était facile, cependant, de comprendre *Thérèse Raquin*, de se placer sur le terrain de l'observation et de l'analyse, de me montrer mes fautes véritables, sans aller ramasser une poignée de boue et me la jeter à la face au nom de la morale" (14). Another phrase in this preface points to deterministic forces at work in the naturalist aesthetic, that could serve as a relevant approach to genocide: "[L]'étude du tempérament et des modifications profondes de l'organisme sous la pression des milieux et des circonstances"(16).

⁴³ Rusesabagina mentions "Emerita" by name, claiming that, because of what she witnessed, she becomes the unfortunate target of Interahamwe violence: "The minister of public works, Félicien Gatabazi, was gunned down by thugs as he was entering his house. A taxi driver witnessed the assassinations; she was shot as a precaution the next day. Her name was Emerita and she had been one of the freelance drivers who competed for fares in the parking lot of the Hotel Mille Collines." Rusesabagina 68-69. Gérard Prunier agrees that Gatabazi was executed before April 6 – on February 21, at 11 pm. He was shot dead by an unidentified armed commando. According to Prunier, he was the Executive Secretary of the Social Democratic Party (206). Dallaire notes that Félicien Gatabazi was a well-known Hutu moderate from Butare (529). African Rights quotes François Xavier Nzanzuvera, the Attorney-General of Rwanda and investigator of the assassination of Gatabazi, who claimed suspicions that led to the Presidential Guard (232).

The next day, while driving Valcourt to see père Louis, Émérita exclaims, “j’ai [...] appris que je ne voulais pas mourir. Autrefois, la mort, c’était le paradis. Maintenant, c’est la fin de la vie. Et la vie, Valcourt, la vie, c’est le paradis” (202). In this novelistic account, she becomes fired up to confront the violent young militia at the roadblocks, who are raping and killing, rather than bow her head and pretend she sees nothing. Once she is back home taking a shower, however, Émérita becomes the unfortunate victim, in this version of the event, of a grenade thrown inside – an act of reprisal. Valcourt does not witness this event, but learns of it later, from Émérita’s mother, and sees the spattered blood and body parts. Again, rather than giving a first-hand account of the crimes he becomes aware of, Valcourt at times plays the role of unofficial, investigative journalist and amateur in forensics, basing his conclusions on the observation of crime scenes. Yet, in this chaos, his voice is ineffective: he lacks access to media, now controlled by the extremist Hutu faction, and there is no international public interested enough to intervene.

The non-political killings in the period leading to the death of President Habyarimana on April 6 and after are often clearly marked by a desire for vengeance – most often manifested sexually, via rape, mutilation, and other issues related to reproduction. Not only are the Tutsis themselves recipients of extremist Hutu violence of a sexual nature; often, this anger is vented against the preferred status afforded Tutsis earlier by the colonial powers, for favoring them from the beginning. Other times the target is the colonial masters themselves – and all “whites” for their superior attitudes.⁴⁴ Valcourt eventually becomes aware of a very personal and unique vengeance enacted by Justin the “garçon de piscine” on white women requesting his popular massage technique, attracted as they are to his physique and exotic virility. In fact, these treatments end up very sexual, with no holding back on naturalist erotic detail in the narrator’s description of one session and Valcourt’s reaction: “Si on la comparait à la violence de ce pays, Justin avait la vengeance plutôt douce, mais elle atteignait un raffinement et une cruauté psychologique qui avaient impressionné Valcourt” (171). It is only later that Justin admits to Valcourt his status of HIV positive, after infecting several women: “Le jeune homme lui avait [...] caché la véritable mesure de la haine” (171). This example of targeting white women provides further evidence of the desire for misogynistic vengeance. Tutsi women had no right to a clear, clean chop of a machete or bullet to the head; they were mutilated, tortured, raped, and left to suffer a long, drawn-out death “pour les punir d’avoir mis au monde tant de Tutsis, mais aussi pour les punir de leur arrogance car, à tous ces jeunes qui tuaient, on avait raconté que la femme tutsie se croyait trop belle pour eux,” the narrator intones (278-79). Valcourt observes, with the hotelier Victor, the bodies forming a long serpentine line, ironically, along l’avenue de la Justice; the men are dead, but many women still tremble in pain as they expire.

Indeed, “la haine” is the motor of the violence and Rwanda’s disastrous defect, according to several of the Rwandan speakers in this novel. Méthode, for example, who is dying of AIDS: “Du sida, bien sûr, de la malaria aussi, mais surtout d’une maladie pire, contre laquelle il n’existe pas de capote ou de vaccin. Cette maladie, c’est la haine” (83). One of the most disturbing examples of sexual violence, fueled by the hatred that dominated at this time, especially from the perspective of the journalist Valcourt, involves a cameraman, one of his pre-genocide trainees. Valcourt happens to notice him, calmly filming the corpses from the back of a pick-up truck (*une fourgonnette*), which stops by a woman lying in the ditch with two children crying over her. The cameraman, jumps off the truck, stops filming, and sets his camera on the ground, calmly unzips his pants and penetrates her. Valcourt vomits and Victor, who is with him, murmurs: “Je vous

⁴⁴ In this novel, there is no mention of the alleged genital mutilation of the ten murdered Belgian peacekeepers. See Dallaire 255; Kayihura 48. Courtemanche would not have been witness to the aftermath of this alleged atrocity.

salut, Marie pleine de grâce, le Seigneur est avec vous...” (279). These examples of documentary neo-naturalism put into language the unspeakable, revealing that there is no limit to cruel, inhuman behaviors, when hate is given free reign by a corrupt government, to commit acts of violence with the goal of annihilating an entire ethnic group.

Yet, in this novel unbridled hate contrasts with the rare altruistic actions exhibited by a few. In this regard, Victor (Munyarugerero), a devout Catholic, figures prominently, as a selfless and tireless Hutu who, at great risk to himself and his family, brings people to the Hotel des Mille Collines for safety and takes them food from the stores of his restaurant/hotel.⁴⁵ The basic humanity of a few characters in the novel shines like the welcome light from a candle in the darkness of a cave; despite the horror and disgust the reader experiences in reading this novel, the value of the account was noticed immediately after its first publication in French in 2000 by Les Éditions Boréal (Montréal). In 2001, the novel was awarded “le prix des Libraires” in Québec. After Patricia Claxton’s English translation of the novel came out in early 2003, it was presented at the Frankfurt Book Fair, creating a sensation.⁴⁶

Whereas the success of this novel could be attributed to its “pornographic” and scandalous content, important elements stand in opposition to the hate and weaponized sexual violence directed at specific sector of the population. In addition to the acts of kindness and simple decency of a few, the positive in sexual relations between male/female partners surfaces.⁴⁷ While rape, torture and sexual mutilation clearly separate any idea of “love” from “sex,” the story of Valcourt’s relationship with Gentille, connects the two, providing a stark contrast. Zola, in his effort to cover the range of human behaviors, does of course depict the propensity of excessive passion and/or the sexual drive to result in murder, as in *Thérèse Raquin*. More relevant would be Jacques Lantier, in *La Bête humaine*, who struggles against murderous impulses when he is near a woman, explained as “vengeance” and seeing the woman as prey.⁴⁸ In Courtemanche’s novel, however, set against the horrific backdrop of a common desire to expunge an entire social/cultural group, Valcourt’s developing relationship with Gentille creates a thread of positivity in the male/female relationship that runs through the narrative.

In the sexually charged atmosphere of the Mille Collines bar and poolside, where prostitutes and libidinous men linger, Gentille works as a waitress. Her bashful timidity catches Valcourt’s attention. It becomes clear that she has a desire for a different kind of relationship, other than that offered off-hand by various patrons. Exchanges with Valcourt, as she waits on his table,

⁴⁵ Édouard Kayihura also mentions the heroic, selfless acts of the “real” Victor Munyarugerero (91, 94, 100) who, during the genocide, lodged at the Hotel des Mille Collines for a time. In Kayihura’s account, General Roméo Dallaire and the UNAMIR he headed are shown clearly in a positive light. In Courtemanche’s novel, Dallaire is not referred to by name, but as “le général canadien” (148); Paul Rusesabagina is not referred to by name either – instead merely as “le maître d’hôtel” (197). In Michel Houellebecq’s novel, *Particules élémentaires* (Paris: Flammarion, 1998), there is also the occasional character shown in a positive light: for example, Annabelle.

⁴⁶ Benoît Aubin, “Voilà, a Hit Novel,” *Maclean’s* 116.49 (8 Dec. 2003): 52. On the jacket of the English translation of the novel, Jonathan Kaplan remarks: “[I]t is a testament to love, its durability and frailty in the face of annihilation.” I have used only the French version for this study. The English title of Patricia Claxton’s translation is *A Sunday at the Pool in Kigali* (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2003).

⁴⁷ “The primary target of the hunt were Tutsi men. Extremist propaganda portrayed the ultimate ‘enemy’ as rich men, men between their twenties and forties, especially if they were well-educated professionals or students.” African Rights 597. One Tutsi girl, aged thirteen, heard the militiamen saying that “little Tutsi girls should be left alone, but that little Tutsi boys should have their sex cut off.” Among the older Tutsi girls who were not badly hurt, they would select ones to keep (African Rights 829).

⁴⁸ Voir Zola, *La Bête humaine* 219. “Les autres [femmes], [Jacques Lantier] n’avait pu toucher à leur chair, sans éprouver le désir d’y mordre, dans une abominable faim d’égorgement.”

draw her to him. She is obsessed with the power of words – in conversation and poetry. Once she feels comfortable talking to Valcourt, she reveals: “Quand on m’enseignait la poésie à l’école, on m’expliquait que les mots pouvaient mener à l’extase” (120). In this threatening environment, Gentille’s interest in poetry provides an impetus for bringing reflection on the potential of language into the narrative, and prepares the reader for her interest, later, in keeping a journal. Her education exposed her to romantic poets, such as Lamartine, Hugo, and Musset (132-33); understandably, she becomes susceptible to Valcourt’s kind words and the interest he shows in her as a person.

Valcourt introduces Gentille to the desperate, yet passionate free verse of Paul Éluard, whose words in the collection *Le dur désir de durer* seem acutely appropriate for this great crisis in Rwanda, although written during another turbulent time in France.⁴⁹ Lines such as “Je parle du fond de l’abîme/ Je parle du fond de mon gouffre”⁵⁰ constitute thus a leitmotif throughout the novel and evoke the sense of darkness and despair many Rwandans were experiencing – even those forced to kill their neighbors. The image of the “gouffre” also recalls the mine pit in Zola’s *Germinal*, which swallows up the impoverished workers, destroying their health and lives. Written in the context of war and loss, Éluard’s poems in this collection are relevant for Valcourt and Gentille in their exploration of love and passion in a landscape of death.

Another leitmotif, obviously naturalistic, is established in the first pages of the novel, based on Valcourt’s ironic musings as he observes the international clientele at the Hotel des Mille Collines. A parallel is drawn between types of carnivorous birds and the men who gather poolside for drinks. The French are crows – “corbeaux tricolores” (20) –, who dive into the pool at the sight of bikini-clad women in the water and then morph into crocodiles after the prey (28); the military men with shaved heads are vultures (14-15). The jackdaws and the buzzards imitate the human obsession with hierarchical order by perching at various levels in the giant Ficus tree (14). They normally feast on scraps from the hotel restaurant, but profit from the situation – disputing human body parts and bits of flesh with dogs on the streets of Kigali. This image is a graphic reminder of the title of Zola’s novel *La Curée* (1872), referring to the portion of the game thrown to the dogs after the hunt; here, the suggestion goes beyond the view of women as disposable, in its evocation of the actual body parts becoming food for dogs and scavenging birds during the genocide.

Valcourt is portrayed as separate from the lubricious poolside behaviors, but rather as quiet, most often sitting at a table by himself, scribbling in a notebook, in a journalistic *mise-en-abyme* since, via the narrator, we are reading the observations he writes down. As he takes in all that goes on, he is drawn to Gentille, a timid and beautiful waitress. He at first hesitates to become involved during these precarious times. The reader learns later that she would be the fourth woman with whom he has “signé un pacte avec la vie” (322). The relationship that develops between them represents life, defying the death and suffering happening all around.

After their wedding, as the couple sits under the Ficus tree by the pool, Valcourt contemplates: “Même la présence de Gentille sous cet arbre trop parfait, son existence, sa beauté inutile devant l’horreur creusaient un trou dans sa poitrine. Il ne pouvait rien, sinon embrasser sa

⁴⁹ There appears to be some discrepancy as to when these poems were first written and/or published. Éluard, who gained the title of poet of the French Résistance during World War II, also served as a young man in World War I and could have written poems in connection with that conflict, as stated on the website consulted Feb. 6 2025: <livrecritique.com>le-dur-desir-de-durer-1920>. By other accounts the poems were written immediately after World War II, when Éluard’s partner “Nusch” died. See Lucien Scheler, “Préface,” in Paul Éluard, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, “Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1968) XLVIII-XLIX.

⁵⁰ Paul Éluard, *Le dur désir de durer. Le Temps déborde* (Paris: Seghers, 1960) 33. In this edition, Pierre Seghers (éd.) writes, on a page preceding the poems, in a footnote: “La première édition du *Dur Désir de durer*, parue chez Bordas en 1946 à 125 exemplaires, était illustrée par 25 dessins et un frontispice de Marc Chagall.”

femme pour se raccrocher à la vie” (212). This thirst for “life” in the presence of imminent death echoes that of the victims of AIDS – Méthode (60-61) and Cyprien (125). Also, Émérita serves as an example of someone who learns of the beauty of life, through an intimate encounter with the man who loves her. This is something she wants to fight for, just before her death. Valcourt and Gentille honor her memory, when they take over the care of Cyprian’s orphaned daughter and name her Émérita.

Significantly, descriptions of Valcourt and Gentille’s sexual relations, also recounted in naturalistic detail, contrast starkly with the quick satisfaction sought by others. They kiss and discover their bodies together – more like in the movies Gentille has seen. Unfortunately, in the crazed, unjust world of the Rwandan genocide, she does not escape the rape, torture and mutilation, suffered by thousands of Tutsi women, despite her Hutu identity card. The reader learns that Valcourt tries to evacuate to Europe with her, but she has the features of a Tutsi. He is knocked unconscious, and she is taken as “the spoils of war” to serve first as the sex slave of Modeste, a Hutu Interahamwe sergeant, the reader learns later, followed by multiple rapes and mutilations.⁵¹

Although Valcourt gains consciousness and his freedom, he returns to Rwanda after a stay in Nairobi during the worst of the massacres. He works with African Rights at a refugee camp, to assist in the extensive project of interviewing survivors. This mention creates another *mise-en-abyme*, connecting with the author’s documentary disclaimer in the “Préambule”:

Certains lecteurs mettront sur le compte d’une imagination débordante quelques scènes de violence ou de cruauté. Ils se tromperont lourdement. Pour en avoir la preuve, ils n’auront qu’à lire les sept cents pages de témoignages recueillis par l’organisme African Rights et publiés en anglais sous le titre de *Rwanda: Death, Despair and Defiance* (African Rights, Londres, 1995).

Here, near the end of the novel, Valcourt recounts working with Raïka, who is involved with this organization. Notice that “Rakiya Omaar” is listed as a co-author of the African Rights publication.

Just as Emile Zola is known for representing social conditions unfavorable for women, Courtemanche gives ample space to the deplorable situation of Rwandan women, especially Tutsi women. He best accomplishes this in highlighting Gentille’s perspective. In Valcourt’s search for Gentille upon his return to Rwanda, he runs into roadblocks. Everyone he asks has evidently been sworn to keep secret what she has endured and where she is. She instructed them to tell Valcourt she has died. One of their former friends, Mme Agathe, finally hands him a notebook, where Gentille kept a journal telling what happened to her after her capture. In her first-person account, she details the pain of serving as a sex slave to Modeste, a sergeant, who mounts her as if she is a “botte de foin” and brings in others to rape her, with the result that she feels like nothing more than “un vagin” – “un trou” (310). She contrasts this use of her body, with her intimate moments with Valcourt, during which they would create mutual sensations of pleasure. It seems as though her body has become a figure for “le gouffre” (or abyss) that Rwanda has fallen into; and yet there is the memory of a very different Rwandan landscape, represented by the sensual explorations she engaged in with Valcourt.

In the penultimate chapter, therefore, readers are presented with an actual (fictitious) document, a genre of journalistic reportage. By writing down her own story, Gentille takes charge

⁵¹ Benjamin Sehene recounts the experience of a woman he met, post-genocide, named Perpétua (Tutsi), who experienced a similar fate of becoming the sex slave of an Interahamwe militant and thus her life was spared, while her whole family was slaughtered (137).

herself of the power of language that has impressed her in Eluard's poetry. Courtemanche thus gives voice to the sufferings of the victims of the genocide and has his journalist protagonist now reading her diary, instead of scribbling impressions in his own notebook. In this way, Jeanette den Toonder notes, Gentille is able to "transgress her situation of non-being" and "[t]he empowering transformation of sexual violence into writing brings about a shift corresponding to her desire to reconstruct her identity through language, to bring herself back from 'trou' (hole) to 'Je.'"⁵² It is worth noting that Gentille is an emblematic Rwandan, with an identity that vacillates between Tutsi and Hutu. Her favorite cousin Stratton expresses the wish of many just to be considered Rwandan: "Ni tutsi, ni hutu, juste rwandais, cela me convenait, car c'est bien ce que j'étais: un mélange né du hasard des accouplements [...]. Mais aujourd'hui, ils ne me laissent pas de choix" (247-48).

Valcourt does find out that Gentille is alive, alerted in the open-air market by the collection of poems by Paul Eluard she is holding. She is terribly mutilated and suffering from AIDS. She recognizes him but tells him to go away, back to Canada. She claims she is not the woman he loved, not a woman anymore. In fact, she has become one of the thousands of women who have been relegated to the "purgatoire des morts vivants" (326).

In turn, Valcourt instructs her acquaintances to tell her that he left that very day on a flight out of Rwanda. Yet, he stays on until she dies six months later from pneumonia, as the fiction goes; during that time he avoids confronting her, at her request. The reader assumes this relationship was imagined by Courtemanche, since he concludes his dedication of the book as follows: "Finalement, à Gentille qui me servit des œufs ou de la bière et dont je ne sais si elle est morte ou vivante."

Following the model of Zola's *La Débâcle*, Courtemanche's novel respects historical points of reference, yet renders them engaging with an overlay of fiction that evokes startling images and develops characters and a plot line. This twenty-first-century author gives his account of a journalist's experience of the double crisis in Rwanda of AIDS followed by the catastrophe of the genocide, with an emphasis on "the sexual" as an overarching consideration. It does seem as though Courtemanche has been immersed in Houellebecq's kind of novelistic undertaking: no holds barred, when it comes to representing in naturalist detail, not only sexual licentiousness, but he has taken the representation of the unspeakable even further in revealing despicable human motives and the barbarity of sexual violence, when hate is given free rein to annihilate an entire social group. For Houellebecq, the sexual freedom of the 1970s (and beyond) caused the dissolution of the couple and the family – once an isolated haven separating the individual from market values.⁵³ That is, for him, only the institution of the family had stood against the rise of individualism and new forms of capitalism flooding the contemporary space; and now, with the

⁵² Jeanette den Toonder, "Un Dimanche à la piscine à Kigali: Writing the Rwandan genocide," in *Postcolonial Violence, Culture and Identity in Francophone Africa and the Antilles*, ed. Lorna Milne [Series: Cultural Identity Studies, 7, ed. Helen Chambers] (Berne: Peter Lang, 2007) 121.

⁵³ In Michel Houellebecq's novel *Les Particules élémentaires* [2me éd.] (Paris: Flammarion, 1998), the narrator explains:

Il est piquant de constater que cette libération sexuelle a parfois été présentée sous la forme d'un rêve communautaire, alors qu'il s'agissait en réalité d'un nouveau palier dans la montée historique de l'individualisme. Comme l'indique le beau mot de "ménage," le couple et la famille représentaient le dernier îlot de communisme primitif au sein de la société libérale. La libération sexuelle eut pour effet la destruction de ces communautés intermédiaires, les dernières à séparer l'individu du marché. Ce processus de destruction se poursuit de nos jours. (144)

advent and legalization of birth control in France, this stronghold has dissolved along with other institutions.

In Courtemanche's novel, the fictitious Valcourt, a proclaimed atheist like the author, notes the generous actions of two Catholic priests⁵⁴ – the Cardinal and père Louis. He asks his friend père Louis to officiate at his wedding with Gentile and baptize their adopted daughter, Émérita, poolside at the Mille Collines.⁵⁵ Nonetheless, many other clerics betrayed their flocks during the three-month crisis. Churches or Christian schools, where many fled, thinking the Christian ideals promoted by these institutions would provide safety. They became the “gas chambers” of this genocide. Valcourt/Courtemanche names “God” as the last bastion against inhumanity: “Dieu, le dernier rempart contre l’inhumanité. En ce doux printemps, Dieu et surtout la plupart de ses pieux vicaires avaient abandonné leurs brebis. Les églises devinrent les chambres à gaz du Rwanda” (297).

Following the lead of contemporary authors, and perhaps especially Houellebecq, Courtemanche has his narrator tell Valcourt's story – in mostly the journalistic sense –, entering into his consciousness, and occasionally that of others, with recourse to a poetics of sex, thereby documenting yet another disturbing and disruptive aspect of its power: if not used as an affirmation of life and to create bonds among human beings, events like the Rwandan genocide reveal its diabolical power when weaponized to destroy those bonds absolutely.

Parallels could be drawn with Zola's documentary novel “par excellence,” *La Débâcle*, about the Franco-Prussian War, with its basis on facts and geography, yet this work features an engaging, fictional thread with characterization and heightened representational strategies to show the horrors of war.⁵⁶ In Courtemanche's novel with the backdrop of the Rwandan genocide, it is as if the crucial documentary observational component intertwines with the fictional element, through modifications to the narrative voice and perspective and the embroidering of actual happenings, not omitting the most shocking. The work exhibits as a constancy a naturalist poetics of the human sex drive, exploring many of its possibilities, positive and negative – this latter including the intent to inscribe death on an entire social group.

⁵⁴ According to this account, frère François Cardinal was assassinated before April 6 and père Louis evacuated shortly after – both Canadian clerics (161, 174-75, 178-79; 204-12).

⁵⁵ Kayihura notes that, during his stay at the Mille Collines, a wedding and a baptism were celebrated by Bishop Nicodème, who was resident there: Victor Munyarugerero's daughter married her boyfriend; and Tatien Ndolimana's child was baptized (100). There is no mention in any of the other accounts I consulted of a Canadian journalist named Gil Courtemanche or of a waitress named Gentile. Several Rwandan journalists are mentioned by name, some for their reprehensible actions, especially in African Rights in the section titled “When journalists become killers; Journalists who adopted the extremist agenda” (160-66). One non-Rwandan journalist, named Georges Ruggiu, a Belgian citizen of Italian extraction, provided technical expertise to RTL, but was also well known for his diatribes against Belgians (161).

⁵⁶ See the article by Kristof Haavik, “Le cheval assassiné: Augures dans *La Débâcle*,” *Excavatio* 19 (2004): 89-99. The author begins his argument by pointing to the slaughter of a horse as a figure for the massacre of soldiers.