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This chapter critically assesses the dichotomy of victims/survivors and perpetrators that proliferates in the media and other public discourses about genocide and related mass atrocities, including crimes against humanity and war crimes. Drawing on over a decade of oral historical and ethnographic research on the 1994 genocide in Rwanda—in which approximately 800,000 civilians, most of whom were Tutsi, were murdered by Hutu Power extremists— this chapter argues that most people’s experiences of mass atrocities are more complex than this dichotomy permits, and often includes actions that challenge the boundaries among victim/survivor, bystander, rescuer, and perpetrator categories. It thus advocates for considering genocide-affected individuals as “complex political actors” whose actions exist along a spectrum of genocidal violence. This allows for deeper consideration of the shifting roles that people take on during periods of extreme violence, and in response to shifts in their nation’s political climate and personal circumstances.

Rwandan Genocide, perpetrators, victims, survivors, bystanders, rescuers, complex political actors

CHAPTER 14

On the Margins

Role-Shifting in Atrocity Crimes

Erin Jessee

1. Introduction

Popular and scholarly representations of genocide and related mass atrocities, including crimes against humanity and war crimes,¹ have long relied upon a fairly strict delineation between those who endure the violence as innocent victims and survivors, bystanders who

¹ Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (adopted July 17, 1998, entered into force July 1, 2002) 2187 UNTS 90 (Rome Statute). Art 5-8*bis* provides current definitions of these overlapping legal prohibitions as defined in international law, which together are often referred to as mass atrocities or atrocity crimes (Scheffer, 2006).

witness but do not directly participate in the violence, and those who inflict the violence as guilty perpetrators who are typically portrayed as monsters whose crimes are without reason (see, for example, [Hilberg, 1993](#)). In the last five years, genocide scholars and related experts have begun arguing against approaching survivors, bystanders, and perpetrators as inherently distinct from each other, though the separation between these categories persists in many fields of study and in popular culture. This chapter argues that by perpetuating distinct differences among survivors, bystanders, perpetrators, and other actors we inadvertently promote an overly simplistic view of how genocides and other atrocity crimes emerge within a society, how they transform people's lives, and the long-term legacies they have for entire societies in the post-atrocity period. This overly simplistic framing has the potential to undermine the stated benefits of initiatives aimed at promoting social repair and can direct a long-lasting harm to the individuals and communities that transitional justice practitioners and related experts are trying to help "recover."

For this reason, this chapter explores a theoretical framework—grounded in decades of research emerging from the fields of Holocaust studies, genocide studies, and conflict studies—for approaching people whose lives have been intimately affected by genocide and related mass atrocities as "complex political actors" (see also, [Jessee, 2017](#), pp. 119–121; [Jessee, 2019](#), pp. 153–174). To be clear, this approach does not advocate regarding all people's actions in these contexts as morally or legally equivalent. Indeed, it demands a sensitive approach, involving careful contextualization, particularly when working with conflict-affected peoples' life histories and other intimate information. Correctly applied, it can offer a starting point for analyzing the full spectrum of people's actions during mass atrocities to produce a more comprehensive and informed view of the extensive role-shifting that can occur, and pushes back against the overly simplistic and sometimes harmful narratives that tend to arise in the aftermath of mass atrocities.

My decision to, for analytical purposes, approach people in genocide- and atrocity-affected communities as complex political actors is evidence-based, informed by oral historical and ethnographic fieldwork that I conducted in Rwanda, with the help of Rwandan research assistants, starting in 2007.² To explain the theoretical foundations for the complex political actor, I begin by providing an overview of relevant literature. I then apply this concept to the life histories that Rwandans shared with me relating to their experiences of the

² Over eight months in 2007 and 2008, and another six weeks in 2011 and 2012, I worked closely with eight Rwandan research assistants, who provided simultaneous translation of conversations and interviews in Kinyarwanda to English, where necessary, and similarly helped me produce verbatim transcripts in English of recorded interviews and related data. Together, we conducted multiple life history and thematic interviews with approximately 65 Rwandans from different backgrounds to the genocide and engaged in casual ethnographic conversations with countless others. We initially recruited people who worked at state-funded genocide memorials located across Rwanda, who I had hoped could put me in touch with other potential interviewees within their communities. However, as this fieldwork progressed, we also recruited people associated with community-based organizations and whom we encountered randomly. We also recruited people who had been convicted for genocide-related crimes and were serving sentences within five prisons in Rwanda, in accordance with the recommendation from prison-based gacaca advisors. The resulting interviews took place across the country and among Rwandans from a range of socio-economic, political, and ethnic backgrounds. The research assistants and participants associated with my genocide-related fieldwork in Rwanda have chosen to remain anonymous in subsequent publications and related outputs associated with this research and so for this reason I use pseudonyms throughout this chapter when referring to them (for more on the underlying methodological framework, see [Jessee, 2017](#), pp. 15–19).

“1994 genocide against the Tutsi,” as it is referenced in official discourse, during which Hutu Power extremists massacred an estimated 800,000 civilians³—most of whom were members of the nation’s ethnic Tutsi minority—over approximately three months.⁴ I then provide some brief theoretical and historical/political context before focusing on some of the specific narratives that I documented from Rwandans whom I had initially viewed according to three clearly delineated genocide archetypes that dominated Rwanda’s political sphere in 2007,

³ The number of deceased victims of the genocide is controversial, with conservative estimates—including the one cited by historian Alison [Des Forges \(1999, pp. 15–16\)](#), which is adhered to in this instance—concluding that between 500,000 and 800,000 Rwandans, including Hutu and Twa civilians, died. Conversely, the Rwandan government and its supporters maintain that over one million Rwandan Tutsi were murdered during this period (see, for example, National Commission for the Fight against Genocide 2013). Most recently, a *Journal of Genocide Research* forum concluded that the lower estimate provided by Des Forges is likely more accurate than the higher estimate provided by the Rwandan government and its supporters ([Meierhenrich, 2020, p. 81](#)).

⁴ Since 2007, the Rwandan government has engaged in a campaign to promote international recognition of the “1994 genocide against the Tutsi.” This campaign has met with significant success: most notably, the Canadian and Belgian governments have criminalized denial of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi as a form of genocide denial. It has also raised significant criticisms, however: most notably, for silencing Rwandans’ experiences of the broader conflicts and human rights violations that surrounded the genocide in the 1990s, including those that were allegedly perpetrated by the current government against Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa civilians, and spread into the surrounding Great Lakes region of Africa ([Straus, 2019, pp. 1–22](#)). In my own research since 2007, I have found many Rwandans reluctant to use this label outside of official discourse due to its silencing potential ([Jessee, 2017, pp. 51–52](#)).

when I first began conducting fieldwork: “the innocent victim/survivor,” “the heroic ex-combatant,” and “the guilty perpetrator,” also known as *génocidaires*.⁵ These categories were prevalent in the official history of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi that was circulating within Rwanda through state-funded genocide memorials, museums, and commemorative events at this time. In the interviews and ethnographic research that I conducted, however, I quickly learned that these archetypes rarely did justice to the complexity of people’s lived experiences surrounding the genocide. Furthermore, each of these archetypes frequently carried powerful moral connotations that, for those who lived with the labels, resulted in both real and perceived social stigmas that could negatively impact their mental health and other facets of their well-being, even decades after the genocide had ended.

2. Role-Shifting and the Complex Political Actor

This chapter is informed by decades of scholarship that has been building on the margins of genocide studies, which have consistently revealed the complexity of people’s actions and experiences surrounding mass atrocities. Most notably, as early as 1963, political theorist Hannah Arendt first grappled with making sense of Nazi bureaucrat Adolf Eichmann in her foundational text, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (Arendt, 1963). During his trial in Israel, the prosecution and the media presented Eichmann as the caricature of pure evil, yet he presented himself to Arendt as a banal bureaucrat whose conscience was assuaged by the knowledge that his efforts to enable the mass murder of Jewish civilians during the Holocaust in Nazi-occupied Europe were entirely in accordance with German law (Arendt, 1963, p. 293).

⁵ The term “*génocidaire*” is distinctly Rwandan and is used to label Rwandans who have some degree of criminal responsibility for atrocities that occurred during the genocide. It is often used in Rwandan popular culture as synonymous with people of Hutu heritage (Burnet, 2012, p. 31; Jessee, 2017, p. 3).

Then, in 1986, writer and Holocaust survivor Primo Levi drew scholars' attention to the "grey zone" that exists surrounding people who find themselves struggling to survive amid genocide. His influential text, *The Drowned and the Saved*, amplified a range of experiences that Holocaust survivors often struggled to speak about, from the Jewish civilians who directly collaborated with the Nazi officials and policies that were resulting in the near-annihilation of Jewish communities across Nazi-occupied Europe, to the gradual "moral collapse" that ordinary people experienced in the concentration camps as they fought each other for food and privileges that could ensure their individual survival (Levi, 1986, p. 29).

In 1992, historian Christopher Browning published a pivotal text, *Ordinary Men* (1992/1998), that examined the actions of the relatively inexperienced middle-aged, family men from working- and lower-middle-class backgrounds who served in German Reserve Police Battalion 101 and whose mandate was to locate and exterminate Jewish civilians across Nazi-occupied Poland (Browning, 1992). Browning estimated that 80 to 90 percent of these men ultimately participated in executions of Jewish civilians, despite what appeared to be fairly minimal negative consequences for refusing. Their motives for committing these atrocities varied dramatically, however, including "war-time brutalization, racism, segmentation and routinization of the task, special selection of the perpetrators, careerism, obedience to orders, deference to authority, ideological indoctrination, and conformity" (Browning, 1992, p. 159).

While these studies were lauded by Holocaust and genocide scholars for their important insights into the field and for other case studies of mass atrocities, only in the last five to ten years have greater numbers of scholars begun to acknowledge the inadequacy of categories such as survivor, bystander, and perpetrator for encapsulating the complexity of people's experiences during genocide and related mass atrocities. Of particular note, in 2007, political scientist Erica Bouris developed a framework for what she termed the "complex

political victim”—a person who “knowingly and purposefully supports certain discourses that contribute to the space of her political victimization” because the resulting discourse allows them to advance personal interests and advocate on behalf of their communities, among other positive outcomes (Bouris, 2007, p. 84). By embracing and co-opting this discourse, Bouris observed that complex political victims could then push back against a frequently imposed “constellation of characteristics: innocence, purity, moral superiority, and lack of responsibility,” and create space to discuss the complexities of their experiences (Bouris, 2007, p. 48).

In 2009, political scientist Erin Baines applied Bouris’ framework to the case of Dominic Ongwen, an Acholi man who had been abducted as a child and forced to become a child soldier in the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) in northern Uganda. Ongwen is currently standing trial before the International Criminal Court (ICC) for war crimes and crimes against humanity that he allegedly committed as commander of the movement’s Sinai Brigade. Baines argues that Ongwen is a “complex political perpetrator”—a term she introduces to encapsulate “a generation of victims in settings of chronic crisis who not only adapt to violence to survive, but thrive” (Baines, 2009, p. 180). Baines maintains that in holding Ongwen legally accountable, the ICC must weigh the many atrocities he perpetrated as an LRA commander alongside the extraordinary violence to which child abductees were subjected by the movement’s leaders, and the movement’s consistent use of spiritual and political ideology and rituals to indoctrinate child abductees into the divinely sanctioned nature of their struggle against the Ugandan government. She notes that there is ample evidence to suggest that the survival of Ongwen and other abductees was often determined by “choiceless decisions” associated with an increasingly complex and violent conflict (Aretxaga, 1997, p. 61). And, while Baines recognizes that such complex political perpetrators still have some agency and responsibility for their criminal actions, and should

be held accountable, she calls for a “specific strategy,” legal or otherwise, for grappling with the challenges posed by people like Ongwen (Baines, 2009, p. 186).

Along these lines, as an analytical starting point for addressing the complexity of people’s actions surrounding genocide and related mass atrocities, I have built upon Bouris’ and Baines’ works to advocate for approaching any person whose life has been intimately affected by genocide and related mass atrocities as a “complex political actor.” This approach emerged from the oral historical and ethnographic fieldwork I conducted with Rwandans who, in varying ways and to varying degrees, were parties to the 1994 genocide: one of the few periods of mass violence in the 20th century that has clearly and undeniably met the legal criteria for genocide as defined by the 1948 United Nations (UN) Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (UNGC).⁶ While not without its limitations, by approaching genocide-affected people as complex political actors I created analytical space to address the common, and often consistent, role-shifting that the people I interviewed engaged in surrounding the genocide, which previously made it difficult for me to categorize them according to the genocide archetypes of “innocent survivor,” “heroic combatant,” or “guilty perpetrator” that are prevalent in the official history that currently dominates Rwanda (Jessee, 2017, pp. 45–80). I encountered few—if any—Rwandans who regarded themselves or others in their communities as neatly fitting within these categories.

The approach is reinforced by simultaneous advances in the fields of genocide studies and perpetrators studies. Most notably, in 2013 Lee Ann Fujii—a political scientist who conducted the first qualitative study of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda that engaged civilians from different backgrounds to the conflict (Fujii, 2009)—convincingly argued that genocide

⁶ Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (adopted December 9, 1948, entered into force January 12, 1951) 78 UNTS 277 (Genocide Convention), Art II; See also Rome Statute, Art 6.

scholars should rethink the standard categories they use for analysis. Fujii further advocated for a new approach that focused on people's actions so that they could better confront the "grey zones of activity during genocide, where people often elide, straddle, and violate standard categories of analysis" (Fujii, 2013, p. 146). In the process, she identified leaders, collaborators, joiners, survivors, rescuers, evaders, witnesses, and resisters as valuable categories of actors whose actions surrounding genocide could prove particularly fruitful for analysis. Her research likewise made substantial contributions toward enhancing scholarly understandings of "joiners," whom she defined as "low-level participants" who joined in the genocide largely due to "social ties that became salient in specific contexts," and which "sometimes took precedence over ethnic considerations" (Fujii, 2008, p. 571), as well as rescuers and "killer-rescuers" (Fujii, 2013, p. 145).

Interestingly, Fujii's work has allowed scholars associated with the emergent field of perpetrator studies to develop a consensus around the need to better comprehend people's varying motivations and actions surrounding genocide by decoupling social practices from social categories—what sociologist Aliza Luft, based on her analysis of transcripts from interviews with perpetrators conducted by political scientists Scott Straus and Fujii, and journalist Jean Hatzfeld, termed "behavioral boundary crossing" (Luft, 2015, p. 153; see also Hatzfeld, 2005; Lyons and Straus, 2006; Campbell, 2009; Fujii, 2009; Campbell, 2010).

Political scientist Timothy Williams notes that this shift in the literature to consider people's diverse motivations and actions surrounding genocide is far more helpful for making sense of the many "actors in genocide who do not fit the box" (Williams, 2018, p. 19). Drawing upon his fieldwork with former Khmer Rouge cadres in Cambodia, Williams developed a useful typology of action in genocide that is framed around an individual's proximity to violence and the individual actions they take, which recognizes outcomes from subversive leadership aimed at preventing violence to witnessing atrocities perpetrated by others to commanding

genocide (Williams, 2018, p. 29). Its value lies in his recognition that individuals can engage in multiple forms of action simultaneously, thereby allowing atrocity scholars and related practitioners to break free from the constraints of the overly simplistic archetypes and better comprehend the individual and social dynamics of atrocity crimes.

Luft (2015, p. 166) notes that the current privileging of a more dynamic theory of action within perpetrator studies has important political and policy ramifications for scholars and practitioners who are searching for better ways to prevent genocide and related mass atrocities. To this, I would add that applying similarly dynamic theories of action to other kinds of actors amid genocide and atrocity crimes, as proposed in this chapter, could have important ramifications for both atrocity prevention and post-atrocity social repair.

3. Approaching the “1994 genocide against the Tutsi”

Admittedly, I was unaware of the need for a more dynamic theoretical framework when I first began conducting fieldwork in Rwanda. My preliminary understanding of the Rwandan genocide and approach to recruiting potential interviewees very much aligned with the evolving official history in Rwanda related to the “1994 genocide against the Tutsi.” Broadly speaking, this official history maintains that on April 6, 1994, the assassination of President Juvénal Habyarimana—the Hutu leader of the ruling party, the National Republican Movement for Democracy and Development (MRNDD)—left a power vacuum that was soon filled by an interim government dominated by Hutu Power extremists.⁷ Habyarimana’s assassination occurred at the height of international negotiations to end a three-year civil war between Habyarimana’s forces and the predominantly Tutsi Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), which had invaded northern Rwanda from Uganda on October 1, 1990 (Guichaoua, 2015).

⁷ The MRNDD was, prior to 1991, known as the National Republican Movement for Democracy (MRND).

By invading Rwanda, the RPF—many members of which were descendants of monarchists who had been forced to flee Rwanda following the nation’s independence in 1962—became a credible threat to Hutu political hegemony (Newbury and Atterbury, 1968, p. 76; Lemarchand, 1970, p. 225). Their invasion prompted the Hutu Power movement to invest in anti-RPF and anti-Tutsi propaganda through such outlets as the magazine *Kangura* (“to wake up”) and the notorious radio station *Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines* (RTLM), to exacerbate ethnic and political divisions among Rwandans, by demonizing the nation’s Tutsi minority—the RPF’s perceived support base (Straus, 2007; Thompson, 2007). A small percentage of Hutu civilians were drawn to the Hutu Power movement during the civil war, joining youth militias known as the *Interahamwe* and *Impuzamugambi* that would serve on the front lines of the genocide (Straus, 2004).

In the hours following Habyarimana’s assassination, which RTLM journalists blamed on the RPF, the Presidential Guard began massacring political moderates whom the Hutu Power extremists perceived as a threat. In the days and weeks that followed, the violence became explicitly genocidal, as the Hutu Power extremists convinced the *Interahamwe* and *Impuzamugambi* to massacre Tutsi civilians across all regions of the country that were not yet under RPF control (Guichaoua, 2015, pp. 214–240). Realizing that the peacekeepers associated with the UN Assistance Mission to Rwanda were incapable of defending civilians or stopping the genocide, the RPF renewed its declaration of war on the interim government forces. As it forced the interim government’s forces west toward the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the RPF stopped the genocidal violence and began providing aid and medical treatment to the survivors. The RPF declared its military victory on July 18, 1994, and established a transitional government that was intended to ensure the long-term political stability of the nation (Des Forges, 1999). By this point, however, official accounts maintain that over one million Rwandan Tutsi had been massacred, and an additional 250,000 to

500,000 Rwandan women (and to a far lesser extent, men) had been raped and subjected to other forms of extreme sexual violence ([Degni-Ségui, 1996](#)).⁸

This official history—much like those that have proliferated in other conflict-affected settings—is not without its critics, particularly in relation to how the government, at times aggressively, disseminates the official narrative to Rwandans and the international community alike via genocide memorials and annual commemorative events known as *Kwibuka* (“to remember”), as well as through the media. The primary issue at stake is not so much related to its historical accuracy—though there are several points that merit deeper historical inquiry and contextualization—but rather concerns that this official narrative silences Rwandans with divergent experiences, while allowing the current government to legitimize its authoritarianism and ongoing human rights abuses. There were many ways to experience the genocide and its aftermath, influenced not only by ethnicity, but also by an individual’s immediate personal circumstances, political affiliations, regional context, religious background, and other facets of their identity (see, for example, [Fujii, 2009](#); [Burnet, 2012](#); [Thomson, 2013](#); [Guichaoua, 2015](#); [Jessee, 2017](#)). However, it takes time to develop trusting relationships with people that allow them to share these divergent experiences, and even then, they primarily share their narratives in private and semi-private settings where they can speak without attracting negative government attention.

4. Genocide Archetypes and Their Alternatives

⁸ This official history is disseminated to the public in the nation’s state-funded genocide memorials (see, for example, [Longman and Rutagengwa, 2004](#); [Freedman et al., 2008](#); [Burnet, 2012](#); [Buckley-Zistel, 2006](#); [Jessee, 2017](#), pp. 45–80), and in official and media accounts that circulate within and beyond Rwanda, among other sources.

Three archetypes are central to Rwanda’s official narrative in recent years: specifically, “the innocent victim/survivor”; “the heroic combatant”; and “the guilty perpetrator.” While the policy of *Ndi Umunyarwanda* (“I am Rwandan”) and related initiatives associated with the nation’s program of national unity and reconciliation has rendered speaking of oneself as Hutu, Tutsi, or Twa taboo, this does not apply to commemoration of the genocide (Thomson, 2013; Purdeková, 2015; Sundberg, 2016; Benda, 2019). Each of these archetypes conveys ethnicity: explicitly, in the case of the innocent Tutsi victim/survivor, and implicitly, in the case of the predominantly Tutsi combatants associated with the RPF and the predominantly Hutu perpetrators (Jessee, 2017, pp. 16–17).

As a starting point, many Rwandans reserved the term “victim” for those who were murdered, disappeared, or harmed irreparably to the point where they became entirely dependent on others for their survival. Thus, the term was seen as completely distinct from that of “survivor,” which only referenced Tutsi civilians “who either experienced and escaped the genocide, or whose immediate families lived in Rwanda in 1994 while they were temporarily abroad,” excluding the possibility of Hutu or Twa survivors (Ibreck, 2010, p. 341). The term “combatant” or “ex-combatant” was typically reserved for those individuals who fought with the Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA)—the military wing of the RPF, which currently rules Rwanda—and had since been demobilized or incorporated into the Rwandan Defense Forces.⁹ While there is substantial evidence that some RPA soldiers committed crimes against humanity and war crimes against Rwandan civilians prior to, during, and after

⁹ While there were other combatant groups associated with the genocide—most notably, the Rwandan Armed Forces, the Interahamwe, and Impuzamugambi—in the context of genocide memorials and other commemorative events, these groups were either referred to by name or grouped together as Hutu Power extremists, génocidaires, and other terms that clearly distinguished them from soldiers associated with the RPA and highlighted their guilt.

the 1994 genocide (Des Forges, 1999, p. 705; Umutesi, 2004),¹⁰ most of these atrocities have been dismissed by the Rwandan government as individual crimes motivated by extreme psychological distress after soldiers witnessed the horrible atrocities that Hutu Power extremists perpetrated against Tutsi civilians during the genocide.¹¹ As such, the heroism of RPA combatants remains celebrated in Rwanda, and they are regarded as completely distinct from the génocidaires who perpetrated the genocide.

¹⁰ See also United Nations High Commission for Refugees (10 October 1994) “Summary of UNHCR Presentation Before Commission of Experts.” Available at:

https://richardwilsonauthor.files.wordpress.com/2010/09/gersony_report.pdf (Accessed:

March 15, 2019); and United Nations (August 2010) “Report of the Mapping Exercise documenting the most serious violations of human rights and international humanitarian law committed within the territory of the Democratic Republic of the Congo between March 1993 and June 2003.” Available at:

[https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/CD/DRC_MAPPING_REPORT_FINAL_EN.p](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/CD/DRC_MAPPING_REPORT_FINAL_EN.pdf)

[df](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/CD/DRC_MAPPING_REPORT_FINAL_EN.pdf) (Accessed: March 15, 2019).

¹¹ One notable exception is the 2009 prosecution of four former RPA soldiers, prosecuted by the Rwandan government with assistance of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda for the murder of thirteen Roman Catholic clergy in Kabgayi in June 1994, one month before the formal end of the genocide in Rwanda (see: Amnesty International (2009) “Amnesty International Report 2009—Rwanda.” Available at:

<https://www.refworld.org/docid/4a1fad72.html> (Accessed: March 15, 2019)). The two

captains who were prosecuted pleaded guilty and were sentenced to eight years in prison, while the other two accused were acquitted.

As my fieldwork progressed, however, it became apparent that each of these labels carried social and political connotations of which not all Rwandans approved, and that by using them uncritically, I risked unwittingly perpetuating an official narrative that for many Rwandans was, at best, problematic and, at worst, overtly harmful. As a result, I was forced to consider a more appropriate theoretical framework to better structure my analysis of the resulting narratives, which were typically far more politicized—frequently constructed, to varying degrees, in opposition to the genocide archetype that they felt poorly or wrongly encapsulated their experiences of the genocide. I now turn to the narratives of three Rwandans whose experiences complicated the genocide archetypes assigned to them or which they claimed for themselves, amply demonstrating the relevance of a theoretical framework that allows for role-shifting—whereby people move between or engage simultaneously in actions that cross the perceived boundaries between victim/survivor, bystander, rescuer, combatant, perpetrator, and so on—surrounding genocidal violence in Rwanda, and beyond.

4.1. The innocent victim/survivor

Innocent's life history began with the story of how his parents met.¹² Both had dedicated themselves to the Roman Catholic Church: his father served as a priest, while his mother served as a nun. They fell in love, however, and so gave up their professions to marry. Innocent's father subsequently became a professor, and his mother stayed home to raise their children, of which Innocent was the first born. Innocent recalled very little from his life before the genocide, but he remembered that Habyarimana's assassination caught the people in his community by surprise. He was playing outside with friends when a group of people

¹² I use pseudonyms throughout this chapter, in accordance with the wishes of the Rwandans I interviewed, and I largely summarize their life histories to avoid mentioning any personally identifying information they shared.

spotted him and warned him that people were being killed, though Innocent did not remember if they explained why. Innocent ran to his grandmother's house and found her dead—presumably murdered by the Hutu Power extremists. Innocent then ran home, where he found his father gathering “weapons”—specifically, household tools that they could use to defend themselves. Together, they ran to a nearby hill where Tutsi were gathering to fight their attackers. Soon after they arrived, however, the Hutu Power extremists surrounded them and began massacring the Tutsi men, women, and children, including Innocent's father. Innocent could not remember precisely how he managed to escape, but he recalled fleeing with approximately 20 other young children into a forest where they hid. The perpetrators searched for them, but eventually grew tired and returned to their homes.

After spending the night in the forest, Innocent joined a small convoy of Tutsi survivors who had decided to flee to the DRC in the hopes of waiting out the violence that had overwhelmed their communities. Shortly after they began walking, however, they were surrounded and attacked anew by Hutu Power extremists. Once again, Innocent escaped the massacre by hiding with two other children in a large drainage pipe. However, some of the attackers saw them climb into the pipe and began attacking them from either end with long spears, killing the children on either side of Innocent and leaving him with a head wound. Innocent pretended to be dead and waited for his attackers to leave, but eventually thirst and hunger forced him to leave his hiding place. He was immediately spotted by a small group of Hutu Power extremists, however, who attacked him with machetes. Believing Innocent's wounds were fatal, his attackers then dumped his body in an open mass grave.

Innocent's wounds left him weak, confused, and unable to climb free of the mass grave. He believed he stayed there for two days waiting to die before he heard a man walking nearby, calling out quietly for survivors. Innocent responded, and the man threw him a rope that he used to escape the mass grave. The man carried Innocent to the local stadium, where

local district officials were encouraging Tutsi to seek refuge. Unfortunately, this promise of refuge was a ruse aimed at disarming the Tutsi and gathering them in a place where they could be more easily surrounded and killed by the local Interahamwe. Innocent was there for less than a day before the Interahamwe attacked the stadium, but once again, he managed to escape the ensuing chaos. With nowhere to go, he joined a small group of “street kids.”

Recognizing by this point that the violence was specifically targeting the Tutsi, Innocent told the street kids that he was Hutu whose family the extremists had attacked by accident. As the sole survivor of his immediate family by this point, and someone who was relatively unknown in the immediate community, there was no one who could contradict his story. The street kids believed him and accepted him into their group.

Innocent’s narrative at this point clearly fits the archetype of the innocent survivor. His young age, his lack of understanding regarding the reasons for the genocidal violence, and his inability to defend himself against his attackers, make this particularly evident. Upon joining the street kids, however, Innocent’s experience of the genocide became increasingly complicated and more difficult for him to recall in a manner that granted him a sense of psychic comfort or “composure” (Dawson, 1994, pp. 22–23), prompting him to adopt more indirect language and leave substantive gaps in his narrative. His association with the street kids meant he was increasingly prompted to make choiceless decisions that ultimately led him to engage in a range of criminal activities to ensure his survival that, upon reflection, he regarded as shameful—despite the extreme circumstances of the genocide—and left him questioning his “innocence” in the post-genocide period. He recognized that the genocide was an unspeakably awful period in Rwandan history and that as a child, he had few options for survival. Yet as he spoke of lying about his background, begging for money, and stealing food and clothing from people—some of whom he knew were Tutsi victims and survivors—he expressed a distinct sense of shame. This peaked when, toward the end of one interview,

he admitted that the street kids he associated with during the period frequently participated in killing Tutsi at roadblocks—sometimes demonstrating great enthusiasm when they encountered someone they regarded as having been too proud or ungenerous toward them. I did not ask Innocent if he participated in these murders—it seemed too painful a subject for him to discuss and I felt it important to respect the silence he maintained around it. However, he subsequently admitted that he did everything he could to convince the street kids that he was one of them, which I received as an indirect admission that he had likely witnessed and certainly been a “situated bystander” to the murders, if not a direct participant.¹³

During my fieldwork, I encountered several survivors who acknowledged—typically off the record and with great difficulty—being forced by Hutu Power extremists to torture, sexually assault, and murder loved ones. Sometimes they were forced to perpetrate this violence prior to being nearly killed themselves, and other times—particularly where there was a history of interpersonal conflict—it seemed to have been designed by their attackers to demoralize and dehumanize both victims and survivors alike. Narratives of these atrocities reminded me of the Nazis’ efforts to eliminate Jewish leaders’ and civilians’ “political and moral armature” by making them complicit in the deportation and murder of their own people across Nazi-occupied Europe during World War II (Levi, 1986, p. 29)—one of myriad links that scholars have attempted to draw between the Rwandan genocide and the Holocaust.¹⁴

¹³ Genocide scholar Giorgia Donà introduced this term to highlight the multiple positionalities of the majority of Rwandan civilians whose actions did not fit the categories of victim or perpetrator related to the genocide, but whose support, opposition, or indifference was fundamental for shaping the violence in their communities (Donà, 2018, p. 2).

¹⁴ See, for example, the debate between Mark Levene (1999) and René Lemarchand (2002) regarding whether such comparison between the Holocaust and the Rwandan genocide is appropriate or helpful for analysis.

Their memories of their actions were often painful for them to recall in much detail, and yet they felt compelled to admit “the truth” about what they had done, often struggling with the moral weight of their choiceless decisions. While I struggle to imagine reasonable people regarding them as being criminally responsible for their crimes, particularly when committed under extreme duress, how survivors interpreted these crimes is significant because it is so clearly part of the “survivor guilt” and related sources of emotional distress they negotiated in the genocide’s aftermath.¹⁵

In Innocent’s case, living with the street kids left him suicidal, and he eventually decided to return to the stadium where he knew he would be killed. As he walked, he met a man who knew his parents, and who offered to hide him in his home. Innocent went with him, but the sanctuary came at a price. The man forced Innocent to work for him, and two days later a local Hutu Power extremist recognized Innocent as the sole survivor of his immediate family. The extremist insisted that the man kill Innocent to prove he was loyal to the Hutu Power movement, and so Innocent fled. Once again, Innocent found refuge with a group of street kids, but this particular group was composed primarily of Tutsi survivors of the genocide, and they “worked together” to protect each other. Innocent’s narrative offered the possibility that they used violence to protect themselves, among other survival strategies, though once again he was not explicit about this. However, as the genocidal violence continued and an increasing number of Hutu Power extremists arrived in their community ahead of the RPF advance, they realized that they would soon be outnumbered.

¹⁵ The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders defines survivor guilt as an associated feature of post-traumatic stress disorder resulting from “surviving when others have not or guilt about behavior required for survival.” See American Psychiatric Association. (1994 [2013]) *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th edition). Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association.

They decided to flee together to the DRC, and this time, Innocent's journey was successful. He lived in refugee camps for a few years where he claimed Hutu or Tutsi heritage, depending on the context—a survival strategy that he claimed many Rwandans used to negotiate the difficult living conditions in the camps in the absence of family networks and related pre-genocide forms of patronage. Once he felt safe formally admitting his Tutsi heritage to the aid workers, he was taken to an orphanage, where he was reunited with three children from his extended family. In 1999, a Rwandan government directive aimed at rehoming genocide orphans with their extended families made it possible for Innocent and his remaining family to return to Rwanda. However, as the adults in Innocent's extended family had been murdered, they were rehomed with a widow whose experiences of the genocide rendered her physically and emotionally incapable of caring for four young children. Thus, Innocent, as the oldest child, became the primary caregiver for their family. Like many people struggling with survivor guilt, he demonstrated remarkable resilience and increasingly dedicated his life to helping other survivors and establishing a renewed sense of community that eschewed ethnic identities. Indeed, we met through the survivors' organization where he worked and was celebrated for his remarkable empathy in working with vulnerable people. However, Innocent found that the label of “survivor” and its connotations of innocence and moral superiority carried a powerful emotional weight, given the choiceless decisions that had made his survival possible. From our conversations, it seemed that the moments in his experiences of the genocide and its aftermath where his survival hinged upon his ability to role-shift from innocent survivor to bystander, and perhaps even a perpetrator by Rwandan standards, weighed heavily on him. In terms of his post-genocide mental health, the psychological weight of his cumulative actions during the genocide seemed to exacerbate the negative effects of the extraordinary genocidal violence he had endured at the hands of the Hutu Power extremists.

4.2. The heroic combatant

I first met Patrick when he was working in one of the prisons where I was conducting fieldwork, where we often chatted surrounding my meetings and interviews. He always wanted me to talk about my research interests, which led me to assume that the prison director or another official had asked him to befriend me as a way of learning more about my project. Over time, however, Patrick began opening up about his life, starting with his childhood in Burundi, where he was born to Rwandan parents who had fled political violence in Rwanda around the nation's independence in 1962, and on whose behalf he had become fiercely dedicated to fighting for the right of Tutsi refugees to return to Rwanda. I asked him if he would be willing to contribute to the project, and he agreed, allowing me to explore a comparatively under-researched perspective on the genocide: namely, the experiences of a respected former RPA combatant.

Patrick's life history began with his childhood in Burundi, where he was raised with his family's stories of their idyllic life in pre-independence Rwanda, and the heartbreak of having been forced—as long-term supporters of the monarchy—to leave. While his childhood memories from Burundi were otherwise positive, by the time he was a teenager Patrick admitted that he had been radicalized by these stories and was determined to fight for the Tutsi refugees' right to return to Rwanda. His family—like so many Rwandans who lived in exile at that time—vocally supported the RPF, and his father, in particular, was close with several RPF officials. Thus, as tensions in the region increased in the late 1980s, they were party to reliable information that the RPF was finally ready to abandon its diplomatic efforts to negotiate the Tutsi refugees' return to Rwanda and was preparing to invade. In response, Patrick decided to join the RPA and traveled to Uganda where, after brief military training, he served on the front line of the 1990 invasion in northern Rwanda.

The RPF's stated purpose for the invasion was to enforce Tutsi refugees' right to return to the country and force Habyarimana to accept a power-sharing agreement that would bring an end to the regional favoritism, oppression of the Tutsi, and corruption associated with his regime. In the first months of the invasion, Patrick recalled that the RPF invested a great deal of funding in propaganda to convince the predominantly subsistence agriculturalist Hutu in the north that the RPF meant them no harm, and made sure Hutu RPA officers were highly visible in the communities so the RPA did not seem like an entirely Tutsi invading force. He also stressed that RPA troops were expected to adhere to strict guidelines to ensure that they treated Hutu civilians and injured or surrendered members of Habyarimana's forces fairly to maintain good relations. For this reason, Patrick maintained that he never witnessed the RPA atrocities that Hutu Power extremists claimed prompted the mass flight of Hutu refugees from the north, nor did he believe it would have been possible for RPA troops to commit such atrocities during the civil war.

With the creation of the Interahamwe in 1993, however, Patrick recalled an important shift in the civil war. The Interahamwe immediately became a significant threat to the RPA troops and their civilian supporters in the north—most of whom were Tutsi—by committing torture, rape, and murder under the guise of being youth-led civilian defense units. Patrick witnessed firsthand some of these atrocities, which he believed the perpetrators used to spread fear among the civilian population and undermine their support for the RPF. But the worst atrocities occurred immediately after Habyarimana's assassination, when the Hutu Power extremists in the community where Patrick was based decapitated several Tutsi community leaders and impaled their heads on spikes to signal the start of the genocide. As the genocide in this community escalated, a common form of execution that the extremists reserved for Tutsi men was called *kandoyi* and involved tying the victim's elbows behind his back and then hanging him from his elbows so that his toes barely touched the ground. The

victim was left hanging until it seemed he was ready to pass out from pain and exhaustion, at which point the Interahamwe would beat him with nail-studded clubs until he died. Those who were murdered in this manner were left hanging, which Patrick believed was meant to serve as a message to spread fear among the Tutsi and demoralize the RPA soldiers. The Hutu Power extremists also encouraged their supporters to rape Tutsi women and, after finishing, to impale them using sharpened sticks or other objects to ensure they died a slow, agonizing death. The bodies of these women were also left exposed in public to humiliate and shame the extremists' victims and those who survived them. On multiple occasions, Patrick and other RPA soldiers were ordered to give deceased victims a respectful burial, leaving him with some of his most powerful, nightmare-inducing memories of the genocide.

Until this point, Patrick's narrative largely fits the archetype of the heroic combatant. He sacrificed his education to support the RPF's 1990 invasion of Rwanda, and he fought on the front lines against Habyarimana's forces while working alongside his fellow soldiers to convince the predominantly Hutu civilians they encountered that the RPF invasion would be good for the nation long-term. To this end, he was adamant that he never engaged in the human rights abuses of which RPA troops were accused by the Hutu Power extremists during the civil war, adhering to the "amplified silence" that persists in the post-genocide period around "RPF-perpetrated violence experienced by Rwandans of all ethnicities" ([Burnet, 2012](#), p. 111). However, as our discussion of the genocide continued, Patrick began to resist this amplified silence by acknowledging that some RPA soldiers perpetrated revenge killings or otherwise killed Hutu Power extremists and their supporters when an opportunity presented itself. Patrick recalled that as the genocide continued, he and his fellow soldiers were frequently depressed and angry, and quick to lash out at the Interahamwe and interim government forces they encountered, preferring to kill them rather than permitting them to surrender. These atrocities constitute an admission of war crimes as defined by the First and

Third 1949 Geneva Conventions, which uphold protections for wounded and sick soldiers, and combatants who surrender.¹⁶

However, Patrick maintained silence on the topic of alleged RPA atrocities against Rwandan civilians during and after the genocide, despite the aforementioned evidence to the contrary, though he was, throughout our conversations, dismissive of the idea of himself as a hero. Only Samuel, a former RPA combatant from Cyangugu, would discuss this on the record, and then only in reference to his experiences in the DRC during the First Congo War. He was understandably cautious about sharing much detail about his life history on the record, and so did not consent to being recorded. However, he wanted to talk about the atrocities he and his fellow soldiers had perpetrated between 1996 and 1997 in the DRC, where he claimed his unit had been given a mandate to pursue—with the purposes of either capturing and returning to Rwanda or killing—known *génocidaires* who were hiding among the two million refugees who had fled the genocide. Without going into much detail, he acknowledged that in their pursuit of *génocidaires*, they often used torture and disproportionate force against their targets and the civilians whom they believed were hiding them. In summarizing this period in his life, he told me, “it is important to understand that people have been cruel, worse than animals in the past.” He extended this statement to both the genocide, of which he was a survivor, and the subsequent atrocities he perpetrated in the DRC, his role in which he claimed he was still struggling to understand, noting “it takes time to understand such events.”

¹⁶ Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armed Forces in the Field (adopted August 12, 1949, entered into force October 21, 1950) 75 UNTS 31 (First Geneva Convention); Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War (adopted August 12, 1949, entered into force October 21, 1950) 75 UNTS 135 (Third Geneva Convention).

The broader amplified silence that exists around RPA atrocities, however, was not always upheld by other Rwandans with whom I have worked over the years. Conversely, I have found that stories of RPA atrocities have emerged fairly consistently in my fieldwork in Rwanda, even when working on projects that were in no way related to the genocide. For example, while working on a project unrelated to the genocide, I interviewed a woman from eastern Rwanda. As part of her life history interview, we had been discussing how she came to be the head of her family and a leader in her community. She attributed this to the death of her husband, which had left her impoverished and forced her to seek work outside the home to support their children. When I asked her why she could not have turned to other members of her family for help, she replied that “they” had killed him and the other men in her family. She then clarified that RPA troops had killed most of the men in her community as soon as they took control of the area in 1994, allegedly because they saw the people as Hutu Power extremists and génocidaires. However, she claimed that the real extremists had fled the RPF advance some weeks prior to her husband’s murder, leaving behind only civilian bystanders.

Such accounts were not uncommon, in my experience, in rural communities around Rwanda, supporting the conclusion that some RPA troops committed atrocities—likely constituting war crimes and crimes against humanity—against civilian populations in Rwanda during and after the 1994 genocide.¹⁷ As a result, I read these narratives as a

¹⁷ For the purpose of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), “crimes against humanity were defined as the following crimes when committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack against any civilian population on national, political, ethnic, racial or religious grounds: (a) Murder; (b) Extermination; (c) Enslavement; (d) Deportation; (e) Imprisonment; (f) Torture; (g) Rape; (h) Persecutions on political, racial and religious grounds; (i) Other inhumane acts” (Statute of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (adopted November 8, 1994) UNSC Res 955(1994), as amended, Article 3 (ICTR Statute).

complicating factor for the archetype of the heroic combatant and the broader official history that surrounded the “war of liberation” as the civil war period is referenced in official discourse. Indeed, one of several key points of ethnic and political tension that persists in the post-genocide period emerges from the recognition among Rwandans that former RPA combatants were rarely punished or prosecuted for committing war crimes and crimes against humanity. Given the Rwandan government had invested in a decade-long program of “universal accountability” that used national courts and *gacaca* trials to prosecute all Rwandans who were accused of genocide-related crimes, from informing on Tutsi who were hiding and looting the homes of the deceased to murdering and raping Tutsi civilians (Gahima, 2013, p. xxxviii), many Rwandans—and particularly convicted *génocidaires*, in my experience—saw themselves as victims of victor’s justice (Jessee, 2017, p. 175).¹⁸

4.3. The guilty perpetrator

This leads to a third prevalent genocide archetype: the guilty perpetrator. Among the twenty convicted *génocidaires* that I interviewed in 2007 and 2008, most were fairly “typical” low-level perpetrators.¹⁹ Among this cohort, Roger was one of the first of many convicted

¹⁸ The term “gacaca” (meaning “justice on the grass”) refers to a pre-colonial dispute resolution mechanism that was reinvented by the Rwandan government to address the estimated 150,000 Rwandans who were imprisoned after the genocide to await trial for their crimes (see Doughty, 2016; Ingelaere, 2016). Over a decade, it became a central feature of Rwanda’s transitional justice program, considering more than 1.9 million genocide-related cases with varying degrees of success (Rutayisire and Richters, 2014).

¹⁹ Generally speaking, the majority of Rwanda’s *génocidaires* were, at the time of the genocide, young to middle-aged men from rural communities with moderate levels of education and few prospects for advancement in their communities. Women were far more

génocidaires who did not align with my preconceived notions of the potentially dangerous people I would be interviewing in the prisons.²⁰ My preconceptions regarding génocidaires were informed not only by the media, NGOs, and scholarly sources that were available to me in 2007, but also by conversations with Rwandan officials who expressed concern and, in the case of one prison director, astonishment that a young woman such as myself was interested in speaking to “these horrible génocidaires” who were “beyond rehabilitation” (Jessee 2021, p. 70.) Similarly, I was conscious of the possibility that ideologically motivated perpetrators

likely to engage in property crimes and other minor offenses than in killings and torture.

Perpetrators rarely had criminal backgrounds or had engaged in violence prior to the genocide, and in terms of their motives for killing their Tutsi compatriots frequently cited factors that went well beyond the commonly cited ethnic hatred of the Tutsi (Mironko, 2004; Straus, 2006; Fujii, 2008, pp. 568–97; McDoom, 2012; Jessee, 2015; Nyseth Brehm et al., 2016).

²⁰ As I was not permitted to record interviews in the prisons, the following account is based on notes I took of the interviews with Roger, which I then verified with him in subsequent conversations to ensure he was comfortable with the resulting narrative and the conclusions I drew from it. We conducted these interviews in private offices just inside the prison gate where the prison administrators worked, but we were removed from the main buildings where the prisoners lived. Due to this interview setting, we often encountered challenges in prompting people to speak openly about their experiences, as it was assumed that we were going to be biased in favor of the Rwandan government’s official history. It took time—again, a benefit of being able to conduct multiple interviews with each person—to convince convicted génocidaires that I was interested in engaging with different perspectives on Rwanda’s history and the genocide, and would not divulge to officials the things they said (Jessee, 2017, pp. 149–151).

might see my research project as an opportunity to imbue their personal political agendas with academic authority, justifying the massacre of Hutu political moderates or Tutsi or Twa civilians as a necessity due to their perceived inherent inferiority or contaminating presence, for example ([Jessee, 2011](#)).

Yet upon meeting Roger in the prison where he was awaiting the results of his latest trial, he did not strike me as the kind of monster I had mentally prepared myself to meet. Conversely, he was soft-spoken, respectful, and appeared remorseful and confused about how he had come to be a *génocidaire*. He began his life history by talking about his peaceful childhood in southern Rwanda prior to the genocide. Roger was born to a relatively wealthy family in 1974, soon after Habyarimana had taken power in a “bloodless coup.” His father was well-educated and politically active and had long fought for equality and human rights in Rwanda. He was well-respected in the community for having condemned the anti-monarchist violence that had overwhelmed the nation in the years surrounding independence, and hid friends and co-workers who were targeted, saving their lives. For this reason, Roger claimed he could not recall any ethnic tensions during his childhood, nor was ethnicity a topic of conversation within his family. The only source of political tension that he could remember was regional, between northern and southern Rwanda: in his community, he noted that people were fairly united against the north, regardless of their ethnic heritage.

Soon after the civil war began, however, the political climate in Roger’s community changed. Unlike most Rwandans his age, who learned about their ethnicity in school, Roger claimed that he first recalled learning about his ethnic identity in early 1991, when he was evicted from a Tutsi-owned bar that he had visited with friends. He did not approve of ethnic divisionism, however, and so soon after he—along with his father—joined the Social Democratic Party (PSD) to fight the Hutu Power extremism that was gaining traction within the Habyarimana regime and in their community. As the civil war continued, Roger and his

father were occasionally forced into hiding to escape political violence directed at members of the PSD, against whom the Hutu Power extremists increasingly incited violence for being *ibytso* (“spies,” or “accomplices of the enemy”). Indeed, after Habyarimana’s assassination, members of the PSD and other political opposition groups were some of the first victims of the atrocities, and Roger and his family hid until around April 20, 1994, when the violence in his community shifted away from political moderates to focus exclusively on the Tutsi. Roger and his family did not flee at this time, as they felt they could survive only if they stayed in the community where they were well known and had good relationships with people.

When the genocide in his community began, Roger—despite significant risk to himself and his family—worked with his father to hide Tutsi family, friends, and co-workers in various places around the community, including his own home. At that point, the Interahamwe had insisted that each family send at least one man to help with night patrols and maintain the roadblocks, but Roger’s family was able to avoid this by giving the Interahamwe money instead. His father also paid the Interahamwe to leave their home and properties alone, and for a few days, this strategy was successful. On the morning of April 28, however, soldiers arrived at Roger’s home, after his friends had told them he was hiding Tutsi. Roger felt he had no choice but to help them escort the two people he had been hiding to a nearby roadblock. He knew that they would kill him and his family if he refused, as he claimed several Hutu from his community had already been murdered for this reason. The soldiers forced Roger to carry a machete and lead one of the people himself, and when they arrived at the roadblock, they forced him to participate in executing the two people he had tried to rescue.

From that day forward, the Interahamwe insisted that Roger come to the roadblocks every day to help “protect the community,” and that he attend political meetings where interim government officials told them that the Tutsi were the enemies of the country and

gave them further instructions on how to fight them. Roger claimed he did not believe this propaganda, nor did he ever want to fight the Tutsi. Nonetheless, he went to the roadblocks each day, where he waited for Tutsi to attempt to pass or for the local authorities to call them to hunt Tutsi who were believed to be hiding in the area.

Roger ultimately lost track of how many Tutsi he killed in the weeks before the RPF took control of his community, but he claimed he always tried to be merciful and give them a “good death”—by which he meant quick and without mutilating their remains—so their spirits would have a better chance of resting peacefully in the afterlife. This was notably different, he claimed, from how the Hutu Power extremists approached these executions, particularly when dealing with Tutsi who attempted to resist their attackers or who had a bad reputation in the community. Similarly, Roger insisted that he never raped Tutsi women, and when, in May 1994, the authorities told them that women had no ethnicity and they could begin taking Tutsi women as wives, he refused to accept this “reward.” When the RPF wrested control of his community a few weeks later, Roger claimed he was happy and tried to settle back into regular life, though he was haunted by the crimes he had committed.

Immediately after the genocide ended, however, Roger’s neighbors identified him to the RPF as having played a key role at the roadblocks. Roger was imprisoned immediately, which he accepted, as he recognized that he had “caused harm to the country.” And, when it was his turn to attend gacaca, he claimed that he confessed his crimes freely and apologized to those he harmed, wanting to support national unity and reconciliation. When we met, he was awaiting sentencing and was hopeful that his complicated position relative to the genocide—first as a rescuer and resister of the violence, and only later under duress becoming a perpetrator—would be taken into account. He admitted worrying about his trial’s outcome, however, as none of the people he tried to rescue had survived the genocide, and most of his friends, neighbors, and family had distanced themselves from him after his arrest.

He feared that as a result he would be regarded solely as a perpetrator, and that none of his alleged efforts to rescue people or to resist the genocide in his community would be considered in determining an appropriate sentence.

This complex narrative of genocide perpetration, and the role-shifting it entailed, was not uncommon among the convicted *génocidaires* I interviewed. Indeed, I encountered few whom I could comfortably categorize as the monsters I had expected—who celebrated or were remorseless of the atrocities they had perpetrated—based on the narratives that were then prevalent in popular culture within and beyond Rwanda.²¹ Far more common were the narratives of people whose lives had been upended by the civil war—sometimes accompanied by personal loss, such as the murder of loved ones—and who had subsequently been drawn to the Hutu Power extremists’ agenda, or for other reasons came to regard the mass rape and murder of Tutsi as normalized such that they too began to participate in the violence. Similarly common were perpetrators’ accounts of alleged rescues—both successful and failed—through which they attempted to save those Tutsi they knew personally and recognized posed no threat to them, even as they massacred other Tutsi who were strangers or with whom they had a history of interpersonal conflict. And, while this does not diminish the brutality or severity of the crimes they perpetrated, it points to the need for a more nuanced framework for making sense of their shifting actions surrounding the genocide.

6. Conclusion: Role-shifting among Complex Political Actors

While there are occasional clear cases of innocent survivors, heroic combatants, and guilty perpetrators surrounding the genocide in Rwanda, many Rwandans understand their actions and those of their compatriots in much more complicated terms, making such labels

²¹ I have published elsewhere about the few occasions where the *génocidaires* I interviewed seemed remorseless (see, for example, [Jessee, 2011](#); and [Jessee, 2015](#)).

inaccurate and at times painful for people to negotiate given the political and social capital associated with them. Unfortunately, there appears to be little space in Rwanda at present for public discussion of role-shifting during the genocide that would consider these complexities in a meaningful way. Certainly, the Rwandan government argues that Rwanda's recent genocidal past makes its future political stability uncertain, requiring authoritarian leadership, limited democratic reforms, and reduced, limited civil liberties until Rwandans come to view each other according to their shared national heritage, rather than ethnicity. This position is, to an extent, understandable given the unenviable task that the government is tackling in working to reconcile a nation whose citizens have been divided, not only by ethnicity, but also by political, regional, socio-economic, and other tensions. However, there is also an arrogance to this position, one that treats the Rwandan people as incapable of reason and empathy across ethnic divides and requiring a strong hand in order to avoid future bloodshed.

Among the Rwandans I have interviewed over the years, most lived in densely populated and tightly knit communities. For this reason, they demonstrated a striking awareness of their neighbors' actions surrounding the genocide, as well as throughout other periods of Rwanda's past, even if the subjects cannot be discussed openly. One sentiment that has been expressed by all the Rwandans with whom I have worked, regardless of ethnicity or political affiliation, is the desire to avoid future bloodshed. Given this common goal, and widespread recognition of the different ways that Rwandans from different regions, clan lineages, and ethnic groups, for example, had been disadvantaged at different points in Rwanda's past, there may be fertile ground for public discussion of Rwandans as complex political actors surrounding the genocide. However, given the work of facilitating post-genocide reconciliation and social repair "among 'intimate enemies' . . . is contentious, suffused with hostility and instrumentality," asking Rwandans to engage in this manner

would not be easy or painless, particularly for survivors of the genocide and related mass atrocities (Doughty, 2015, p. 432).

The broader literature on genocides and atrocity crimes suggests that an enhanced focus on role-shifting among complex political actors might have merit for contexts beyond Rwanda, as well. There is already substantial support for similar theoretical frameworks within the emergent field of perpetrator studies, a key point of concern within which is the often-politicized nature of the “perpetrator” label in different settings, as well as how to adequately encapsulate individual’s complex motivations and pathways to committing genocidal violence (Williams and Buckley-Zistel, 2018, pp. 1–15; Anderson, 2019; Smeulers et al., 2019, pp. 1–10; Anderson and Jessee, 2021, pp. 3–22). Indeed, at present this seems to be a matter of pressing concern within the field, as scholars and related practitioners struggle to address the growing prevalence of genocide and related mass atrocities in the 21st century and mitigate the negative legacies of the resulting humanitarian crises. Given that the majority of people who serve on the front lines of genocidal violence typically have no prior criminal background and may not even be particularly ideologically motivated when engaging in genocide-related violence, it is crucially important for people to realize how easily they can be drawn into committing genocide. Beyond perpetrator studies, however, there is also value in exposing people to the complexities of how genocides and atrocity crimes take shape and their long-term legacies for other kinds of actors caught up in atrocities so they do not perpetuate overly simplistic stereotypes that those who have survived genocide find harmful.

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