

CHAPTER 5

Reader as Witness

Rethinking Perpetrators of Political Violence through Contemporary Literature

Reader as Witness

Falke

Cassandra Falke

Abstract

Twenty-first century novels increasingly portray twentieth-century histories of violence in a way that implicates readers: as keepers of public memory, as complicit in ongoing political violence, and even as potential perpetrators. These novels target a global readership and treat the recollections of past atrocities and the prevention of future ones as a global responsibility. This essay describes the reader as a variety of what Geoffrey Hartman calls the “intellectual witness,” people who feel responsible for the maintenance of the stories of an atrocity, even without having personal ties to it. Perpetrator fiction plays a unique role in constructing the reader as witness, because it resists the easy identification of readers with the victim position and complicates the distinctions of perpetrator, freedom fighter, victim, and bystander. Looking closely at three works of perpetrator fiction—Jonathan Littell’s *The Kindly Ones*, John Berger’s *A to X*, and Boubacar Boris Diop’s *Murambi, the Book of Bones*—this chapter discusses the various forms of responsibility they impute to readers. The reader as witness is situated in reference to survivor witnesses, humanitarian witnesses, and the phenomenological understanding of the subject as always already witness.

Keywords witness – perpetrator fiction – act of reading – phenomenology – *The Kindly Ones* –
From A to X – Murambi the Book of Bones

In 1998, Geoffrey Hartman suggested that “In another twenty or forty years a community sensitive to matters touching on the Shoah will be more of a public.” In contrast to the community with family ties to the event, he predicts that this public will “respond ... in a more self-reflective way.” The key figure in articulating that reflexivity, he says, will be the “intellectual witness.”¹ Now, more than twenty years later, Hartman’s prediction has come true. Books, articles, museums, and films testify to the scope of a public interested in the Holocaust, and the figure of the witness remains key. But as survivor-witnesses die out, the concept of the witness is changing. It is becoming more flexible and expanding its usefulness for describing mediated encounters with other events of political violence, including acts of genocide and terrorism that have occurred since.

Following World War II, genocides have recurred globally with disturbing regularity: in Indonesia (1965–66), Bangladesh (1971), Burundi (1972), Cambodia (1971–75), traditional Kurdish lands in Iraq (1986–89), Rwanda (1994), Bosnia (1995), and traditional Batwa and Bambuti lands in the Congo (2002–03). Genocide continues against the Darfuri people in Sudan, Yazidis in Syria and Iraq, and the Rohingya people in Myanmar. This list does not include ethnically inclusive campaigns against civilians, such as the deaths of over 220,000 civilians in Syria since 2011,² or conflicts in which civilian deaths are classified as collateral damage, such

¹ Geoffrey Hartman, “Shoah and Intellectual Witness,” *Partisan Review* 65, no. 1 (1998): 37.

² Syrian Network for Human Rights, “Civilian Death Toll,” June 14, 2021,

<https://sn4hr.org/blog/2021/06/14/civilian-death-toll> (accessed January 24, 2022).

as the war in Afghanistan that killed 71,000 civilians between 2001 and April 2021.³ What might it mean to be a responsible intellectual witness to these recent and ongoing crimes against humanity? Globalization and the proliferation of media technologies create a cacophony of stories that are almost impossible to not hear, but not all stories are listened to equally. Writing for the Human Rights Watch 2019 World Report, Philippe Bolopion expressed the concern that “activists, diplomats, and scholars who formed the backbone” of a movement to protect human rights at the turn of the twenty-first century have begun to accept “atrocities as the new normal.”⁴ If the memorializers of the Shoah have succeeded in multiplying intellectual witnesses to that event—people who feel responsible for the maintenance of the stories of that atrocity, even though they could not intervene to stop it—then what can we learn from them in order to create effective intellectual witnesses for other acts of political violence and human rights abuses?

An adequate answer to this question would require the coordinated work of scholars and activists involved in social science, media, politics, history, pedagogy, and literature. This chapter will take a first step by elaborating on the concept of an intellectual witness with reference to the phenomenological work of Emmanuel Levinas and Jean-Luc Marion, and by

³ Watson Institute of International and Public Affairs at Brown University, “Costs of War:

Afghan Civilians,” April 2021,

<https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/costs/human/civilians/afghan> (accessed February 23, 2022).

⁴ Philippe Bolopion, “Atrocities as the New Normal: Time to Re-Energize the ‘Never Again’

Movement,” in *Human Rights Watch World Report 2019*, [https://www.hrw.org/world-](https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/essay/atrocities-as-the-new-normal)

[report/2019/essay/atrocities-as-the-new-normal](https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/essay/atrocities-as-the-new-normal) (accessed January 24, 2022).

examining the implications of the concept for reading literature. I will try to specify the ways in which readers become witnesses to the violence they read about, articulating some of the ethical implications of the reader-witness position. I also address a few cautions that scholars have voiced about witnessing on behalf of a community of which one is not a part. Throughout, I illustrate very briefly the literary reader's uniqueness as a witness in reference to three contemporary works of perpetrator fiction: Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones*, John Berger's *From A to X*, and Boubacar Boris Diop's *Murambi, the Book of Bones*.

Political violence is increasingly represented in what Adam Kirsch calls "the global novel." These novels, which insist "on the global dimension not just of contemporary experience, but of contemporary imagination," are "now the most important means by which literature attempts to reckon with humanity as such."⁵ Without diminishing the place-bound and enculturated nature of all experience, they present the local as experienced in light of global connectedness. In his fictionalized account of visiting Rwanda four years after the massacre of nearly a million people in April of 1994, Diop reminds readers that in Murambi, where approximately 50,000 Tutsis were killed, "the victims had shouted out. No one had wanted to hear them."⁶ No one had wanted to hear them locally or globally. Diop's indictment of this willful deafness is powerful because it is global. In James Dawes's pioneering book about what he calls "the novel of human rights,"⁷ he investigates such works as an American literary

⁵ Adam Kirsch, *The Global Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016) 25, 13.

⁶ Boubacar Boris Diop, *Murambi, the Book of Bones*, trans. Fiona McLaughlin (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 147.

⁷ James Dawes, *The Novel of Human Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

phenomenon connected with the US history of articulating rights as civil rather than human. However, as this chapter shows, the novel of human rights is an emerging global form.

Diop is from Dakar, Senegal, which is 7,500 kilometers from Kigali the capital of Rwanda (the distance from Turkey to Mongolia), but he has become one of the most cited novelists to portray the Rwandan genocide. Because Wolof is his first language and Kinyarwanda is the first language of most Rwandans, he collected stories about the genocide in French, a shared language inherited from the countries' colonizers. Originally published in French, the novel was translated into English in 2006. The transnational path of *Murambi's* composition and distribution testifies to the continuing influence of Africa's shared colonial history and to the contemporary power dynamics of international publishing. The English-French author John Berger frustrates readers' attempts to locate *From A to X* by alluding to South American intertexts and weaponry used in the Middle East. A French-American, Jonathan Littell now lives in Spain, and his novel, *The Kindly Ones*, describes a French-German protagonist who, during World War II, moves from Ukraine to the Caucasus to Stalingrad, from Berlin to Italian-occupied Southern France, from Berlin to Auschwitz, then onward to Budapest and Pomerania, and back to Berlin, finally escaping to France. For all of these authors, political violence is a transnational phenomenon shared as a human problem, rather than as a phenomenon to be accounted for by nationalistic histories. None of the three novels could be adequately described as belonging to one national literature. They have human histories more than national histories as their foci. Before returning to the novels and the ways their portrayal of political violence interacts with contemporary globalization, I want to expand on becoming a witness, which, like experiences of political violence, is singular in each instance yet universal as a human phenomenon.

1 The Concept of the Witness

Hartman's "intellectual witness" differs from Gramsci's organic intellectual: this witness is not someone who speaks on behalf of a suffering community from within communal beliefs, but an outsider who speaks to the outside on behalf of that community. Hartman attributes four characteristics to the intellectual witness. First, he says, the intellectual witness is a bystander. "[D]etached or belated, he has no obligation to take account of the Shoah."⁸ Second, the intellectual witness is powerless to alter the situations and characters they describe. That makes us like bystanders in times of violent oppression, who hear rumors, see propaganda, and yet fail to intervene.⁹ Third, being an intellectual witness demands "moral and intellectual stamina."¹⁰ According to Hartman, Adorno was against the writing of poetry after Auschwitz because he felt that artists and readers lacked that stamina. Hartman fears that we have done little to regain it since 1945. Fourth, intellectual witnesses have time to react. Immediate danger, recurring stress, and fear all compromise a person's ability to reflect before acting when witnessing violence in the present tense. "Catastrophe," as Hartman puts it, "reduces time," but reading, I suggest, expands it.¹¹

People reading about the rise of the Taliban in *The Kite Runner* or the starvation of the Igbo in *Half of a Yellow Sun* possess these four characteristics, as do historians, philosophers, and literary critics addressing the Shoah. They read with no sense of obligation, no possibility of

⁸ Hartman, "Shoah and Intellectual Witness," 39.

⁹ Ibid., 44.

¹⁰ Ibid., 40.

¹¹ Ibid., 45.

directly intervening in a crisis, and yet demands are made on their intellectual and moral stamina on every page because imagination or empathy operate in precognitive processes to which consciously held moral beliefs must then catch up. Having time to react, time to engage this push and pull of interpretive reaction and willful interpretation, is a luxury that an in-person witness does not have. The possibility of intervening in the event they witness heaps significance on their reaction in the compressed time of the event and hampers the freedom of later reinterpretation with guilt or pride.

The reader as witness, then, is one instance of the intellectual witness that Hartman predicted. In order to further extrapolate the characteristics of the reader as witness, I will draw on two concepts of witnessing that have not received much attention in the literature about genocide. The first is the concept of the “humanitarian witness.” Identified by Didier Fassin and historicized by Carolyn Dean, the term “humanitarian witness” refers to people who perform humanitarian missions for organizations such as the Red Cross or Doctors Without Borders.¹² Fassin notes that since the Biafran crisis of the 1970s, these workers have recognized an “urgent new imperative to bear witness, no longer to simply offer assistance.”¹³ Dean and Fassin’s work

¹² Carolyn J. Dean, “The Politics of Suffering: From the Survivor-Witness to Humanitarian Witnessing,” *Continuum Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 31, no. 5 (2017): 628–36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2017.1357337>; Carolyn J. Dean, *The Moral Witness: Trials and Testimony after Genocide* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019), 146–52. Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present*, trans. Rachel Gomme (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

¹³ Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason*, 200.

defining the humanitarian witness is useful for thinking about reading because it clarifies both the importance of literature about political violence and the problems of thinking that witnessing is enough. When Dean examines the figure of the humanitarian witness as part of the broader, post–Eichmann era history of witnessing, one negative effect of humanitarian witnessing becomes clear. Victims themselves, “as individuals and spokespeople,” disappear in the clamor of humanitarian organizations to witness *for* them. “Now humanitarians speak in the same voice, as if they too were survivors,” and whereas the survivor “remembers soberly and recoils from affect” because of their personal suffering, “the humanitarian uses suffering instrumentally to gain support for his cause, publicizing victims’ pain.”¹⁴ Another concern about the advent of the humanitarian witness is that in the dependence on the recognition of trauma victims, the recognition of political subjects in the age of humanitarianism “has shifted from a demand for justice to the exhibition of pain,” or from a structural to an affective dimension.¹⁵ In literature, this looks like sensationalism, or pleasure in others’ pain. Even so, Fassin considers “testimony, which is embedded in a globalized media space, ... as essential an element of humanitarian activity as is providing assistance.”¹⁶

Literature is unique within that globalized media space in the way it directs readers’ attention. Véronique Tadjo, a French-Ivorian author who has also written about the Rwandan genocide, emphasizes this about her choice of literature as the means through which to bear witness to the crisis. In a 2009 conversation with Diop, she states that “literature throws a very different light on it than does a history book or a journalistic piece.” Because literature helps “the

¹⁴ Dean, “The Politics of Suffering,” 632.

¹⁵ Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason*, 219.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 206.

reader identify with what is happening,” it can break through the “information overload, breaking indifference,” and can rehumanize the individuals involved.¹⁷ Readers, whose awareness of a historical conflict through literature includes an extended contemplation of the emotions, decisions, and experiences involved, are changed by the event of reading and empowered to engage in the humanitarian activity of testifying. In order to clarify how a work of literature changes someone, I want to turn to a second concept of witnessing that can be integrated with Hartman’s original idea: the phenomenological concept of witnessing.

In his 1997 book *Being Given*, French phenomenologist Jean-Luc Marion began a critique of autonomous subjectivity that would result, ten years later, in what he called “the erotic reduction.” His first step toward this reduction is replacing the subject with the witness. “Constituted and no longer constituting,” he writes, “the witness no longer enacts synthesis or constitution. Or rather, synthesis becomes passive and is imposed on it.”¹⁸ The witness differs from the I as a centering ego in four ways: the witness does not initiate the manifestation of a phenomenon; it “does not see the given phenomenon in its totality”; it “cannot read or interpret the intuitive excess” of meaning a phenomenon offers; and it allows itself to “be judged (said, determined) by what ... [it itself] cannot say or think adequately.”¹⁹ All “saturated phenomena” arrive in this manner, according to Marion, and all art reaches us as a saturated phenomenon. Artworks saturate and overwhelm the phenomenological intentionality we direct toward them.

¹⁷ Véronique Tadjo, “Interview with Boubacar Boris Diop,” *African Identities* 8, no. 4 (2010): 429.

¹⁸ Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, translated by Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 216–17.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 217.

So does every interaction with another person. I have explored the comparability of being overwhelmed by a book and being overwhelmed by a person at length elsewhere.²⁰ Suffice to say here that both works of art and other people engage us in a process of reception and change that we cannot anticipate, cannot fully interpret, and cannot adequately recall through memory.

The erotic reduction, in which the subject becomes not only a witness but also fundamentally a lover, is a radicalization of Husserl's phenomenological reduction and an expansion of Levinas's idea that we become who we are by means of the other. Whereas Levinas had declared that each other person calls to us, demanding to be recognized and protected, Marion goes a step farther and says that every other person asks to be loved. Whether we respond to that other person with love or not, the person we are is changed in that moment by our acceptance or rejection of the invitation. In reading, we meet an invitation to asymmetrically attend to the text as other. It calls us to this sort of attention by mirroring our relation to another person, but in its fleshlessness, a book deprives us of a means of exercising the responsibility to which we are called. The phenomenology of Marion and Levinas adds to the concept of intellectual witness the recognition of this responsibility, but because the call to responsibility must be answered in the flesh, it also clarifies the ways in which being a witness is, in itself, inadequate. Reading begins an ethical process that only real assistance can complete.

2 Why Literature?

The singularity of literature makes it possible for the reader to be a kind of humanitarian witness without necessarily instrumentalizing the stories they read. This is not to say that it is not possible to instrumentalize a work of literature, only that the act of reading a work of literature

²⁰ Cassandra Falke, *The Phenomenology of Love and Reading* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016).

may open up a new kind of witnessing, one that is ethically potent without being entangled with the institutional structures that offer humanitarianism as a palliative or even justification for political violence. Fiction generally, and perpetrator fiction in particular, is uniquely equipped to avoid the two pitfalls thus far identified for someone witnessing on behalf of another— instrumentalizing pain or sensationalizing it.

The idea of imaginatively crossing historical-cultural borders to identify with victims of political violence enacts a fantasy of identification with the victimized other, a fantasy that may have real ethical and political benefits if it results in ethical action in the present. If victimhood became a “newly discovered source of inner strength: of honor, of glory, and of wisdom,”²¹ then contemporary readers might hope to obtain wisdom or strength by reading memoirs or well-researched first-person fiction addressing diverse instances of political violence and victimization. However, particularly if we read actual memoirs, we readers and critics might be tempted to replace moral sentiment with moral action. In contrast, the fantasy of identification encounters its limit when readers are invited to empathize with perpetrators rather than victims. When reading fiction focalized through perpetrators, readers are reminded of our uselessness to prevent their violent acts. We recall that we are not innocent victims due to our capacity to identify with even the most heinous of perpetrators, such as Littell’s Maximillian Aue, a Nazi. Perpetrator fiction works through paradox: our intimacy with the focalizing character engages our empathy, devotes our attention to their particular possibilities, and overwhelms us with the capacity for violence all humans share. And yet, assuming readers are not sadists, the character’s demand for empathy, which pulls on our best Levinasian instincts, is constantly counteracted by the empathy we experience for their victims. That victim-focused empathy has to imaginatively

²¹ Dean, “The Politics of Suffering,” 613.

leap over the perpetrator's limiting intentionality, a real exercise for the intellectual and moral stamina that Hartman emphasizes is essential for intellectual witnessing.

Some perpetrator fiction aids us in this leap. Although focalized mostly through Cornelius Uvimana, who lived in Djibouti during the Rwandan genocide and has returned, so he does not "become someone without a past," *Murambi* moves between multiple focalizers: perpetrators, victims, survivors, and accomplices.²² When readers encounter Faustin Gasana, he has become a commander of the Interahamwe, the youth wing of Rwanda's ruling party and the main perpetrator of the genocide. He is reveling in the newfound respect he receives in the poor neighborhood in which he was born. He has been entrusted to lead the killing of Tutsis that evening. His driver is deferential, the soldiers of the president's guard exchange a friendly wave with him, and he has been meeting with mayors and prefects.²³ He is on his way to see his ailing father, a worthy errand, but he mentions that he is able to move about freely because of his Interahamwe connections. Faustin, like each of the alternating focalizers of the novel's first three sections, tells his story in the first person. He is characterized primarily by the contrast with his father, a wounded and bedridden man who demands affection from his son, but views him as part of "a generation of incompetents."²⁴

Faustin's story is preceded by that of Michel Serumundo, a Tutsi father and husband, whose twelve-year-old son cannot be found as the Interahamwe are closing down the streets to begin the killings. Faustin is in Kibungo and Michel in Kigali, and the two never meet, but by foregrounding the father-son relationship in both and portraying both in the everyday settings of

²² Diop, *Murambi*, 44.

²³ *Ibid.*, 21, 12–13.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 14, 18.

home and family life, Diop draws a parallel between them. We read Faustin's story with the awareness of the Tutsi family's anxiety already in place, but also with an awareness of the contrast between Michael's kind-hearted fathering and what Faustin received. Later in the novel, when Diop focalizes a chapter through Doctor Joseph Karekezi, one of the leaders responsible for the massacre of nearly 50,000 men, women, and children at Murambi Technical School (a character based on Aloys Simba),²⁵ he uses a similar technique and precedes it with the imagined reflections of Rose Karemera, an old woman sought by the Interhamwe, who has escaped thus far through the protection of her Hutu neighbors. She, like the families at the school, is seeking refuge. Diop invites comparisons between her and the victims of Murambi, and between the family that shelters her and Karekezi.

The Kindly Ones is narrated in the first person by Aue, one of the most vicious, unlikeable perpetrators in literature. At times, the novel foregrounds Aue's lack of empathy by focusing excessively on the materiality of bodies. Aue comments on the color and texture of bodily refuse and frequently describes his reaction to the horror he sees in physical or passive terms (his boots sticking to the floor of a bloody hallway, reclining in the grass before watching a mass execution). It might be argued that the very absence of empathy in the focalizing character

²⁵ Boubacar Boris Diop, "Denial through Silence," trans. Vera Leckie, *Warscapes*, blog post, April 29, 2014, <http://www.warscapes.com/opinion/denial-through-silence> (accessed January 25, 2022). The article also appears in print as chapter 2 in Jean-Damascène Gasanabo, David J. Simon, and Margee M. Ensign, eds., *Confronting Genocide in Rwanda: Dehumanization, Denial and Strategies for Prevention* (Bogotá: Apidama Ediciones, 2015).

invites readers to fill the affective vacuum. That may be, in which case, the novel invites empathy for victims more readily than some critics have recognized. But there are places where the novel appeals to readerly empathy more directly. Unlike *Murambi*, when *The Kindly Ones* invites readers to empathize with victims, it is by means of people we know now, in our outside-the-book present, not by trying to narrate the complexity of a victim's subjective experience. Pages 13–16 of the book spend line after line detailing the number and rate of deaths on the Eastern front, noting that the “conflict with the USSR lasted ... 3 years, 10 months, 16 days, 20 hours, and 1 minute.”²⁶ In the middle of figuring the rate of death of Soviets, Germans, and Jews down to the second, the narrator writes, “Let those who smirked at that admittedly somewhat pedantic extra minute please consider that it is worth an additional 13.04 dead, and imagine, if they can 13 people from their circle of friends killed in one minute.”

Unlike a historian compiling a narrative from multiple sources, the novel reader is locked into one perspective at the time of reading. The reader, therefore, approaches a text from a position of discernment within the limits of a single subjective position rather than a position of judgment from an imagined objective stance outside of the circumstances described by the fictional work. A protagonist like Aue in *The Kindly Ones* or Faustin in *Murambi* is recognized as bad by the reader from the first page by their allegiance to the SS or the Interahamwe—we judge based on our extratextual knowledge of history—but insofar as such a protagonist suffers within a situation they cannot control, readers see that lack of control and suffering with them to the extent that the text offers it. The legibility of history within a particular novel controls, to some extent, the possibility of judging.

²⁶ Jonathan Littell, *The Kindly Ones* (New York: Harper, 2010), 16.

In contrast to Aue and Faustin, the perpetrator in Berger's *From A to X* is separated from his political context to such an extent that readers cannot make a judgment about the rightness or wrongness of the actions that got him arrested. He models the truism that one person's terrorist is another's freedom fighter, an observation frequently found in terrorism scholarship. We know only that Xavier has been jailed as a terrorist; we do not know what he has done or why.²⁷ The novel is composed primarily of letters from his lover A'ida, and to her, he is a hero. She calls him her "on-the-ground-lion," "Ya nour," "Hayati," "Mi Guapo." He is presented to us for most of the book as the object (or intersubject) of her adoration—brave, enlightened, life-bringing, handsome, and beloved.²⁸ A'ida herself writes from a city under siege, so in imagining him having been in the city with her prior to his interment, we imagine him fighting an enemy that we as readers see as the aggressor through our affiliation with A'ida. We know that he is tortured while imprisoned, which also draws on readers' sympathy. There is no alternate perspective on Xavier from which we might judge him, no way to position him in a historical group that might automatically villainize him. Berger incorporates histories of oppression into the novel through the authors and the facts that Xavier cites as having inspired him, so we may guess at the arena of conflict in which he has operated based on where these authors and facts are from, but the references point to conflicting interpretations of his location. The novel very much embraces the humanitarian dictate that "there are no good and bad victims" by occluding the violent act that makes Xavier a perpetrator.²⁹ If we remain within the perpetrator/victim dichotomy, we see him as a victim only.

²⁷ John Berger, *From A to X* (London: Verso, 2008), 1.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 54, 95, 104, 116.

²⁹ Doctors Without Borders, quoted in Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason*, 234.

Each of these novels expands readers' understanding of what humanity is capable of, but like any portrayal of the extremes of human behavior, they risk promoting voyeurism. This risk, which is inherent in any portrayal of violence, becomes even greater when readers perceive themselves to be part of a population that does not enact or condone genocide or terrorism. Nevertheless, these three novels promote reading as an act of witness rather than voyeurism, in part by avoiding sensationalism. *Murambi* avoids the sensationalism that mars what Elizabeth Anker calls "the human rights bestseller" by focusing on the times before and after the genocide and focalizing through characters who do not strike actual blows during the famous 100 days.³⁰ This has the effect of reinforcing the responsibility of people who were, like readers, witnesses more than perpetrators, while also avoiding exploitative descriptions of physical violence. *The Kindly Ones* overflows with repugnant descriptions of physical violence, but when paired with Aue's equally repugnant self-absorption and apathy in the face of victims' suffering, the "representational exorbitance and hyperbole" that Anker worries produce an exoticization of human rights abuses seems merely sickening in its repetition.³¹ In *From A to X*, both A'ida and Xavier downplay their own suffering for the sake of the other and elide their insurgency activities so that their writing does not incriminate them. Berger thereby avoids any expectation that the violence they endure or enact will be described, and he is able to foreground the plot of a love affair impeded by circumstance. Even so, as A and X exchange their reasons for hoping for change, Berger continues to emphasize the political stakes of the novel.

³⁰ Elizabeth S. Anker, *Fictions of Dignity: Embodying Human Rights in World Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell, 2012), 35.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 39.

These three texts question the possibility of representing political violence, whether it is the immensity of the genocide of thousands, or millions, or the immensity of the imprisonment and torture of one. The most compelling pleas in *Murambi* are silent. During the course of the novel, Cornelius finds out that his father, Joseph, was responsible for the killings at Murambi and that his Tutsi mother and his siblings were among his father's victims. In the novel's fourth and final part, he walks through the technical school, which is now the Murambi Genocide Memorial Center. This section is narrated from a third-person point of view. In this way, Diop allows the bones of the more than 60,000 skeletons buried or preserved where they fell at the Memorial Center to speak for themselves, without Cornelius or Diop himself presuming to voice their suffering. Diop makes no attempt to explain the genocide, saying instead that "the fourth genocide of the century remained an enigma" that "went far beyond the struggle for power in a little country."³² He also makes no claim for the power of art to adequately represent the genocide. Cornelius, an author like Diop, had arrived planning to write a play, but feels "helplessness before the sheer immensity of evil." Nevertheless, he resolves not to "resign himself to the definitive victory of the murderers through silence."³³ This is the choice we face as scholars as well. What could we write that would be adequate to even one death in the Rwandan genocide? What could we add to Littell's 900 + pages exploring an imaginary perpetrator's psychology? But the risk of not writing well enough about political violence or the literature that portrays it is less than the risk of silence. Moreover, scholars can be self-reflective about which acts of political violence find a witness and how literature facilitates acts of witnessing. We can

³² Diop, *Murambi*, 178.

³³ *Ibid.*, 179.

resist scholarly practices that reinforce nationalistic histories and produce scholarship that approaches the prevention of political violence as a globally shared goal.

3 Conclusion

Present, in the flesh, at the site of a humanitarian crisis, aid workers must distribute limited resources to victims they judge to be more or less “deserving,” more or less in need, but there is no option of directing readerly attention to another more “deserving” victim instead of the character focalizing the text. At most, we can imagine others’ suffering in addition. The association between a reader and a focalizing character is intimate. As Georges Poulet marveled in his 1969 article, “The Phenomenology of Reading,” the “interior universe constituted by language” in literature “does not seem radically opposed to the me who thinks it.”³⁴ The intimacy of literature, coupled with the duration of that intimacy in a novel, is one trait that makes its call to be a witness stronger than journalistic or historical nonfiction. We do not experience a novel as words *about* an engaged party, but as the words *of* an engaged party. I don’t say that to imply competition or even categorical distinctions between literature, journalism, and history; I only mean to highlight something unique about novel reading.

The act of reading also becomes an especially powerful call to witness because it has no prescriptive link to politics or intervention. That is not to say that literature about genocide is not politically engaged. It is engaged, of course, but it is not prescriptive in the way that humanitarian nonfiction about genocide must be. The interpretive excess of a work of literature makes its potency unpredictable. This is particularly true of novels about political violence, where the events exceed historical and legal norms and where emotions are extreme. However

³⁴ Georges Poulet, “The Phenomenology of Reading,” *New Literary History* 1, no. 1 (1969): 55.

unpredictable, the question of what we see in the imaginative world of a novel is important and has political and ethical implications. With regard to victims and perpetrators, Erin McGlothlin points out:

By ignoring the perspectives of the one group, we imply that we somehow belong to the other, and this kind of identification with the victims is, at its extreme, as dangerous to our inquiry as identification with the perpetrators might be.³⁵

Perpetrator fiction robs readers of some of the potential smugness of sitting in historical judgment, even as it blurs the categorical distinctions between pure victim and pure perpetrator. As Aue says early in his narration of *The Kindly Ones*, “You should be able to admit to yourselves that you might also have done what I did ... I think I am allowed to conclude, as a fact established by modern history, that everyone, or nearly everyone, in a given set of circumstances, does what he is told to do; and pardon me, but there’s not much chance that you’re the exception.”³⁶ Whatever the reader’s response, perpetrator fiction calls for the recognition of at least this fact.

³⁵ Erin McGlothlin, “Theorizing the Perpetrator in Bernhard Schlink’s *The Reader* and Martin Amis’s *Time’s Arrow*,” in *After Representation?: The Holocaust, Literature, and Culture*, ed. R. Clifton Spargo and Robert E. Ehrenreich (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 214.

³⁶ Littell, *The Kindly Ones*, 20.

One final unique strength of literature as a call to witness is that the lack of images causes the reader to be engaged in imagining horrific acts. Different readers and viewers have different saturation points for violence, different points at which what they read or see overwhelms and sickens them. A friend of mine vomited after the first few pages of Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*. Conversely, I just taught *American Psycho* to twenty undergraduates, and they had no overwhelming physical or perhaps even emotional reactions. There are a lot of factors that differentiate Foucault's historical account and Ellis's fictional one, and a lot of differences between my 67-year-old friend and my 20-something-year-old students, but the point holds: people have different levels of tolerance for real and imagined pain. However, I suspect that most readers would stop reading a paragraph at the first signs of nausea rather than push on as my friend did. Just as most of us withdraw our hand from a hot stove, most of us imaginatively withdraw at the point that we begin to sicken. That does not necessarily mean we stop reading. It might just mean reading with less imaginative specificity. That often unconscious withdrawal is not an option with images, which come upon us unaware when we open a news article online or watch the screen change in a film. Because reading requires this additional imaginative investment, it builds on the unique past we bring to it in untraceable ways. The space that opens up between what a novel demands we imagine and what we are willing to imagine uncovers the limitations to our own empathic horizons, which reveals something about the ethic within which our attention operates, an ethic that often differs from that which we consciously claim.

As Jenni Adams notes regarding Holocaust literature, “the conventional pattern of identification” has invited readers to align themselves with victims.³⁷ A postcolonial focus on the possibility of “writing back” also gives voice to the victim in an oppressed-oppressor dichotomy. In contrast, novels focalized through a perpetrator ask readers to bear witness, not so much to suffering, but to a shared human capacity for violence. They question whether political violence is motivated by culturally constructed concepts of rights, universal longings for a secure and purposeful life, or ideologies that blind perpetrators to the humanity they share with a potential victim. Novels that make readers a witness of perpetrators conceptualize motivation outside the predetermining categories of law. They are free to elide political context or to posit complex and specific individual circumstances. Constructing the reader as witness, they are nevertheless free to make the narratee a lover, collaborator, victim, or judge, inviting reconsideration of not only motives, but also the way that the transmission of a perpetrator’s story enables forgiveness or empathy.

In conclusion, the reader as witness approaches the portrayal of political violence as an intellectual, not empowered with the bodily presence to intervene in an event, but they are not as detached as Hartman first supposed. The power, proximity, and interpretive excess of a work of literature impose on the reader responsibility akin to that invoked by the presence of another person. At the same time, the physical absence of another person makes it easier for the reader to shrug off this responsibility. We may vent our emotional or moral discomfort in the secure context of our personal lives and do nothing to alleviate the suffering that genocides continue to

³⁷ Jenni Adams, “Reading (As) Violence in *The Kindly Ones*,” in *Representing Perpetrators in Holocaust Literature and Film*, ed. Jenni Adams and Sue Vice (Middlesex: Valentine Mitchell, 2013), 31.

cause. Intellectualism and aesthetic distance may even help conceal the responsibility to which a book calls us. The more recent advent of the humanitarian witness makes that escape from responsibility even easier, as humanitarian witnessing feels like a political and ethical act. It *is* an ethical act in the way that calling for help when someone is injured is, but it is not being that help. What form actual help might take depends on readers' abilities, situations, and resources. My goal has not been to predetermine an ethical response for other readers. Rather, I hope to have clarified the nature and potency of an encounter that readers increasingly make with works of fiction now that the public Hartman predicted has arrived. Because of the publication of several novels since 2000 portraying political violence other than the Shoah, that public is beginning to reflect on the violence in global and structural terms.

Academics like to talk to other academics, who generally lack the power of policymakers or even of the voting, talking, purchasing, volunteering, and donating public. Our bearing witness is perhaps more powerful as teachers and citizens than as researchers. But the reader as witness is not a purely academic figure. The category includes, for example, book club organizers, educators in high schools, and lifetime learning courses. It includes people who swap books around the neighborhood or make displays in the local library. *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* have sold 38 million copies worldwide. That is more than the entire population of Afghanistan. Littell's *The Kindly Ones* received a huge amount of coverage in France, Germany, and the US. I stopped counting reviews when I got to thirty. In an otherwise thoughtful critique of the aestheticization of Holocaust stories, Garth Risk Hallberg criticizes Littell for bringing the "supreme example of human suffering into contact with the great muddy stream of mass culture," but this claim is based on a false dichotomy between mass culture and

high art.³⁸ We *live* in a great muddy stream of mass existence. That is where genocide happened and continues to happen, and that is where we, no longer subjects, become responsible as witnesses.

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³⁸ Garth Risk Hallberg, "Everybody's Holocaust: Jonathan Littell's Fictional Nazi and Postmodernity's Double Bind," *The Millions*, March 23, 2009, https://themillions.com/2009/03/everybody-holocaust-jonathan-littell_23.html (accessed January 25, 2022).

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